

Hepburn: Your local MP is democracy's enemy

Most Canadians are fed up with unaccountable MPs who don't pay any attention to voters after election day.

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Behind Prime Minister Stephen Harper sit some of the many ordinary MPs Bob Hepburn says spend too much time working for the interests of their party rather than for voters.

Sean Kilpatrick / The Canadian Press

In the late afternoon of most days, visitors to the House of Commons can watch as a bored-looking MP delivers a dull speech on an obscure issue to a

handful of MPs forced by their party to attend to ensure a quorum in the chamber.

Most MPs in attendance fill their time reading reports, answering emails and scanning newspapers. None of them really listens to the speech, which has been carefully vetted by party rulers.

When it comes time to vote on legislation, the MPs vote as they are told by their party leaders. Every MP knows their role and they'd better play it well or their political masters will come down hard on them.

It's a far cry from the hotbed of democracy and enlightened political debate that Canadians want — and deserve.

This sorry excuse for a vibrant legislative body, filled with subservient or frustrated MPs, is a big reason why more and more Canadians are fed up with how our democracy is working these days.

Indeed, MPs are among the biggest roadblocks — and enemies — to improving democracy in Canada.

Despite growing public outcries about the state of our democracy, MPs from all parties have done nothing to confront the decline in democracy in recent years, from election fraud to abuse of parliamentary institutions.

And Canadians have generally also sat silent, so fed up that we no longer pay attention to what's going on in Parliament because we don't care any more.

That disengagement may be slowly changing, though. If it catches on it could spell trouble for MPs and have major implications for Parliament and democracy.

The freshest sign of that is a poll released this week by Samara, a group that promotes citizen engagement, that shows most Canadians believe MPs aren't accountable to them and don't care what they think.

In their grim report, titled *Who's the Boss?*, the Samara researchers found Canadians awarded MPs the most marks for representing the views of their party, some 15 points higher than the score they gave for representing the views of the people who elected them.

"In other words, Canadians feel MPs are doing the best job at the very thing Canadians see as a low priority: representing the views of their political parties," the researchers said.

In a 2011 study by Samara, many of the 65 ex-MPs it interviewed agreed they spent way too much time working in the interests of their party rather than for voters.

Clearly, political parties are run by autocrats at the top. Some critics have gone so far as to describe Prime Minister Stephen Harper as dictatorial in how he controls both his cabinet ministers and backbench MPs.

In effect, MPs are powerless outsiders, cut out of all areas of parliamentary influence from having input into public policy to voting their conscience on legislation.

Sadly, most sitting MPs, comfortable with their hefty salaries and lucrative pensions, refuse to speak out.

Because they remain silent, however, they must accept blame for the erosion of democracy perpetrated by successive prime ministers who gather more power, leaving Parliament, in the words of former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, an "empty, pointless debating chamber."

In a series of recent speeches and interviews, Ignatieff has warned about the dangers facing our democratic institutions unless MPs step up and demand more free votes in Parliament and an end to the pure partisanship that results in politicians in other parties being seen as "the enemy."

"Until we can break some of the power of parties in Parliament, I think Parliament's going to die," he told an audience in London, England.

So what should MPs and voters do?

First, MPs must address the disconnect between the demand by party leaders for MPs to slavishly follow their edicts and the local interests of their constituents. They can start by demanding more free votes in Parliament.

Second, MPs need to talk much more with constituents between elections. I bet most Canadians never see or talk with their local MP except during elections.

Third, voters must be willing to tell MPs exactly what's on their mind, especially when it comes to the indifference elected officials show toward the assault on our institutions and traditions.

Working together, Canadians — and their local MPs — can take our democracy back.