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PM Touts ‘Common Ground’ As Report Warns Partisanship At ‘Unhealthy’ Levels

A new Samara report suggests “unhealthy partisanship” increased during the last Parliament.



By Zi-Ann Lum



MIKE SUDOMA/CP

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stands in front of his cabinet as he speaks to media during the final day of the Liberal cabinet retreat at the Fairmont Hotel in Winnipeg on Jan. 21, 2020.

OTTAWA — Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says a sense of camaraderie will guide his government forward when MPs head back to the House of Commons next week.

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three-day retreat Tuesday. A reporter asked if the deaths of 37 Canadians and 25 permanent residents on [Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752](#) in Tehran or if the aftermath of Newfoundland's historic blizzard have brought new perspective to the government's work.

"Canadians at our best, in difficult times, are there for each other. We lean on each other, we support on each other through challenges and that's very much the approach that Canadians have shown us all over these past weeks," he said.

"And it is certainly the approach with which we will engage in the House of Commons, looking to find common ground with our colleagues in the House, looking to work together on bringing forward real measures to help Canadians."

His comments repeat similar remarks made by Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland on Monday, emphasizing Ottawa is dedicated to finding common ground across Canada.

Watch: Freeland talks about finding common ground. Story continues below video.



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Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland says Ottawa finding common ground across Ca...

Trudeau's response comes on the same day the [Samara Centre for Democracy published its latest report](#) reviewing the efficacy and decorum of the last session of Parliament.

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risen to unhealthy levels. The problem is fueled by a combination of polarization and hostility toward members of other parties, and protective and uncritical uniformity among members of the same party," the report reads.

In its analysis of voting records in the last session of Parliament, Samara found the average MP voted with their party 99.6 per cent of the time. There were nearly 1,000 votes that took place during the last sitting of Parliament.

It also points to the doctrine of party solidarity as a factor that feeds increased partisanship. Having an election on the horizon may be another.

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Sunny ways were back again and desire to collaborate. But then as things pushed on and the election drew nearer, it became harder to sustain.

—Dr. Paul Thomas, senior research associate at the Samara Centre for Democracy

“There was maybe at first some goodwill,” Dr. Paul Thomas, one of the report's co-authors, told HuffPost Canada in an interview. “Sunny ways were back again and desire to collaborate. But then as things pushed on and the election drew nearer, it became harder to sustain.”

Because the Liberals now have a minority government, some procedural tricks, such as using a majority to push a time allocation motion through to limit debate on legislation, are off the table.

But showing goodwill isn't enough in politics, Thomas said of Trudeau's pledge for more co-operation. Actions are what give the ideas meaning, he said.

“It's all well and good to have that intention, but it needs to be matched with some reforms to give it meaning so you're not just relying on the same system producing different

results.”

During the last Parliament, omnibus bills were also increasingly used, according to

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[undemocratic practice](#) used by the previous Conservative government.

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The report also notes how Trudeau’s decision as Liberal leader in 2014 to kick senators out of caucus has contributed to a new relationship between the Senate and the House of Commons.

Independent senators, now the largest bloc in the upper chamber, have shown a “greater willingness” to challenge the government and House of Commons over legislation, according to Samara.

This has led to increased scrutiny of bills and more amended government legislation. In the last session of Parliament, 70 government bills were passed. The previous Conservative government, in comparison, passed 100 in a similar time frame.

Trudeau’s emphasis to find “common ground” isn’t new — it was the title of his 2014 memoir and has been a repeated motif in [speeches](#) and answers to reporters’ questions. It’s a theme he has repeatedly stressed since election night, when voters in Alberta and Saskatchewan shut out Liberals from winning any seats in the two provinces.

The Liberals slipped to minority status after losing 27 seats on election night to end up with 157, shy of the 170 needed for a majority. Although they lost the election, the Conservatives increased their seat count to 121 from 95 in the House of Commons.

Trudeau and his cabinet ministers will return to Ottawa to continue planning for the resumption of Parliament with a winter caucus retreat that starts Wednesday.

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