

Watching the Watchdog: Democracy Is Lost in Translation

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Published on: February 4, 2013

There was a time -- it lasted 110 years -- when Canada's parliament went about its business observed only by its MPs, staff, denizens of the press gallery and those citizens foolhardy enough to sit through its debates from the visitor's gallery.

The peoples' representatives, gathered together from sea to shining sea to shining sea, debated the peoples' business and, most of us believed, regularly came to decisions reflecting the views of the majority of the citizens of this land.

Participatory democracy was being served. God was in his heaven and all was right in the land.

(The world's most famous example of participatory democracy, not incidentally, is the Iroquois Confederacy's [Great Law of Peace](#), now around 900 years old. It's the oldest living unchanged [constitution](#) in the world and likely one of the main roots of the American constitution.)

Then came 1977 and TV and everything changed.

Today, TV pictures stream live from the House and now we can all see what actually happens behind the façade of that ornate and venerable chamber -- the very heart and soul of our democratic life.

What the pictures show is that if participatory democracy is defined as a system within which we the people have a strong voice in the happenings and decisions of the legislature, it is now increasingly obvious that what we're watching in the House is seldom democratic and even less often participatory.

Instead, most of what happens in the House is the blood sport of crude, rude, raw party politics.

Enter [Samara](#), the non-partisan, charitable group "that works to improve political participation in Canada."

I once described Samara in these pages as a major [shit-disturber](#). (I ran into Alison Loat, Co-founder and Executive Director of Samara, at a recent Canadian Journalism Foundation gathering and she told me Samarans are rather proud of that description.)

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/tim-knight/samara-report_b_2614824.html

Anyway, a couple of years ago, Samara brought us the sad news that MPs arrive in parliament largely unprepared and unfocused, and sit there with little understanding of what they're supposed to do.

Late last year Samara told us Canadians' satisfaction with our democracy is at an all-time low. Just 55 per cent. And only about one out of four of us thinks Ottawa deals satisfactorily with the issues we feel are most important. The reason -- we believe MPs do their best work representing not us, their constituents, but their various political parties.

Samara's latest report, *Lost in Translation or Just Lost?* comes out this week and is almost as depressing. It does surveys to find out what Canadians care about, then analyzes close to six month's worth of parliamentary transcripts to find out if our 308 MPs have actually been discussing those matters like they're supposed to.

Have our representatives, in other words, been practicing participatory democracy?

"In the end," reports Samara, "there seems to be a disconnect between what's happening in the House of Commons and what Canadians believe is happening--something is 'lost in translation.'"

I'll spare you the statistics. Here instead are some highlights (fitting neatly into my earlier line about "the blood sport of crude, rude, raw party politics"):

"The media has traditionally been blamed for focusing on the partisan stories and not showing Canadians the full range of the work that's happening on the House floor. In Samara's series of exit interviews with former Members of Parliament, MPs agreed that this decline is real and that the party encourages, if not rewards, such behaviour."

And here's part explanation:

"The House is not designed for dialogue and cross-partisan discussions. While Parliament is meant to be the country's centre for democratic debate, Canada faces a fundamental problem that 'decisions are made elsewhere and then imposed on this place.'"

"The 'real work' and decision-making processes do not take place in the House."

"Many current and former Members of Parliament attest that, other than Question Period, the House is often almost empty."

I suspect that the Grand Council of the Iroquois Confederacy is watching all this with amusement mixed with more than a little alarm.

One Elder to another: "Decent governance has sure gone to hell since those damned settlers took over."

Which brings me to the matter of one of parliament's most distinguished Elders, [Kevin Page](#).

For the past five years, Page has been the [Parliamentary Budget Officer](#), watchdog-in-chief of all government spending, the man who tries to make sure the party in power is spending our money reasonably wisely -- and tasked with telling us when it's not.

As a result of rather too often telling us when it's not, Page has so pissed off the Harper cabinet that Finance Minister Jim [Flaherty](#) calls him "unbelievable, unreliable and incredible."

Problem is that Page's term as the man who tells truth to power about money is up in a couple of months. And the odds on his being reappointed to this vital public service post are roughly the same as the proverbial snowball's hopes in hell.

It's believed instead that the Conservatives will either kill the office entirely or appoint someone Jim Flaherty trusts as believable, reliable and credible enough to do what he or she is told and not answer back.

While we're waiting, who better to mourn the end of Kevin Page's five years of trying to uncook the government books than the great political journalist [Rick Mercer](#)?

There's a great line in his latest rant: *"If history has taught us anything, it's that governments, all governments, tend to ... what's the word I'm looking for here ... they lie about this stuff."*

Which is why we so desperately need Kevin Page, or someone of his ilk, to watchdog for us.

In the meantime, Mr. Page, I speak for many millions of Canadians when I [say](#): "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."