

## Global Opinions

# Why is it virtually impossible to be an independent in Canada's Parliament?

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By J.J. McCullough

When the parliament of Canada is dissolved in a few weeks, in the run-up to October's general election, the outgoing [seat count](#) will tally 177 Liberals, 96 Conservatives, 41 New Democrats, 10 Bloc Quebecois, 3 from minor parties and eight independents.

At first glance, this high number of independents — a faction on the brink of displacing the Bloc as Canada's fourth-largest parliamentary group — may seem like evidence of a public eager to elect politicians outside the constraints of partisan conformity. On closer inspection, however, the eight are merely a monument to a standard ritual of Canadian political culture: purging the problematic.

Not a single independent MP was elected as such. Instead, all were expelled by their original parties after committing some unforgivable offense.

In Canada, a politician's membership in the political party of their choice is a privilege someone else grants them, not a right of free association. A recent [study](#) by the Toronto-based Samara Centre for Democracy [confirmed](#) just how top-down the process is. Of the 6,600 partisan parliamentary candidates that ran between 2003 and 2015, “only 17% arrived there through a competitive nomination race.” The vast majority were either directly installed by their party's boss or appointed through a sham election in which they were the sole candidate. Given Canada's proliferation of “safe” districts, this can mean “the process of selecting the party's candidate has more impact on who the MP will be than the election itself.”

Once in parliament, an MP's ability to remain a member of the party they were selected to represent remains deeply dependent on their ability to stay in the good graces of the party leader. The stories of parliament's eight independent MPs offer lessons about what you can't get away with these days.

First to fall was Nunavut MP Hunter Tootoo, who was removed from the Liberal Party caucus in May of 2016. Initially, the official story implied his expulsion had something to do with a [drinking problem](#), though it's now understood to have been in response to the MP's “[inappropriate](#)” relationship with a former staffer.

Next came Darshan Singh Kang, who left the Liberals in September 2017 following allegations he had repeatedly [groped and kissed](#) an ex-staffer without consent. New Democrat Erin Weir was similarly booted

from the NDP in May 2018 after an [investigation](#) concluded he too was guilty of unwanted advances.

On the Conservative side, Tony Clement was [removed](#) from the Tory party in November following what leader Andrew Scheer characterized as “numerous reports” of Clement inappropriately texting women, including one relationship that spiraled into [financial extortion](#) of the married father of three.

Clement’s downfall coincided with that of Raj Grewal, a Liberal MP who was [removed](#) from his party following revelations he was suffering from a gambling addiction severe enough to have attracted attention from the [Royal Canadian Mounted Police](#).

Last were a trio of women who fell out of the Liberal Party’s good graces in the aftermath of the [SNC-Lavalin scandal](#). Provoked by mounting criticism of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s allegedly improper pressuring of Attorney General Jody Wilson-Raybould, MP Celina Caesar-Chavannes tweeted [critically](#) about Trudeau and complained to the press about his “hostility” in their past interactions. A few days later, Trudeau [announced](#) she was out.

Wilson-Raybould herself and allied cabinet minister Jane Philpott were [expelled](#) from the Liberals a few days after that once it became clear that they too were committed to a narrative of the Lavalin scandal deeply unflattering to the prime minister.

While parliament’s eight independents are all the products of different circumstances — some sympathetic, others decidedly not — they’re nevertheless united by a few consistent themes.

The main one is that while Canadians may formally elect members of parliament, an MP’s ability to stay in office is ultimately subordinate to the judgment of their party leader. Absent the backing of a major political party, it is virtually impossible to get reelected — “fewer than half of one percent of those elected to Parliament since 1993 won as Independents,” notes the Samara study. An ability to strip party membership thus affords party bosses an effective veto over the political future of any elected parliamentarian as is deemed necessary to protect the party from embarrassment, scandal or even internal dissent.

The other lesson is that despite the truism that it is possible —indeed *proper* — to distinguish a politician’s personal life from their professional competence, enjoying long-term partisan representation in Parliament now clearly demands scrutinizing the moral character of candidates. MPs who struggle to manage their addictions or sexual appetites can no longer claim that such private demons have no bearing on their ability to do their job. That’s for the party leader to decide.

It goes both ways, too. While the Tootoo/Clement/Kang/Weir/Grewal cases illustrate the negative consequences of immoral conduct, the Wilson-Raybould/Philpott/Caesar-Chavannes episodes demonstrate that taking a firm moral stance can be an equally bad career move.

Canadians enjoy a constitutional right to elect whoever they want to the House of Commons. The final standings of the 42nd Parliament, however, should remind voters of the parallel importance of pleasing party leaders who have limited tolerance for bad hires.

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