

MPs need authority, yes. And clear responsibilities

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There is good in Michael Chong's proposed Reform Act. The very step of introducing it enlivens and enlightens our parliamentary democracy.

That it focuses on giving more authority to individual members of Parliament away from party leaders on leadership selection and local nomination contests shows how far Parliament has strayed from its original principles. Unfortunately, the bill itself strays from addressing the underlying issue: the roles and responsibilities of MPs themselves.

The position has been around for almost 150 years, but no formal job description actually exists. Candidates apply and voters select someone to represent them in Parliament without actually fully agreeing on what the job entails.

In a representative democracy, such as Canada's, we elect MPs to represent us from a given geographic riding. But what do we really mean by represent?

The representative role actually has three dimensions. MPs represent their ridings in a *delegate* role; they represent their party in a *politico* role; and they represent their own views in a *trustee* role.

As a delegate, MPs perform the traditional populist role of acting as the direct voice of the citizens in their riding, placing personal and party judgments second.

As a politico, MPs act as advocates and representatives of their political party, even when it conflicts with their riding interests or their own personal views.

As a trustee, MPs rely on their own judgment and opinion to decide and vote on public and political matters.

In practice, MPs are called upon to perform all three roles. But the default view of Canadians is that when push comes to shove, the politico or party role wins out despite desiring first the delegate role.

A [report](#) last year from Samara, a democracy think tank, bears this out. It found that just 36 per cent of Canadians were satisfied with how MPs do their jobs. And when it came to what MPs do best, the highest score given was to "representing the views of their parties."

A clear disconnect between what Canadians want their MPs to do and what their MPs actually do – that's now the norm.

So, how to redress this imbalance? Not easily, given that voters don't vote with just one expectation. Party labels matter to them, too. Voters are not just choosing a representative; they are choosing a government. And a disciplined party that looks ready to govern garners more votes than an undisciplined one, hands down.

But until we come to grips with what voters want and expect from our MPs and what their role should be, democratic dissatisfaction will reign.

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Instead, we need to go back to basics. Write what's needed first: a job description for our members of Parliament, setting out their roles and duties and a code of conduct to ensure they adhere to it.

It's not so far-fetched. Britain has a [code of conduct](#) for MPs that sets out members' duties and states: "Members have a general duty to act in the interests of the nation as a whole; and a special duty to their constituents."

Placing the "delegate" role after the "trustee" role is unsurprising in the land of [Edmund Burke](#), who famously said as MP for Bristol in 1774, "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

Here in Canada, the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy recommended in its 2005 [report](#) a formal statement of the roles and duties of an MLA and accompanying code of conduct, stating: "to first and foremost represent conscientiously the interests of the constituents of his or her electoral district." This was Job 1 as far as New Brunswick voters were concerned, and would likely be the same for Canadian voters as a whole.

Write the roles and duties in the order that reflects voters' values and matters most to them. When those duties are clear and codified, MPs will know what is expected of them and voters will too. Then watch behaviour and practice in the House of Commons adjust alongside.

Changing Parliament's culture, not just its rules, should be the goal.

It will be ironic if Mr. Chong's bill to make Parliament work fails to pass because Parliament fails to work. But, with an MP job description on the books today, it would have a much better chance.

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