

MPs Still Nobodies, But Now it's When They're on the Hill

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Pierre Trudeau famously said that as soon as MPs were 50 yards from Parliament Hill they turned into nobodies. If the Samara report is right, this has come full circle. Today's MPs are somebody until they get within 50 yards of Parliament, where they promptly become nobodies.

Samara interviewed 65 former MPs to get their views on how to fix Parliament. Most came to Ottawa hoping to do politics differently. They believed Parliament was where the big issues were being debated and that they could make a difference. It didn't turn out that way. Samara found wide agreement among them that Parliament is broken and a striking convergence on their view of Ottawa. Three big themes wind their way through the interviews:

- MPs feel like outsiders in Ottawa;
- They think the real problem is the "culture" of Ottawa; and
- Many feel that their best moments as MPs came when they were pursuing projects outside their parliamentary roles, such as helping reduce crime in their community or promoting environmental causes.

Thirty years ago, I think these MPs might have found Parliament a very different place. But something has changed, and these findings from the Samara report help us put our finger on it.

Parliament is supposed to be about dialogue and debate, but dialogue and debate is a two-way street. Both sides must be willing participants in the exercise. If either side decides to stop, the dialogue is over -- even though the talk may go on. Often, this is what happens in a marriage breakdown. One partner just stops engaging, even though he/she may keep talking, perhaps for years.

Normally, we call this posturing. All of us know what it is like. We also know that, when someone decides to play this game, no amount of pleading, threatening, blustering, or insulting can force them to reengage. Dialogue is, first and foremost, a consensual act.

If the culture of Parliament has changed, the real problem, I submit, is that there is no longer the will to make the dialogue work. The reason is that the policy process no longer rewards the government for engaging with the opposition. Most of the time, they are punished for it. As a result, it makes more sense for the government to posture than to engage. Why?

Once upon a time, policy-making was about finding the best ideas to solve a problem. In those days, it made sense for a government to debate its choices with the opposition. This allowed it to benefit from testing the ideas, at the same time that it was winning public support for them. Two things have changed.

First, over the last three decades there has been a virtual explosion of new organizations, from NGOs to business organizations, advocacy groups, associations, communications and

government relations firms, and so on. At the same time, globalization and new technologies have made events faster and issues far more interdependent and complex.

The impact of all this on Ottawa has been profound. The policy space is now crowded with highly organized players, and issues overlap in all kinds of unexpected ways. As a result, the policy process is no longer about finding the best ideas. It is mainly about managing all these interest groups, many of whom are in a position to derail a process they don't like. In practice, this means the government must be constantly shifting and changing its position to accommodate key interests and adjust to changing circumstances.

Second, 24-hour news coverage, and now the rise of social media, has made real debate very risky. Getting pinned down on an issue removes the flexibility a government needs to manage the process. As a result, political leaders usually avoid real debate like the plague and, instead, prefer to speak in vague generalities, such as cracking down on crime, managing the economy, promoting national security or rolling back big government, all of which leave maximum wiggle room.

This brings us back to Samara's effort to find ways to fix the role of MPs. We need to recognize that, in this environment, letting MPs freelance is seen by party leaders as an intolerable risk, especially on the government side. Expressing the wrong views can send a process into a tailspin -- and a political party's polling numbers along with it. To prevent this, parties increasingly script their message around broad themes, then issue an edict that caucus members, even cabinet ministers, must stick to the talking points, or risk being expelled from the team.

My point is that the real problem is not how to fix the role of MPs, but what to do about the fact that, increasingly, they have no role. Their own strategists tend to look on them as so much baggage left over from another era. We should hardly be surprised, then, that these MPs find themselves feeling like outsiders in Ottawa -- almost everyone does.

As for the political culture, if party politics now demands that MPs check their idealism at the door and, instead, parrot slogans and spew talking points, why be surprised that MPs see it as the problem? It is.

Perhaps the most disturbing finding of the Samara report, however, lies in the confession by MPs that their most rewarding moments happen outside their daily business. The chilling message here is that sometimes they are able to find a little corner where the party brass feels it is safe to let them play for a while. With luck, for a brief, shining moment, they may get to do what they came to Ottawa to do: make a difference.