

## OPINION

# MPs must seize opportunity of Reform Act votes

By KENDALL ANDERSON (/AUTHOR/KENDALL-ANDERSON) NOV. 5, 2019

The powers under the Reform Act give MPs more independence to speak on behalf of their constituents or seek cross-partisan consensus without fear of reprisal from their party leaders.



NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, pictured on Oct. 30, with some of the new and returning MPs of his 24-member caucus. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

[f \(https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/11/05/mps-must-seize-opportunity-of-reform-act-votes/223470\)](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/11/05/mps-must-seize-opportunity-of-reform-act-votes/223470)

[t \(https://twitter.com/intent/tweet/?text=MPs must seize opportunity of Reform Act votes&url=https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/11/05/mps-must-seize-opportunity-of-reform-act-votes/223470&via=thehilltimes\)](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet/?text=MPs%20must%20seize%20opportunity%20of%20Reform%20Act%20votes&url=https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/11/05/mps-must-seize-opportunity-of-reform-act-votes/223470&via=thehilltimes)



Canada's democracy doesn't end when the polls close on election day. We expect that our newly elected MPs will head to Ottawa and advocate for the interests of their communities and regions. But for that expectation to become a reality, MPs must seize the powers offered to them through the Reform Act.

For decades, academics and media have noted that the power of individual MPs has been eroded by ever-stronger party discipline and the dominance of party leaders over their caucuses. This discipline eats away at our democracy by turning MPs into little more than "brand ambassadors," rather than the independent thinkers and local champions they are supposed to be. In the Samara Centre for Democracy's interviews with former MPs from the last decade, researchers heard the same concerns.

In early 2015, Parliament passed the Reform Act to rebalance the relationship between individual MPs and their party leaders. The act offers the rank-and-file MPs in each caucus the ability to govern themselves by taking on a set of decision-making powers, including the ability to expel or readmit members from caucus, and to trigger a review of the party leader.

Together, these powers give MPs more independence to speak on behalf of their constituents or seek cross-partisan consensus without fear of reprisal from their party leaders. They also empower MPs to hold their leaders to account.

However, these rules aren't in place automatically. Instead, the Reform Act amended the Parliament of Canada Act to require each party caucus to hold a series of votes at its first post-election meeting to decide on which of the four powers to adopt. The longest-serving member in each caucus has to conduct the votes and report the results to the Speaker of the House of Commons.

If MPs choose *not* to grant themselves the powers, the status quo continues. Leaders would still be able to kick MPs out of their party caucus with no due process or appeal—even those who still have the support of their local party association. MPs will lack any mechanism to stand up to a leader who fails to listen to their caucus or, even in the worst case scenarios, abuses their powers.

Following the 2015 election, several parties failed to conduct the votes as required. It is unacceptable that these caucuses' first act after being elected was to break the law. This failure had consequences, too: when the prime minister removed Jody Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpott from the Liberal caucus, the decision was his alone, despite having never been given that power by the caucus.

During the 2019 election, the Samara Centre sent a questionnaire to all major party candidates to ask for their views on party discipline and the Reform Act's provisions. Of the more than 200 candidates from the five parties now represented in Parliament who replied, over 70 per cent indicated that their caucuses should hold the required votes, while just two per cent were opposed. A clear majority of these respondents also believed that MPs should adopt each of the four powers for caucus governance offered by the Reform Act.

The Conservatives and NDP have confirmed that they will hold the votes at their first formal caucus meetings, as required. We expect the other parties to do the same. However, we urge MPs to go beyond just holding the votes and actually give themselves the powers they need to be effective parliamentarians.

Some parties may argue that their MPs don't need the Reform Act powers because their leaders have a more open or inclusive style of management. Such arguments ignore the fact that relationships between leaders and their caucuses can change quickly as new issues emerge.

Taking the powers now will ensure that MPs have the capacity to speak independently and on behalf of their constituents in any situation. It's both practically important and inherently of value that MPs embrace the power to hold their leaders to account. The *Reform Act* votes are not a referendum on any one leader, but a principled stand on the importance of the individual MP.

Party leaders have proven more than willing to use the powers at their disposal to keep MPs in check, and to discard individual members when they prove too troublesome. It's time for MPs to seize the moment and begin to reverse that relationship, so they can truly provide the kind of meaningful representation that Canadians expect and deserve.

To learn more about the Reform Act, visit [samaracanada.com/the-reform-act-revisited](http://www.samaracanada.com/the-reform-act-revisited) (<http://www.samaracanada.com/the-reform-act-revisited>).

*Kendall Anderson is the executive director of the Samara Centre for Democracy.*

*The Hill Times*

---

---

RELATED STORIES

---

---

(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/10/17/this-election-vote-for-a-parliament-that-will-defend-reinvigorate-democracy/219698>)

OCT 17, 2019

**This election, vote for a Parliament that will defend, reinvigorate democracy**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/10/17/this-election-vote-for-a-parliament-that-will-defend-reinvigorate-democracy/219698>)



MAY 27, 2019

**It's time for MPs to seize opportunity presented by democratic empowerment motion**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/05/27/its-time-for-mps-to-seize-the-opportunity-presented-by-the-democratic-empowerment-motion/201564>)

APR 22, 2019

**It's un-Canadian to ignore the Reform Act, Prime Minister Trudeau, because it's 2019**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/04/22/its-un-canadian-to-ignore-the-law-prime-minister-trudeau-because-its-2019/197211>)



APR 15, 2019

**MPs, political insiders question 'endgame' of former cabinet ministers Philpott and Wilson-Raybould**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/04/15/mps-political-insiders-questioning-endgame-for-former-cabinet-ministers-philpott-and-wilson-raybould/196419>)



JUN 13, 2018

**'Something has to give:' MPs across party lines push to reform Parliament, loosen party control**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2018/06/13/something-give-mps-push-reform-parliament-loosen-party-control/147455>)