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'Something has to give:' MPs across party lines push to reform Parliament, loosen party control

By SAMANTHA WRIGHT ALLEN JUN. 13, 2018

The All-Party Democracy Caucus is surveying MPs to see where there's momentum for change in the wake of a Samara report that found ex-MPs disillusioned by their lack of independence.



In contrast to a report released Tuesday based on former MPs's views, current Parliamentarians say committees are still places where good work gets done. From left, Conservative Blake Richards, NDP David Christopherson, Liberal Anita Vandenberg, Green Party leader Elizabeth May, and Liberal MPs Denis Paradis and Wayne Easter. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade, file

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MPs in the All-Party Democracy Caucus are canvassing colleagues for feedback on parliamentary reform to see where there's momentum for change in the wake of a report released this week that found ex-MPs were disillusioned by the level of party control, partisanship, and their lack of independence.

Caucus co-chair and Liberal MP Anita Vandenbeld said the anonymous survey to MPs will help the caucus “determine where there's momentum,” and the areas where there's real support from MPs for change. It's essential the research be conducted by a third party so MPs will be frank, she said—in this case Samara Canada, a non-profit organization that promotes civic engagement in politics.

While that report is expected to come in the late summer or early fall, on June 12 Samara published another report (<https://www.hilltimes.com/2018/06/12/loosen-party-grip-backbenchers-says-report/147409>) based on exit interviews with 54 former MPs who served in the last Parliament (2011 to 2015) when Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper was in power.

Samara researcher Mike Morden and Ms. Vandenbeld (Ottawa West-Nepean, Ont.) said there's some commonality in the report's findings and what they're asking current MPs.

They asked MPs about 20 questions, including on evaluating the House of Commons and scrutiny of government, collaboration across party lines, how satisfied they are, and their thoughts on reform proposals that were crowdsourced from MPs.

“Most of the reforms, they're not partisan issues. As Members we need to look at the institutions,” said Ms. Vandenbeld, calling MPs “the vanguard” and “the frontline of democracy,” which is “under threat globally.”

It would be “an incredibly useful tool” if enough people respond. Mr. Morden said a good response rate would be about a quarter, but they are hoping for much higher. As of June 7, about 50 of the 338 MPs had responded before the June 22 deadline.

“If the House leaders see that backbenchers from all parties came out very strongly in favour of something,” Ms. Vandenbeld said, it won’t be presented as something one party is pushing.

“It takes away the party dynamic and it allows Members to focus entirely on the efficiency, the functioning, the way in which we operate in this place.”

The All-Party Democracy Caucus began last year (<https://www.hilltimes.com/2018/01/24/new-party-democracy-caucus-introduced-carleton-event/131727>) and has 22 MPs and one Senator on it, she said. Its leadership came from among the Liberal, Conservative, NDP, and Green parties.

Remove party control of committees: report

Samara’s June 12 report noted the 2015 MPs’ feelings on committees stood in “stark contrast” to remarks of MPs serving from 2004 to 2011, published in a previous study. The recently departed MPs were “stunningly dismissive of the committees they experienced,” as scripted spaces for party talking points.

The six MPs *The Hill Times* spoke with about the report’s results disagreed with that assessment, describing committees as places where valuable work takes place, with Green Party leader Elizabeth May noting a “dramatic change” in committees now as compared to the previous Parliament, from 2011 to 2015.

The current Prime Minister’s Office doesn’t drive and control committees in the same way, said Ms. May (Saanich-Gulf Islands, B.C.).

“PMO, it isn’t existing the way it did under Harper. Trudeau has definitely re-established cabinet government,” she said.

Liberal MP Wayne Easter (Malpeque, P.E.I.) described the “sea change” more bluntly: “Committee members on the government side were absolute puppets on a string,” previously, he said, with committee business held in private and opposition MPs voted down without debate.

But the report, and other MPs, say party control over committees is still a problem and recommend ways to reform the make-up of committees. Chairs should be “truly” elected by Members “rather than the current system where committee appointments are controlled by the

parties, who often ensure only one Member is nominated for the position,” and committee membership should be selected by party caucuses in a secret ballot, the report recommended.

Five-term NDP MP David Christopherson said his many years on the Public Accounts Committee have represented a reprieve from the partisanship he says plagues other aspects of Parliament. Other MPs agreed that the House and Question Period have become increasingly polarized spaces they'd like to see improve, but many expressed either doubt it could happen or about where to begin.

