

## HILL LIFE & PEOPLE

# Two House chambers? Time to consider it, MPs say

By EMILY HAWS FEB. 13, 2019

With two chambers now built, in West Block and Centre Block, some MPs say it's time to have two running permanently.



Liberal MP Kevin Lamoureux says that a parallel chamber is 'absolutely critical.' *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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With the Centre Block beginning a decade-long rehabilitation, and an interim House of Commons Chamber now running in West Block, advocates of varying political stripes say the time is ripe to consider a second permanent House chamber.

A parallel chamber would boost the number of people who could debate a bill, say proponents, and could also allow for more family-friendly hours, for instance, or more time to present petitions.

Liberal MP Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Man.) said a second chamber is “absolutely critical.”

“Demands on chamber time continues to grow through things such as social media, the number of issues, the growth of the number of MPs, [and] the growth of concentration in leaders’ offices,” he said, noting that he was speaking as an individual, rather than through his role as parliamentary secretary to Government House Leader Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Ont.). “It’s marginalized the amount of time there for the individual Member.”

Deputy Speaker and Conservative MP Bruce Stanton (Simcoe-North, Ont.) has written two recent pieces, for *Policy Options* (<http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/january-2019/the-virtues-of-a-parallel-chamber/>) and the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (<http://www.revparlcan.ca/en/vol-41-no2-a-parallel-chamber-for-canadas-house-of-commons/>), arguing for dual chambers.

Other MPs, however, were more cautious, wondering if a second chamber would really improve efficiency and the quality of the debate. A spring 2018 survey by the Samara Centre for Democracy and the All-Party Democracy Caucus suggested that nearly two-thirds of the 97 MPs who responded to a related survey question were opposed or indifferent to the idea, leaving only about 30 per cent in support.



Procedure and House Affairs Committee chair Larry Bagnell, pictured Dec. 11 in the Centre Block House, says the committee is considering studying the benefits and drawbacks of a parallel chamber. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

concern.”

Liberal MP Larry Bagnell (Yukon), who chairs the Procedure and House Affairs Committee (PROC), said the time is ripe to consider the idea, so it could be included in the renovation plan. Centre Block closed for renovations at the end of January and officials are now evaluating the extent of the repairs and renovations to be done. Currently the plan is to convert interim chamber space in West Block to committee rooms once Centre Block reopens, but some MPs say the interim chamber could be kept as the parallel one.

“I think PROC should have a discussion and a recommendation to the Board of Internal Economy as to whether or not we should have two chambers,” he said, suggesting it could be a good idea to have more time for members’ statements, petitions, or adjournment proceedings.

Cost could be a downside, but he didn’t think it was a significant deterrent. Mr. Bagnell added PROC will continue to stay engaged in the Centre Block renovation.

While most proponents seem to be floating the idea of West Block as the home to a second House chamber, Mr. Lamoureux said he would like to have the two chambers in Centre Block, meaning in the next few years the parallel option should be studied and piloted and, if successful, put into the final Centre Block renovation plan.

“What you do not want to see is you have the main ring, and then you’ve got that other place over across the street,” he said. It would certainly increase cost, he said, but is a worthwhile long-term democratic investment.

While Conservative democratic institutions critic Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, Alta.) supports a study, she said she’s also concerned it would be “more of the same” and said that an all-party consensus would be needed to implement it.

“I can’t help but wonder if it’s not duplicitous,” she said. “I do think we need to evaluate what will allow us to best represent Canadians...but I don’t think I would be alone in my views of

When asked if the government supported the idea, Mr. Lamoureux wouldn't say, but added that if "I didn't believe that the prime minister himself wouldn't be open to the idea, I wouldn't be talking about it to the degree to which I am."

Ms. Chagger said in an emailed statement that the government is always open to improving the House.

"If the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs decides on its own to study the merits of a parallel chamber, we would welcome such a review and take note of the committee's findings," she wrote.



Conservative MP Stephanie Kusie supports studying the use of two permanent chambers, but questions whether a parallel chamber would improve the House of Commons' functions. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

The idea of two chambers came up in an April 2017 PROC report (<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/PROC/Reports/RP8354291/procrp11/procrp11-e.pdf>) on modernizing House procedures and making a more family-friendly Parliament. Some MPs noted it could allow the House to rise earlier each day, or could eliminate the need for Friday sittings.

