



Rathgeber challenges party dominance of MPs

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The authors of the book "Why Nations Fail," Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, argue that, historically, countries have declined when power is too tightly concentrated in the hands of a few political leaders, rather than dispersed more widely among citizens.

Careful observers of Canadian politics have lamented this trend here since well before Stephen Harper rose to power; in fact, there's long been a sense that decisions are made in party leaders' offices, with little or no input from citizens or their elected representatives.

But rarely do we hear public articulations of this sentiment from those who feel it most closely: the elected representatives themselves.

Most MPs are relatively silent on the frustrations associated with balancing their roles as a member of Parliament and a member of a political party. This is what makes Alberta MP Brent Rathgeber's decision to leave the Conservative caucus, announced Wednesday night, so powerful.

The results of a series of exit interviews my colleagues and I conducted with 79 former MPs who left office between 2006 and 2011 suggests Rathgeber's experience is far from unique. Tensions between being a member of Parliament and a member of a political party are felt widely among MPs from all parties, from those who've sat on opposition benches as well as those who held cabinet portfolios.

What is new is Rathgeber's willingness to address it while still in office, and it's unfortunate that his decision has been so quickly mischaracterized as a caucus revolt. In fact, in a post written on his website, Rathgeber stated that he still supports the prime minister's leadership and plans to "generally" support the Conservative government.

Rather than an attempted palace coup, Rathgeber's choice can be seen as a challenge to the culture of political party dominance at the expense of the voice of the MP, a trend that's persisted, largely unchecked - including by MPs themselves - for decades.

<http://www2.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/archives/story.html?id=4435308b-8e79-45e0-bc4d-78698d0a3008>



MPs don't enter politics expecting that they will agree with their party colleagues on every issue. After all, the push and pull of opinions is integral to the healthy functioning of any organization, particularly a political party.

Rathgeber's decision underscores a deeper point. What appears to be missing in politics today is any clear sense of how MPs should go about expressing opinions or voicing dissent within their parties. What one MP considered appropriate dissent could be tantamount to party treason for another.

For example, some MPs we interviewed thought that abstaining from a vote was built into parliamentary procedure precisely to allow public dissent or signal when a party's position differed from constituents' interests.

One MP described how he handled a situation where a high-profile economic announcement ran counter to the interests of his riding. "I was torn between the need to work for the well being of my constituents, and my personal values that led me to want to defend the position of my colleagues. I discussed my dilemma with (my party leader), who accepted that I could deviate from the party line by not taking part in the debate or the vote," he said.

Others, however, characterized MPs who refrained from voting as cowards. One MP underscored this view. "You're sent here to do a job. Do it. Don't hide in the washroom when it's time to take that stand," he said.

Some felt justified that, when matters warranted, voting against their party in the House of Commons was entirely acceptable. One MP claimed to have voted against his party often, "but I was able to explain the rationale and I was never castigated or hung out."

However, some MPs expressed frustration with members who voted against their party. Quite a few MPs framed party discipline in terms of being a "team player." Said one, "It annoyed me when people would vote against the party with no consequence. As a team player, that annoyed me. If I was only in it for myself, I'd be voting here and voting there."

But others disagreed further, and felt strongly that caucus was the only appropriate place to express disagreement with a party's position. "The route to change is through the internal caucus system," said one former member.

Only in the most extreme cases, however, did MPs feel it necessary to leave caucus, either to sit independently or to join another party.

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How to appropriately engage in policy discussions in party-dominated politics was a frustration nearly uniformly shared by the MPs we interviewed. "It was the challenge of deciding to become an MP. I've always been an independent thinker (but) the majority of life was governed by someone else and you had to adhere to the policy or (endure) the wrath of the whip," one MP said.

For many MPs, the way party politics are managed today results in decisions they often described as opaque, arbitrary and even unprofessional. Furthermore, as in Rathgeber's case, those decisions often ran counter to MPs' stated motivations for entering public life in the first place: the desire to practise politics differently.

It is unlikely this situation will change unless MPs more clearly understand and communicate the primary purpose of their role: to hold government to account. It is not to serve, primarily, as the voice of a political party. Rathgeber, more than almost any MP on the Hill today, has been clear on this point, and has articulated as much many times on his blog and in numerous media interviews. Citizens vote for their MP, not a prime minister or party. As such, calls for him to run in a byelection are unfounded.

If nothing more comes of this, may it be a reminder to all citizens that, as dominant as political parties and leaders are today, when ticking our ballot, each of us is voting for our member of Parliament and not just a member of a political party.

Alison Loat is executive director of Samara (samaracanada.com), a nonpartisan organization that improves citizens' participation in democracy.