

# VIBERT: Outgoing MPs say they're reduced to scripted echoes of leaders

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A new Samara Poll shows outgoing MPs say they have been reduced to a scripted, uncritical echo of their party leadership. Jim Vibert also finds Justin Trudeau's election campaign pledge to address the so-called democratic deficit has gone largely unfulfilled. (JUSTIN TANG / CP)

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- Former parliamentarian

Canadians are losing faith in their democratic institutions and with good cause, according to former members of parliament.

“We’re not just in a sort of post-truth politics, but we’re in a post-democratic politics,” said one former MP, leaving little doubt that Canadians who think they are ably represented in Parliament are mistaken.

Representative democracy is in trouble in Canada, under attack from within by the dictates of autocratic leaders and partisan functionaries, according to **The Samara Centre for Democracy’s survey of MPs who left Parliament in 2015.** (<https://www.samaracanada.com/research/political-leadership/mp-exit-interviews/volume-ii/flip-the-script>).

The report, based on interviews with 54 former MPs from all major parties and most regions who resigned or were defeated in the last election, was released today (June 12) and paints a dismal picture of the role of parliamentarians, who have been reduced to scripted, uncritical echo of their party leadership.

A striking change between the current survey and the previous one, with former MPs from 2004 to 2011, is that partisan control now extends to parliamentary committees, which had been the last bastion of independent thought for individual MPs. Committee work is now described by former MPs as a waste of time.

## Making a mockery

In committees, MPs once worked across party lines on policy or to improve legislation but now are choreographed by party apparatchiks, and party leaders uses control over committee membership to manage members and punish any hint of dissent.

“MPs have progressively lost permission to make up their own minds, and even pick their own words,” a former parliamentarian said.

Most MPs go along with the fiction that committee work matters and let witnesses “pour out their hearts . . . and spend untold hours (preparing) a 10-minute presentation,” with no idea that MPs are “making a mockery of the whole system.”

The problems are most pronounced for backbenchers on the government side of the House. The 120 Liberal MPs who are neither cabinet minister nor parliamentary secretaries aren’t much more than guaranteed government votes in the Commons and good props for photos.

Canadians who elect representatives to be their voice in Parliament are effectively silenced by the constraints of enforced, strict adherence to the party line placed on their MPs.

Measures to restore committee independence and authority by wresting control from party leadership is seen as one tangible change that can give purpose and a some legislative influence to individual MPs.

## A clearer understanding

Leaders won’t voluntarily surrender control over the levers of political power. Structural changes in parliament will be needed to restore some health to representative government, and that won’t happen unless Canadians demand it.

Samara didn’t find much reason for hope in the current Parliament, elected in 2015. Justin Trudeau’s election campaign pledge to address the so-called democratic deficit has gone largely unfulfilled.

Samara first exit interviews with former Members of Parliament from the 38th, 39th and 40th Parliaments (2004-2011) resulted in the bestseller, *Tragedy in the Commons*. Among its findings was that MPs don’t have a clear, common understanding of their jobs

That problem persisted and was perhaps even more pronounced among former MPs surveyed after the 2015 vote.

“(H)ow can we expect parliamentarians to defend representative democracy if they don’t agree on what core purposes they are supposed to serve?” the report asks rhetorically.

## A common erosion

With each passing Parliament, the shrunken role for MPs becomes more normalized, and MPs become resigned to or even content with a system that undermines them and their responsibilities as representatives.

Coincidental with the erosion of effective representation is a decline in citizens’ trust in democratic institutions. Leaders who exploit that mistrust for political gain add momentum to the process.

MPs should be empowered not for their own sake, but to become a critical link between citizens and the state. Citizens need to see public life as a worthwhile pursuit and see their priorities reflected by their political representatives.

The erosion of independent thought among elected representatives is not confined to Parliament. The same strict, centralized political control is evident in provincial legislatures, where premiers’ offices and centralized partisan operatives exert ever more influence.

The result is elected representatives who are little more than the public mouthpieces for government policies and positions massaged into inoffensive drivel by unelected functionaries. It’s hard to say what form of government that is, but you can eliminate democracy from the list.

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