

EDITORIAL

Memo to MPs: You really can do better

By **Star Editorial Board**

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It's doubtful many members of Parliament finish their careers and look back saying, "Gee, I wish I'd been more of a slavish sycophant and mindless partisan attack dog."

Thanks to the [Samara Centre for Democracy](#), and its [retrospective on Canada's 42nd Parliament](#) titled "House Inspection," regrets can be few for the new Parliament that starts work on Monday.

Samara, long one of the under-appreciated gems in the country, set out a blueprint illustrating common frustrations in political life, thereby providing a roadmap for current practitioners on how the job might be more satisfyingly pursued.

The election that produced a minority Liberal government in 2019 has, in a sense, given MPs a fresh chance.

Canadians apparently wearied of the near-absolute authority of majority government. They sent to the Commons members from several parties, in numbers that mean they'll have to work together.

It's probably fair to conclude from this they wish more comprehensive debate, the pursuit of good ideas whatever their provenance, and a commitment on the part of all involved to mature collaboration.

No party has a monopoly on smarts. And no first minister's office should be as omnipotent, authoritarian and punitive to its own independent thinkers as so many have been.

All new Parliaments open with promise of a new approach. Few deliver. This one can.

One of the bigger knocks against politics as currently practised is that so many men and women of accomplishment – sent to Ottawa with a near-sacred mandate from their communities – check their brains and spines at the door in favour of reciting talking points drafted by, as Sen. Mike Duffy so famously put it, the PMO's "boys in short pants."

The Samara report found herd behaviour of massive scale. The average MP voted with his or her party 99.6 per cent of the time. The most rebellious of the 338 MPs, only 96.6 per cent of the time.

Most Canadian families couldn't get that kind of group-think around the table at Christmas dinner.

All parties rail, while in opposition, against measures such as omnibus bills and time allocation for debate.

All parties, once elected, find the machinery of democracy inconvenient and tend to adopt the very same tools they so passionately criticized.

It would be nice to see ethics and attitudes not so flexible they could work in Cirque de Soleil and see the use of such constraining tactics disappear or diminish.

Committees, the study found, often reached consensus across party lines, but collaboration declined over the life of the Parliament as unhealthy partisanship increased and prevailed.

And MPs – in this study, as in Samara’s instructive exit interviews with departing or defeated MPs over the years – see debate as empty, repetitive and a waste of valuable time.

There are solutions to such problems that scarcely require doctorates in political science to identify.

Think more. Act better. Don’t repeat endless talking points.

Thought is hard work. Do it. Develop your own ideas. Express them clearly and forcefully, but in the same courteous way in which you would like to be addressed.

Moreover, call out colleagues who lower the standards of debate, thereby debasing the currency in which you all trade.

“Exercise diligent scrutiny,” the report said.

And here’s an idea!

“Overcome toxic partisanship by getting to know colleagues across the aisle and demonstrating principled independence within the party.”

Why not take that even further? Why not invite MPs of different stripe to your riding and your part of the country to better understand where your views were formed and what your constituents expect?

“Strive for better, more substantive and civil debate, with less note-reading, less heckling and more dynamic exchanges,” the report said.

With grace and goodwill, it shouldn’t really be that difficult.

Good luck. Get to it.