Australia and the United Kingdom already use parallel chambers, which look similar to large committee rooms. “They permit certain parliamentary business to be transacted outside of the main chamber, thus relieving the pressure on time in the main chamber; they do not possess decision-making power; they have a low quorum; and they are more informal in their physical setting, allowing for greater interplay in debate,” according to the PROC report.

A former House clerk told the committee the arrangement wouldn’t be too complex to put in place procedurally, and would have a limited cost and impact on the work and salaries of parliamentary staff. The House administration would support and put in place a House decision to establish a parallel chamber, the report noted. The committee, at the time, didn’t take a position on the issue.

NDP PROC vice-chair David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, Ont.) and Liberal MP and member Scott Simms (Coast of Bays-Central-Notre Dame, N.L.) both seemed to support the idea during a Dec. 11 PROC meeting, which briefed MPs on the Centre Block renovations.

“To my colleagues, let’s give this serious consideration. We can even do it before that, but certainly for the conversion of West Block back to just committee rooms, we should think about that,” said Mr. Simms.

Mr. Christopherson said the idea was worth studying, adding that “without changing the dynamics of the place, without changing anything really, it’s an add-on.”

### **Parallel chamber could empower backbenchers, say proponents**

While many MPs *The Hill Times* spoke to supported a parallel chamber, or at least a study on it, the Samara report said that most opposed or were indifferent to it.

Liberal MP and Democracy Caucus co-chair Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West-Nepean, Ont.) said MPs were more supportive of a parallel chamber once they understood it.

Parliament should not pursue “fanciful ideas” like second chambers, but rather, should push to restore eroded procedural rules, noted one survey respondent.

While every party believes strongly in what they’re proposing, the way the beliefs are communicated ends up “driving home the same points,” said Ms. Kusie, which is why it could “just be more of the same.” She supports running a pilot project after the October general election, but she said she still feels there is room to improve the current system.

Samara senior research associate Paul Thomas said that it can be difficult to convince MPs of a second chamber's merit, given it sounds like more work and MPs are already pressed for time. That being said, they "might enjoy it more" if there are rules to reduce toxic partisanship, he said. The second British chamber, for instance, prioritizes debates with bipartisan support and backbenchers set the schedule.



Conservative MP Scott Reid, right, says he's supportive of a parallel chamber if it's focused on private members' business. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

"It really depends on how the issues that are debated in the second chamber come about," Mr. Thomas said.

The type and level of partisanship is determined by the MPs themselves, and could happen regardless of the number of chambers, said NDP MP Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood-Transcona, Man.), adding he supports a study and is supportive of more chamber time.

A parallel chamber would mean more time to introduce private members' bills, reducing or eliminating the use of the current lottery system, Mr. Stanton said. The first debate hour could also be in the second chamber, with the rest of the work in the main one. Currently, only one hour per day is allocated to private members' business.

"You would open up more time in a four-year Parliament so more Members would be able to get a piece of private members' bills into debate," he said. "There are some Members that have been here for 10 to 12 or more years, have never been able."

A "secondary lane" also leaves more time to examine omnibus legislation, Mr. Stanton added.

Ms. Vandenbeld suggested piloting the second chamber by having the House replaced on Fridays by the parallel chamber in a committee room. MPs who want to stay and get on the record on a topic could do so, she said, while others could fly home to their constituencies.

"They don't have to just sit there just in case we don't have quorum," she said, making it more efficient.

In Mr. Stanton's *Policy Options* column last month, he wrote that Scott Reid (Lanark-Frontenac-Kingston, Ont.) and Liberal MP Frank Baylis (Pierrefonds-Dollard, Que.) were working "to propose an amendment to the standing orders to create—or at least run a pilot project for—a second, parallel chamber after the next election."

Mr. Reid didn't mention the amendment in an interview with *The Hill Times*, and didn't respond to a follow-up email. He said his decision on supporting a parallel chamber would depend on how it was set up, but supported one that focused on private members' business.

"You have actually significant matters being discussed; they're just not significant to the government's agenda" or in the throne speech, he said.

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