



Democracy in danger?! Not really

Contrary to popular opinion, our system of government is not near death – and most of the proposed cures would make things much worse

ANDREW POTTER, OTTAWA CITIZEN

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Canada is a fractious federation, rent by all manner of political divides. But if there is one idea that brings people together from all corners of the political landscape, it is the certainty Canadian democracy lies in ruins. So entrenched is this conviction, that to merely suggest the opposite -- Canada is, in fact, a functioning democracy -- is to invite scorn and ridicule.

So allow me to invite some scorn and ridicule.

Last week, retiring Liberal MP Keith Martin delivered his parting words to the chamber in which he has served Canadians since 1993. The consensus amongst MPs, he told *The Hill Times*, is that Parliament is "a colossal waste of taxpayers' money," and he went on to cite excessive partisanship on committees as a major problem.

A week before that, the *Toronto Star* ran a report on a conference of political scientists under the alarmist headline, "Is Canadian democracy in real danger?" The story's main source for this angle was Laurier professor David Docherty -- a favourite quote-machine for press gallery reporters -- who said Canadians should be "alarmed" at the way successive prime ministers have treated the Commons as "an inconvenient impediment to their rule."

But these are only the most recent rehearsals of what has become the endless refrain of Canadian political commentary. Actually, to call it a refrain is to be too kind to its sense and coherence. It is more like the vuvuzela of our national conversation -- a constant honking din of whinging about the disgrace of Question Period, the decline of Parliament, excessive partisanship, party discipline, the unelected Senate, and, worst of all, our obsolete and unrepresentative electoral system.

But does it follow from this that Parliament is broken? Not at all. But to see why this is the case, we first need to make sure we understand exactly what the House of Commons is for.

Under the system of responsible government, the House of Commons performs three main functions. It has to make a government, hold it to account, and determine the length of that government by granting or withholding its support. MPs perform other useful functions in the House, in committees, and back in

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their ridings, but these are dwarfed in importance by the need to make a government and hold it to account.

And by this fundamental measure, our parliamentary system works exceedingly well. It works best when there is a majority government, because then there is a sharp distinction between government and opposition, with clean lines of responsibility and accountability. The electorate has a clear sense of who is to be praised or blamed for how the country has been run, and voters can reward or punish their representatives accordingly. The machinery is slightly less effective in a minority government, but the essential nature of responsible government is sustained through the principle of cabinet solidarity -- that is, that there is a government that stands or falls as a whole.

So why don't more people grasp this? Why is everyone so convinced our democracy is ruined?

There are at least two reasons. The first is the widespread tendency to mistake the work environment for the institution. That is, a lot of the hand-wringing over our democracy is actually just a dislike for the nasty tone of Question Period, or the partisanship of committees. But a lack of decorum is not the same as institutional dysfunction. Our members of Parliament treat one another with disrespect. So what? Why should that bother anyone off the Hill? If MPs want to run their workplace like it's always last call on Friday night at YukYuks, that's their business.

The deeper problem is that too many people don't understand how Parliament works. This applies not only to journalists and academics, but even to MPs themselves. In its latest report on a series of exit interviews it did with 65 former members of Parliament, the Samara organization noted that most of them left Ottawa having little sense of what their job actually was. While there was a great deal of disagreement among respondents over what is included in the job description, it is astonishing that only one or two actually cited "holding the government to account" as part of it.

It would appear that almost everyone interested in Canadian politics has internalized some half-baked understanding of responsible government as a system of "checks and balances" based on a "division of powers." Perhaps it is bad civics education or maybe everyone has just spent too many hours watching *The West Wing*. Regardless, an excessively congressional picture of our system of government is what seems to motivate some of the more goofy calls for reform, such as "free votes" in the Commons and an elected Senate.

And this is the key point: Virtually every suggested reform for what allegedly ails our democracy -- cheers for minority government and its hope of a diluted executive power, coalitions, electoral reform, referendums, voter recall initiatives, and so on -- will only diminish the ability of the Commons to serve

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as the vehicle through which the executive is able to engineer the consent of the governed, and through which Parliament can hold the executive to account.

Parliament's most serious affliction is not dysfunction but widespread ignorance. What it needs most is not so much to be reformed as simply understood.

Andrew Potter is a public affairs columnist for Maclean's magazine.