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'Show business for ugly people': ex-MPs look back at days on Hill

By **SABRINA NANJI** Democracy Reporter

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They once held the country's most powerful positions but after exiting the House of Commons in the last election these 54 MPs aren't holding back on the state of parliamentary democracy.

It's "show business for ugly people," as one former politician put it.



House of Commons maintenance staff prepare the chamber for the return of Parliament in September 2012. A report by the Samara Centre for Democracy

detailing exit interviews with politicians who lost or resigned their seats in 2015 included complaints from some ex-MPs that partisan tentacles have reached areas of Parliament where “constructive work used to happen.” (ADRIAN WYLD / THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO)

On Tuesday the Samara Centre for Democracy, a charitable advocacy group, released Flip the Script, a report detailing exit interviews conducted with former politicians in 2017, two years after they lost or resigned their seats.

In it, ex-MPs candidly complain heavy-handed, controlling party leaders and their top, unelected staffers eroded their ability to do the work they were elected to do.

“Representative democracy is in trouble,” the report reads. “Members of Parliament have been drifting away for decades from the essential work citizens require of them — of legislation, representation and scrutiny. It’s getting worse.”

Canadians may be more familiar with the hyper-partisan nature of Question Period, but partisan tentacles have reached areas of Parliament where “constructive work used to happen,” the report said.

For some former MPs, parliamentary committees had become scripted and choreographed, private members’ bills were considered “empty exercises” and meaningful debate was limited.

Even punctuation turned partisan. A former Tory then serving in the government backbenches, “saw red” during clause-by-clause study of draft legislation at committee when an opposition member’s proposed amendment to fix a simple grammar mistake was shot down.

“(W)e didn’t vote in favour of their amendment. The rationale I got from the people at committee was, ‘We don’t want to give them the win.’ I thought, ‘Yes, I can see the press release now: NDP adds a comma to legislation,’” the former MP said.

Committees are where MPs who aren’t in cabinet spend the majority of their time, closely studying and scrutinizing legislation, policy and government activity. They’re also a public venue for citizens and organizations to speak directly to those in power.

But it was no longer the “productive escape” from the canned talking points and desk-thumping that’s typical of Question Period, Samara’s report said. “MPs have progressively lost permission to make up their own minds, and even pick their own words.”

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Some MPs were told what to discuss in “pre-committee meetings.” Then, at committee, parties would encourage MPs to ask the public scripted questions, a practice one former cabinet minister called “evil.”

“These people pour out their hearts to us, as witnesses. And spend untold hours on a 10-minute presentation. And if nothing they say makes the slightest bit of difference, we’re making a mockery of the whole system,” the ex-minister said.

MPs also reported trouble getting access to government information and being subject to strict party discipline if they dissented. If you don’t toe the party line, “your name’s now on somebody’s hit list,” another former MP said.

Fixing the problem will require procedural and culture changes, Samara’s report said.

“Democracy requires Canadians to strive to make it better, and the country deserves nothing less,” the report said.



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