



Party control on Parliament Hill worsened in final Harper government, former MPs warn

BILL CURRY >

OTTAWA

PUBLISHED JUNE 12, 2018

Exit interviews with former members of Parliament reveal a worsening pattern of central control, where even the words politicians utter in committees are written by unelected political staffers.

The Samara Centre for Democracy interviewed 54 former MPs from the last Parliament about their experience in Ottawa and found many of them questioning the very purpose of being an MP in an era when political power is concentrated in the hands of party leaders. The Samara Centre is a non-partisan charity working to improve Canadian politics.

The ensuing report, released Tuesday, is a follow-up to a similar exercise based on MPs who served between 2004 and 2011. During that project, former MPs described committee work as a positive and welcome reprieve from the “canned” speeches delivered on the floor of the House of Commons.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

Former MPs now say that tight level of control has infiltrated committees.

“That was a really striking difference,” said Samara’s research director Mike Morden in an interview



Control of committees has clearly become a sore point.

“[Parties] bring in the questions, and you’re encouraged just to read them verbatim,” said one former MP, who is described as a senior parliamentarian and former cabinet minister. “We’re making a mockery of the whole system.”

Failing to comply with the party leadership’s wishes can result in being removed from a committee, according to former MPs, while those who play along are rewarded with foreign travel.

The study focuses on the 41st Parliament, which ran from 2011 to 2015 and was led by Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s majority government.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT



In addition to committee work, former MPs also raised alarm over the poor quality of financial information they receive before voting to approve government spending.

One former MP, who is described as a senior former parliamentarian with extensive governance experience, said the biggest problem is the way spending information is presented to Parliament.

“The only piece that is completely dysfunctional, in my mind, is the budget,” said the former MP, who added that the government deliberately hides key information. “I know how to read a budget. That’s my specialty. And still, it is unbelievable how things get hidden.”

On that front, the report said several MPs noted the creation of the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer has helped them make sense of the government’s spending plans.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

The report’s authors recommend that power over committee membership should be removed from party leaders and placed in the hands of party caucuses through secret ballot votes. It notes that the United Kingdom has recently moved in this direction and it has produced more independent-minded MPs.

One former MP expressed concern that many MPs don’t seem to be bothered by their lack of independence.

“They will happily go to committee and read the card that’s been handed to them ... and then go back to whatever else they’re doing, sending e-mails, whatever else,” the MP said. “I don’t