

Democracy the big loser in Canada's Parliament: Hepburn

Parliament is faltering if most Canadians feel their interests aren't well represented by their MPs, new report from Samara says.

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A new report by Samara, a non-profit think-tank devoted to promoting democracy and citizen engagement, says many Canadians think Parliament is a discredited institution where MPs have no real power. Prime Minister Stephen Harper rises during question period in the House of Commons on Jan. 31, 2013.

Be honest, when was the last time you watched the daily question period broadcast live from the House of Commons or paid attention to the highlights on a nightly newscast?

I'll wager it's been a long time.

What was once a regular habit is over for many Canadians, especially those outside of the political hothouse of Ottawa. They've replaced it with the odd look at politicians on TV yelling loudly in the Commons on issues the public feels are of little relevance to their lives.

For these Canadians, Parliament is a discredited institution where MPs have no real power.

Indeed, polls last fall suggested only 27 per cent of us feel Ottawa is dealing with issues about which we care deeply.

It's a sorry state for Parliament, which if not reversed could ultimately weaken our democratic system as we know it today.

That's the underlying conclusion of a major new report released this week by Samara, a non-profit think-tank devoted to promoting democracy and citizen engagement across Canada.

The report, titled "[Lost in Translation or Just Lost?](#)" "Lost in Translation or Just Lost?" analyzed a half-year's worth of debates and speeches in Parliament during 2012 with the goal of determining whether what happened in the House of Commons matched up with Canadians' main priorities.

To the surprise of the Samara researchers, Parliament was "actually aligned with Canadians' interests, albeit weakly," the report said.

This was especially true on economic issues such as jobs. However, there were major disconnects on other topics, notably health care and the environment, that deeply concerned voters but received little attention in Parliament.

"Overall, these results suggest MPs are doing a better job of representing Canadians' views than Canadians might expect," the report said.

http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/2013/02/07/democracy_the_big_loser_in_canadas_parliament_hepburn.html

So why the disconnect?

Alison Loat, executive director of Samara, said in an interview Canadians don't feel federal or provincial politicians represent them well when they see the bitter fights in question period, MPs reading pre-approved questions and legislatures closed for most of the year (B.C.'s legislature has met just 19 days since last spring).

The Samara report says our parliamentary system "is faltering if a majority of Canadians do not believe their interests are well represented by their elected representatives."

Ominously, the report warned that "a far more serious threat to Parliament than declining decorum is simply that the over eight million words accumulated over a year of debate may not really matter because Parliament itself doesn't really matter."

The main reason for that is that virtually all key decisions and policies are made by the Prime Minister's Office. The role of Parliament has degenerated into being a mere rubber stamp.

The report is filled with comments from unnamed MPs bemoaning the decline of Parliament. Some examples: "A waste of time." An "empty, pointless debating chamber."

Over the years, countless political leaders have promised to fix Parliament, giving backbench MPs more clout and allowing them to vote more in line with their constituents' desires than with official party policy.

Loat has some suggestions to reverse the slide that range from giving MPs more free votes to longer debates on major issues and promoting new ways for citizen engagement, such as citizens' assemblies.

Loat believes there's "a sense of urgency" among the public for change, but I doubt it will filter up to party leaders who won't act because they want to protect their own power.

Admittedly, it's easy to become discouraged and tune out.

But, as Loat insists, everyone can play a role in reinforcing our democratic institutions through simple steps such as ensuring politicians know voters are concerned about what is happening in our legislatures.

By doing so, we can restore some respect for Parliament and our provincial legislatures — and strengthen our democracy.