



Why parties matter

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Published on: July 15, 2014

It's often fashionable to dump all over political parties as the supposed source of all ills in our political system. *Toronto Star* columnist Susan Delacourt did just that over the weekend with a piece that proposed that parties be abolished, and that perhaps we would be the better for it. The problem with Delacourt's analysis, however, was that she only looked at one side of the coin.

What people often forget is that parties represent different things in different arenas. The parliamentary party is a facet that is important in the day-to-day operation of parliament, and serves some of the most crucial functions of all – maintaining confidence. This is the underlying principle by which our system of Responsible Government operates – that the government of the day has the confidence of the Chamber, so that it can continue to govern. It maintains confidence by means of arranging its followers into a party that will support it on matters of confidence – things like spending proposals or key government programs and foreign policy decisions. It also means that the prime minister can continue to advise the Queen or Governor General, because he or she has the confidence of the Chamber. So you can see why it's a pretty big deal.

There is also a now-pervasive myth also cited by Delacourt that since most municipalities don't need parties, why should Parliament? Others will cite Nunavut as an example, where there is a "consensus model" adapted to the Westminster system, again without party lines. Both of these arguments are completely bogus, however, the moment you consider that most larger city councils still have factionalism that may not have party labels but nevertheless exists on some kind of ideological basis, not to mention that even the largest city councils are less than 50 individuals with a different power structure than Parliament, while a model like Nunavut's doesn't scale up from 13 members to 308. As well, despite the political scientist that Delacourt cites declaring that brokerage is an "antiquated concept," even a cursory look at party operations would see that it still exists, given the fact that the government doesn't have riders attached to every spending bill designed to buy off individual MPs for their support. Now imagine a party-less chamber where that kind of support-buying becomes a necessity to get budgets passed.

The flip side of course is the extra-parliamentary party, which I'm going to dub the electoral party. This is of course what Delacourt largely focused on, with talk of branding exercises and voter identification turning into voter segmenting in the modern paradigm of micro-targeting that doesn't seek to broaden the base, but rather narrows it. And it's not unfair to say that yes, there are problems with the way parties work these days, for both the parliamentary and electoral facets. The solution, however, is not to blow the system up because you're focusing your wrath on the wrong things, and that is what tends to happen.

Where the solution to those problems actually lies is in the opposite of what Delacourt and the like would argue – that in order to fix the problems, they require more engagement from people and not less. The problem when no more than two percent of the population – one of the lowest rates in the democratic world – are members of a political party at any given time, is that it allows a small number of people

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within the party to exert undue influence. This applies for things like policy development, candidate selection and nomination races – you need more people engaged, in order to push back against top-down control and to make themselves heard and to hold the party itself to account.

Conversely, when it comes to the reforms needed on the parliamentary side, the biggest fix that is needed is for the parties to restore the system of caucus selection of leadership, so that the leader is once again accountable to the MPs and not to a nebulous and ephemeral membership. It not only takes some of the centralized power away from the leader, but it re-engages the MPs as individual decision makers. If there is any one thing that will serve parties better, it is this kind of reform.

There is, however, a unifying factor in the problems that plague both the parliamentary and electoral party structures, which is the fact that a lack of civic literacy, combined with a lack of responsibility on the part of both voters and MPs, has created a system where everyone walks around going “not my problem.” Voters don’t want to engage in parties, and MPs don’t want to claim their rights and responsibilities, seemingly more comfortable blaming others for their lack of action (not to mention backbone). This was confirmed in the recent book *The Tragedy of the Commons*, which Delacourt also cited, but to a different conclusion. What is most striking about that book is the way in which the former MPs that were interviewed were concerned with their own self-mythologizing, insisting that they were all outsiders to the system (almost to a single MP), and that the party made them do everything. Except that each and every one of them could have said no.

What MPs and voters alike need is a crash course in civic literacy, so that they are armed with the knowledge that is necessary to push back against the power structures that have entrenched themselves in the leaders’ offices and party hierarchies. You don’t like the way the party elite run things? Ensure that you have a strong enough grassroots to push back. You don’t like how the leader’s office treats MPs like puppets? It only takes a handful of MPs to say no, because they can’t all be fired at once without some serious questions being raised. All it takes is a little effort. To simply declare that parties are the problem is facile and wrong, and abolishing them just throws the baby out with the bathwater.