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Potential parliamentary reforms would strike a blow to democracy: Editorial

On democracy, Justin Trudeau is not as advertised.



A dubious set of parliamentary reforms currently being floated casts doubt on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's commitment to democratic renewal. (JUSTIN TANG / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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The mess of democracy is easy to love when you're in opposition and your job is to hold government to account. But for those in power trying to push through an agenda, robust democratic institutions – a working Parliament, for instance, or watchdogs with teeth – are too often seen as a nuisance.

The Harper government was famously attuned to this tension, putting expediency ahead of democracy at every turn. In opposition, Justin Trudeau was an outspoken critic of Stephen Harper's autocratic tendencies. He tapped into growing public concern about the health of our democracy, promising open government and a post-partisan approach to Parliament.

But a dubious set of parliamentary reforms currently being floated suggests once again that Trudeau is not, in fact, fundamentally different from his predecessors on this point. On balance, the reforms would make it easier for government to govern, but harder for Parliament to hold government to account. And the anti-democratic manner in which the government seems set on pursuing them is further proof that expediency, not democracy, is the priority.

The potential changes to the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, laid out in a "discussion paper" last week, are a mixed bag. A few are for the good. A measure that would allow the Speaker to hive off portions of omnibus bills, for instance, would weaken one of government's most powerful shields against scrutiny. A proposal to dedicate one day a week of Question Period to interrogating the prime minister, as the British Parliament does, would also be welcome, as long as the PM showed up on other days, too.

But several others are cause for concern. A proposal to limit debate by strictly scheduling the stages of a bill's passage would likely increase efficiency, but at what cost to democracy? Same goes for measures that would limit speeches in committee, eliminate opposition filibustering and remove other tools for delaying government legislation or alerting the public to problems. In our version of democracy, when the government has a majority, the opposition has few tools as it is.

In a richly ironic gesture, on the same day the discussion paper was released, a Liberal MP tabled a motion demanding the relevant parliamentary committee issue recommendations on reform by June 2. Why the rush? Surely democratic reform ought to be pursued by democratic means, with all the deliberation and debate that entails. In response to the motion, members of the committee [filibustered](#) to draw attention to the abuse of Parliament, using a tool they might not have for much longer.

A new report from [Samara](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to civic engagement, suggests that confidence in Canada's democracy, while low, has increased since Harper's defeat. In 2015, survey respondents gave our democratic leadership a grade of D; this year, the mark improved to a C. This jibes with an Ekos poll that found that, after decades of erosion, public trust in government spiked after Trudeau's election win.

Canadians embraced Trudeau's positive vision and took hope from early signals. His openness with the media, for instance, is a clear improvement over his predecessor. The un-muzzling of government scientists and the restoration of the long-form census, too, were steps in the right direction.

But in other important ways, the prime minister is falling short. His delays on access-to-information reforms, his stubborn reliance on cash-for-access fundraisers, his bogus promise of “open” nominations, his electoral-reform charade – all of these weaken democracy. The potential proposals for procedural reform would, on balance, do the same.

The spike in public trust that Trudeau brought with him to Ottawa provides a great opportunity for a government with ambitions for an active role. But it also carries a risk. We are seeing in America and elsewhere what can happen when hope turns to cynicism.

Read more about: [Justin Trudeau](#), [Stephen Harper](#)

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