“If we can't fix it at the committee level, then I really don't see much hope for the rest of the system,” said Mr. Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, Ont.). “This is where it has to start.”

Parliamentary secretaries have got to go, he said, echoing the report's finding that they “ride shotgun”—there “for one reason and one reason only:” to tell their caucus colleagues how to vote and report back to the centre.

Mr. Easter, the chair of the Finance Committee and a 24-year MP, says parliamentary secretaries serve a purpose, and he pointed out that they're not voting members of committees.

“I see them as an important part for clarification for where the department may be at,” he said, adding that all parties will often have a representative for the whip's office or leader's office in the room.

While removing party control of committees “sounds great in theory,” he said it's “not as simplistic as some would portray.” For example, in 2015 a large new crop of MPs was elected and, if they were to have been chosen for committee roles by a secret ballot of their peers, their peers wouldn't have enough information to competently vote on the best choices, as everyone was so new, he suggested. Besides, governments need to pass their legislation through committees, so he said there needs to be some assurance government has good people to study bills.

“But I will agree that there sometimes [is] too much influence by the centre or the leader's office in all parties,” he added.

While the report speaks of an erosion of individuality and a tightening grip of party control, Mr. Christopherson said “it was ever thus” that prime ministers wield “an absolute grip” in our system.

“The hand on the throat of caucus members by leaders was just as tight then as it is now,” he said, while Ms. May said the report reflects her observations of “the increasingly intrusive power of the large three political parties.”

The Speaker of the House can make the biggest difference, Ms. May said.

“A lot of the rules of Parliament that have fallen into disuse ... people forget everything because they never knew,” she said, praising House Speaker Geoff Regan’s (Halifax West, N.S.) efforts to bring more decorum to the House, but adding Members shouldn’t be allowed to give canned speeches.

What has changed, however, is legislative bodies have become “nastier places,” Mr. Christopherson said—an assessment Mr. Easter, an MP since 1993, agreed with.

“A lot of the tradition and respect that oiled the machinery of parliamentary business has all but dried up. It’s all vicious and all power now,” said Mr. Christopherson, but what’s also changed is the citizens elected to the chambers are “balking at the system they find.”

Though informal, he sees the democracy caucus’ work, of which he is a part, as a start.

“This is the most organized I’ve ever seen it,” he said. “Something has to give.”

Liberal MP Denis Paradis (Brome–Missisquoi, Que.), who returned to Parliament in 2015 after a decade under former Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien, said he thinks the system hasn’t changed much.

“It’s about the same because the rules haven’t changed a lot.”

There’s kind of a balance, he said, because parties also must manage a team approach to votes, and partisanship is an expected result in the “*système contradictoire*.”

Conservative democratic institutions critic Blake Richards (Banff–Airdrie, Alta.) disagreed with much of the MPs’ assessments, saying he’s never felt constrained from expressing views different from his party.

“If [MPs] are feeling that’s not the case, I think they need to look at their own actions, possibly,” he said.

“I think you have to do that in a way that is conscious of the fact that you’re part of the team,” he said, adding it’s important to make sure there aren’t any surprises, and you can defend what you’re doing. “Part of how you get elected is on the party brand and you’re always working to try and make sure you’re not doing anything to damage that.”

Mr. Paradis noted the way the system works, parties often need everybody on board, except when there’s a free vote.

But he asserted, “there should be more free votes.”

Mr. Christopherson is in complete agreement on that point. He became embroiled in a highly public internal party tussle a few months ago when he voted against his party and was booted from committee membership, a move NDP leader Jagmeet Singh walked back after outrage from some MPs in his caucus. Liberal MPs Scott Simms (Coast of Bays–Central–Notre Dame, N.L.) and Wayne Long (Saint John–Rothesay, N.B.) were also recently removed from their committee posts after voting outside of party lines. Mr. Simms was removed from his chair role, while Mr. Long was kicked off two committees he sat on.

That publicity puts leaders in an “impossible position” where Mr. Christopherson said they are either presented by the news media as weak for not controlling caucus or dictatorial for demanding MPs vote along party lines.

“It should have no reflection on the leader one way or another, and yet it does and that’s what complicates things.”

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