

The case for abolishing political parties

Canadian municipalities function without political parties. Why not the federal government and the provinces?

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What exactly is the point of a political party in the 21st century?

That's a question we don't often ask when we're talking about democratic reform. But if we're looking for radical solutions to political malaise in Canada, why not consider abolishing political parties altogether?

We could call it the "party's over" solution to what's ailing our civic culture.

It's not an entirely crazy idea: by and large, municipalities function without political parties, and you don't see anyone arguing that partisan divisions would improve their operations.

Moreover, most Canadians live their daily lives without any attachment to political parties. It's estimated that only about 5 per cent of voters hold any type of party membership; many more float their allegiance at the ballot box.

As well, when you ask Canadians what it is about politics that turns them off, they will invariably mention the antics and nonsense committed in the name of blind partisanship.

So, while we're enjoying this summer break in the political action in Ottawa (with some exceptions), let's stretch our imaginations and examine the case for political-party abolition.

We're already in the midst of winding down public subsidies to political parties, which put about [\\$1.9 million collectively in the bank accounts of the Conservatives, New Democrats, Liberals, Bloc Québécois and Green Party between April 1 and June 30](#).

By next year, those quarterly payments will be phased out entirely, fulfilling the Conservative government's promise to cease the per-vote subsidy that parties have been receiving since caps were placed on corporate and individual donations more than a decade ago.

The parties will still benefit from tax credits on donations, but the end of the subsidies means they will have to rely solely on those donations to do their business.

The question stands, though: What is their business? What role do they perform?

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Many of the dollars they collect these days goes to advertising and promotion — aimed largely at people who don't follow politics. They're taking money from citizens, in other words, to argue their relevance to citizens. Think of the ways in which those millions of dollars could be better spent — on local charities, for instance, or on health or education.

Advertising — or “branding,” as the marketers say — has become the chief occupation of political parties.

One of the most interesting papers presented at this year's meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association came from one of the country's leading academics in political marketing, [Alex Marland from Memorial University](#).

Marland laid out a persuasive case that political parties no longer perform their historic function of brokering disparate interests in this country. Instead, in an age of fragmented communication, centralized command, distrust of elites and permanent campaigns, political parties are less interested in hammering out coalitions and more interested in appealing to “target markets” of voters. “Brokerage is becoming a relic of a bygone era,” Marland writes. “Politics is increasingly characterized by the segmentation of electors.”

It's hard to argue that this is an improvement in a democracy that, after all, is fundamentally about finding ways to work together. If political parties are interested instead in driving us apart, what's the point of them?

The death of political parties would certainly be mourned by current partisans and politicians but perhaps not by ex-politicians, as we learn in the new book, [Tragedy in the Commons](#), by Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan of the Samara organization.

The book is based on “exit interviews” conducted by Samara with dozens of former politicians to delve into the causes of democratic malaise in Canada.

One theme runs through nearly all the recovering MPs' tales: much of their frustration was caused by their own party, whether it was the rigid discipline, the excessive partisanship, the nasty, internal feuds and so on.

“As power consolidates under the party leader and staff, MPs become increasingly powerless and the voters increasingly disenfranchised, making the misfortune of this behaviour all the more acute,” the authors write.

Loat and MacMillan don't go so far as to call for the abolition of political parties, but they do urge them to radically clean up their act and raise their standards of operation. I'd add an “or else” — namely, abolition.

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Invariably, someone is going to argue that it's impossible to send political parties to the scrap heap of history — that we're stuck with them as a necessary evil.

Getting them to make the case for their continued existence would certainly focus the discussion.

If they're not bringing citizens together but rather repelling even their own MPs with their way of doing business, spending money to knock each other down or convince us of their relevance, do we really need them?