

# Backbenchers point to less party discipline as a fix for Parliament

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OTTAWA – They may not always speak freely in the House of Commons, but some members of Parliament are taking to the Internet to stand up for their right to speak out against their own parties.

“It’s Parliament’s, I would suggest, duty and constitutional responsibility to provide a check on government and hold government to account,” Conservative MP Brent Rathgeber said in an interview on the Global News program The West Block with Tom Clark.

His comments follow a [recent blog](#) he penned, which paints a stark line in the House of Commons.

“I understand that members of Parliament, who are not members of the executive, sometimes think of themselves as part of the government; we are not,” Rathgeber wrote.

Instead, Rathgeber argues MPs are part of the legislature and as such, cabinet is accountable to them, not the other way around.

Rathgeber’s comments stem from one of the greatest tensions in Parliament – the role of an MP as a representative of their constituents and as a flag-bearer for their party.

Over time, the latter seems to have taken precedence with a majority of votes in the House of Commons whipped, or dictated, by the party.

MP’s individual voices, and those of their constituents, have often faded into their party’s larger chorus.

The increasing disillusionment Canadians have with Parliament's ability to reflect their views was highlighted last week by [a report](#) showing just 27 per cent of the electorate thought the House of Commons deals with issues important to them.

Samara, the think tank behind the report, found the alignment happened slightly more often than Canadians thought, but mostly in venues relatively free from party discipline – such as during members' statements and legislative debates.

Rathgeber acknowledges it can be tough to serve more than one master, and there are consequences for voting against the government.

"My primary loyalty is to my constituents. They are the ones that elected me. But I also have a loyalty to the prime minister and the Conservative Party of Canada because after all I was elected under their banner," he said.

The Alberta MP added that he hasn't yet been put in a position where he couldn't support a government bill or initiative.

Rathgeber's call for a more autonomous backbench was echoed by his parliamentary colleague Liberal MP Ralph Goodale, who tackled the problem of eroding democracy in [a blog](#) dated Feb. 8.

Part of the solution Goodale suggests is increased backbench freedom and limiting "whipped" votes to questions of confidence, where a loss could topple the government.

"Otherwise, MPs should think for themselves, make their own decisions and be accountable for them," wrote the Saskatchewan MP, adding that the executive should convince backbenchers a bill has merit if they want support.

Former Liberal MP Glen Pearson, who represented a riding in London, Ont., also blogged on the ["identity" issues](#) of MPs this week.

"The problem for the average politician is that they can't get there from here – the powers of polarization far outmatch their individual abilities to truly represent their communities and the greater good," he wrote.

<http://globalnews.ca/news/391008/backbenchers-point-to-less-party-discipline-as-a-fix-for-parliament/>

Pearson wrote MPs have little choice, but to conform to the politics of the age, leaving citizens increasingly disconnected from the House of Commons.

“Citizens have learned to do without you and you slowly learn to take them less and less into account ... And so you become an anomaly: a politician without a people. They grow confused at your aims, baffled and exasperated at your preference for party over people, and your refusal to take the important things of their lives into account.”

It’s a challenge that was thrust into the public spotlight last spring when Conservative backbencher David Wilks backtracked after telling his constituents he would vote against the Harper government’s omnibus budget bill if Canadians could convince other MPs to do the same.

The rookie MP from the British Columbia riding of Kootenay-Columbia admitted to constituents he and a “barrage” of other backbenchers have concerns about the size and scope of the bill, but has no choice because the vote is whipped.

“But at the end of the day in my opinion, (cabinet has) made up their mind and this is how it is going to move forward and one person is not going to make a difference. One MP is not going to make a difference,” he said.

It’s a sentiment not shared by Rathgeber.

“I’m not here to become a cabinet minister. I ran for Parliament and Parliament is an important institution,” Rathgeber said.

Only time will tell if enough MPs heed Rathgeber’s call to convince Canadians that he is right.