

Ignatieff: Too much executive power is harming democracy

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When Parliament resumed, this week, Prime Minister Stephen Harper spent the first day tweeting about his cat.

But others were more concerned about the state of the Commons.

One of them is Michael Ignatieff. Since leaving public office after his defeat in the 2011 election, the former Liberal leader has been speaking and writing about parliamentary decline and its impact on democracy.

His thoughts coincide with [a forthcoming study from the Toronto think tank Samara](#) that reveals the deep gulf between what Canadians want from the House of Commons and what it is delivering. Is it time to reinvent our main chamber of government? To kick off a week-long series exploring that question, The Globe's John Ibbitson talked to Mr. Ignatieff about what is wrong with Parliament – and how we can fix it.

You have been watching governments on both sides of the Atlantic your whole adult life. What is happening to our parliaments?

People forget that members of parliament are legislators. They're not comedians. They're there to vote on stuff.

But the prime minister's capacity to dictate House business, put together omnibus bills and ram them through, while imposing party discipline, has concentrated executive power at the expense of the legislature.

This is true in all parliamentary systems, but some academics argue that the Canadian prime minister has more power over parliament than any other prime minister in any other parliamentary system. And that is really harming legislative democracy.

Why is this still happening, here and elsewhere?

The acceleration of public life – the sheer speed with which events happen – favours the executive. And the bureaucracy. It favours those who have the information and have the levers of power. I don't want to sound holier-than-thou here. I was party leader. As party leader, I wanted to keep my caucus under control. The press would be at me if there was dissent in caucus: "Liberal Party split." "Leader can't lead." All that stuff. Holding power as leader of the opposition or as prime minister, you have an ongoing imperative to control your caucus. But that imperative contradicts the representative function of your MPs. This is a conflict at the heart of parliamentary democracy. And it can only be changed by something that's unlikely, which is party leaders saying: "Okay, representative democracy matters so much that we're going to let our dogs off the leash."

[That means] more free votes; you welcome dissent rather than suppress it. You allow committees to do their job, which is to look at legislation and vote according to how they view it; you restrict votes of confidence to budget and supply.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ignatieff-too-much-executive-power-is-harming-democracy/article8124123/>

You've talked about how politicians used to look upon each other as adversaries, but now consider each other enemies. What's the difference?

An enemy is a rival who has to be destroyed. An adversary is an opponent you want to defeat, but who you may later need as an ally. But if House votes are along straight party lines and you have a majority, you have no incentive to treat your adversaries as anything but enemies.

What was distinctive about Stephen Harper's use of minority government is that he governed as if he had a majority, and treated people whose votes he actually needed as enemies, and he got away with it. And good for him. He is a very effective politician. But it had a terrible effect on the tone of the House.

To what extent is the democracy itself threatened?

Democracy is much more than Parliament, thank God. ... I'm old enough to remember the sheer, ferocious brutality of the Diefenbaker House of Commons. So we shouldn't exaggerate... But it's pretty bad. I do think we have the most inveterately partisan prime minister in recent memory.

So when you cast forward five or 10 years , what do you see?

What everyone hopes for is a vision of Canadian democracy that begins at the church hall, in the student dorm, on the factory floor, and moves to the municipal council, and up to the provincial legislature, and moves up ultimately to the Parliament of Canada – that people look to Parliament and they think something very simple, they think, "That's us. That's who we are. Those people represent us."

What I hope is that the House is full and the reporters are back in the press gallery watching debates because the debates matter. We've been there before. We can get back there again.

And what do you fear?

What I fear is what I think we've got: a hollowed-out democracy, in which solitary politicians hurl abuse at each other in an empty chamber, and power accrues ever more steadily to the prime minister, to the Supreme Court, to the bureaucracy and to the press. And all of them regard the people elected to represent the people with contempt and derision.

That would be terrible. And that's close to where we are.