

Party Discipline, Representation of Voters and Personal Beliefs

by Monique Guay, MP

There are many reasons individuals stand for election to public office. But sooner or later all elected representatives have to decide whether to follow their personal beliefs, party discipline, or the wishes of their electorate. This article examines some of the elements of this dilemma.



Party discipline can be compared to team spirit in sports. A minister in the Liberal government of Pierre-Elliott Trudeau once compared Canadian politics to a team sport like football, hockey or baseball.

It is dependant on mutual trust, on close cooperation by all members of the team and confidence that each individual will play his role.¹

Party discipline is also the unwritten rule that sometimes forces parliamentarians to set aside their personal beliefs if they conflict with the decisions made by their party. Dissent can be voiced in caucus meetings, which are usually held behind closed doors, away from cameras and journalists. Caucus is where MPs can say they disagree with a bill or one of the party's positions or bring up a policy they would like to see incorporated into the party's election platform. It is not unusual for a newly elected MP to discover with astonishment and confusion

that there are greater rivalries within a party than there are between opposing parties.

Once the debate is over, the MPs have to rally behind their party's decisions; if they do not, they run the risk of being reprimanded. Parties can use perks the appeal of which depends on whether the party is in government or in opposition. A loyal MP can be made a committee chair, House leader, a parliamentary secretary or a Cabinet minister. Insubordinate MPs can be relegated to the back benches, refused authorization to travel abroad, thrown out of caucus or barred from running in the next election.

The Pros and Cons of Party Discipline

Advocates of more freedom for MPs say that loosening up the rules on party discipline would:

- lend greater credibility to the role of MP;
- encourage Canadians to get involved in public life;
- draw more strong candidates who would be able to garner votes by promoting their own personal qualifications as well as the commitments made by their political party;
- help restore faith in democracy among a large proportion of Canadians in Quebec and elsewhere;
- allow MPs to openly state and defend their position without sparking political and media controversies that are irksome to party leaders and sap energy that could be better spent on the business of governing;
- foster dialogue based on mutual respect among the players that would be safe from authoritarian practices that are not in keeping with the times.

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For others, any new powers that would give MPs more authority would amount to a reduction in the power of voters. Proponents of this view argue that party discipline has a dual objective:

- to ensure a clear distinction between the government and the opposition in Parliament;
- to provide a measure of ideological certainty on which voters can count.

John Reid, an ardent supporter of party discipline, once wrote:

Under our system of responsible government, the public at an election has great power to make decisions. If the electorate does not like the government, it knows how to vote effectively; if it does not like a policy, it knows how to vote effectively; if it does not like the leader, it knows how to vote effectively, and if it does not like the local Member, it knows how to vote effectively.

But this ability to vote effectively results from party discipline. If there is no party to hold responsible for actions, how can the general electorate act effectively?²

Whether we side with those who favour more flexible rules on party discipline or those who want the status quo, one fact remains: party discipline is a serious dilemma for MPs, especially when it clashes with an MP's wish to properly represent his or her constituents and advance his or her personal beliefs.

All MPs face this dilemma, but the problem seems to be worse for MPs who sit on the government benches. We currently have a situation in the House of Commons that epitomizes this party line problem, especially for the party in power. There is a broad consensus in Quebec – and there was even a unanimous vote in the National Assembly – opposing the federal government's Bill C-7, which will repeal the current *Young Offenders Act* and replace it with a new law that Quebecers feel is unacceptable, in part because of the coercive approach it takes; they prefer the rehabilitative approach, which has stood the test of time in Quebec. Quebec MPs who are part of the government majority have to support the bill even though they, like those of us in the BQ, know full well that that is not what their fellow Canadians want. Because of party discipline, they have to explain their position to voters and even try to convince them that the bill is a good one, even going so far as to condense the information in an effort to convince the electorate that the government is on the right track and the opposition is wrong.

Eliminating Obstacles to Private Members' Business

Private members' bills and motions are tools that MPs can use to put forward their personal beliefs or fulfil their duty to speak for voters. However, the process these bills have to go through is entirely random and extremely frustrating, which makes the dilemma parliamentarians face in trying to balance their duties as MPs, their role as a representative of voters and their personal beliefs even greater.

Bills and motions are usually tabled fairly quickly, but if they are to make it to second reading, they have to be selected in a draw held two or three times in a parliamentary session. If luck is not with them, MPs have to wait indefinitely for their bill or motion to go anywhere.

The bills and motions that do make it through the draw are placed in the order of precedence for private members' business. However, the Procedure and House Affairs Committee decides by consensus whether each bill or motion will at some point be debated in the House for one hour without a vote or three hours with a vote.

A bill or motion that is not selected for a vote will be debated for one hour during the time set aside each day for private members' business and then struck from the order paper and treated as if the MP never tabled it.

Even if the Procedure and House Affairs Committee decides that the bill or motion will be voted on, the MP is still not out of the woods. The bill or motion will have to:

- win a majority vote on second reading;
- be referred to the committee which studies the matters dealt with in the bill or motion;
- be approved by the committee and go back to the House for the report stage;
- lastly, win a vote on third reading.

With all the steps private members' bills and motions have to go through, it is usual to see all or almost all bills and motions die on the order paper when a new legislative session is proclaimed or Parliament is dissolved for an election.

Conclusion

We see how Canadian parliamentarians are constantly torn by this never-ending dilemma between the position of their party – and the penalties they could face – their personal beliefs and their duty to represent their constituents in Parliament.

Canada should look at other parliaments in the Commonwealth, in particular the British House of Commons, where dissenting votes have long been part of the political landscape. In the 1970s, a quarter of the votes cast in the British legislature were dissenting votes. Between 1983 and 1987, when the Conservatives were in power in London, the House held 62 recorded votes in which 137 Conservative MPs voted against the

government. In Canada, those MPs would have been declared disloyal because any form of expression that goes against the government is perceived as a vote challenging the very legitimacy of that government.

Of course, MPs can use other tools to promote views not considered important by their party such as private members' bills as an appropriate way to take action. But many MPs are reluctant to go that route because the success rate is very low. It would probably be different if the procedure were automatic, more transparent and more equitable.

The House of Commons is currently studying proposals for parliamentary reform. Hopefully, it will give thought to the dilemmas which we face as parliamentarians and which give Canadians – and especially MPs themselves – the impression that we are nothing more than voting machines.

Notes

1. Reid, John, "The Case for Party Discipline", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol 16 (no.3, 1993) pp 2-4.
2. *Ibid.*, p 4.