

# Hébert: MPs need to step it up to stay relevant

It will be MP's loss if they do not expend more energy than their predecessors on challenging a system that is turning them into drones.

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The first time a cabinet minister confided that he found the media to be an essential go-to source to keep abreast of what was going on inside his government, I figured he was pulling my leg.

The year was 1989.

I'd been working as a parliamentary correspondent for only a few years.

Based on that limited experience, I very much imagined the flow of government information on Parliament Hill to be a one-way process — from those who were in the know because they were in power to those in the media whose job it was to pry knowledge out of politicians. But when Lucien Bouchard's office called *Le Devoir's* bureau a few weeks later to get a better handle on how Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was spearheading the Meech Lake file, I realized the process probably bore little resemblance to my initial impressions.

Bouchard was Mulroney's lead Quebec minister. The notion that he would not be fully in the constitutional loop was mind-boggling.

Given the partisan nature of politics, it should come as no surprise that MPs often operate within silos on Parliament Hill.

The fact that some of the most hermetic of those silos are erected within each party and within the government is more counterintuitive.

Over the past two decades, the number of firewalls designed to insulate decision-makers from each other and from those below them in the party pecking order have multiplied.

The inside knowledge that used to leak through the parliamentary media has also been reduced to a trickle, at least by the standards of the '80s and the early '90s.

With every mandate, information flows a little less freely — at the cost to the depth of the national conversation.

All parliamentarians hold a piece of the federal puzzle but less and less of them have a sense of where they fit in the big picture.

One of the collateral consequences of a highly compartmentalized parliamentary environment is a political class that is increasingly alienated from the system within which it toils.

That powerlessness pervades the findings published on Wednesday by Samara, an organization devoted to promoting citizen engagement within Canadian democracy.

As part of its research, Samara conducted exit interviews with 65 retired MPs — ranging from former prime minister Paul Martin to ex-members of the former Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois.

The report makes for sobering reading for anyone who aspires to sit in the House of Commons.

Pierre Trudeau once famously described MPs as nobodies once they stepped away from the parliamentary precinct but these days many of them feel like nobodies on the Hill itself.

The report describes an environment into which MPs basically go blind, with no practical job definition, little hope of sustained guidance and no roadmap as to the way forward.

Time does not necessarily improve matters.

Many of the veteran parliamentarians who looked back on their political experience at Samara's bequest felt their best work was done outside the system.

In any other professional area, those findings would be grounds for serious corrective measures.

But in this case helplessness, it seems, has simply turned into self-imposed impotence.

To make MPs more efficient, many interviewees advocated a shorter sitting week and a switch to electronic voting. Both are modest and overdue measures that would have been within the reach of past Parliaments.

And while many lamented the poisoned atmosphere of Question Period and the shrinking relevance of parliamentary committees, few seemed to think it might have been their responsibility to do something about it.

On Monday, the 2011 class of MPs will settle in the Commons for the first four-year mandate in a decade.

It will be their loss if they do not use that time to expend more energy than their predecessors on challenging a system that is turning them into drones.