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# Can Parliament be Reinvented?

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by Caroline St-Hilaire, MP

*Right off, one thing is clear about today's Parliament: the status quo is unacceptable. We must therefore come up with a new model that meets our expectations. Its true reform, however, is a collective responsibility, involving Members of Parliament as much as it does each and every citizen, not to mention those who inform us, the members of the media.*



I firmly believe that MPs should play a much greater role in Parliament. The centralization of power is democracy's worst enemy. This is why the reform of parliamentary institutions and the electoral system is so important. Our system must change and enable MPs to fulfill their role as representatives of the people. To achieve this goal, however, we as

parliamentarians have responsibilities. We must not simply do as the executive and the government want. It is our duty to try to influence them, to express our opinions and, above all, to stay on course defending our constituents' interests.

We must continue to do what we were elected to do - legislate - but in terms of the interests and well-being of those we represent. We must fulfill this noble duty with our utmost competence and respect. To this end, power must be decentralized so that it is put back in the hands of the public and so that we can carry out our responsibilities to the fullest. Simply put, I am not Ottawa's represen-

tative in my constituency; I represent my constituency in Ottawa.

Moreover, it is our responsibility to adapt and fashion Parliament to suit our society. We must therefore reach out to young people on their level. If they are fascinated by virtual communications, then we must focus on a virtual Parliament. If people in remote regions feel out of touch because Quebec City or Ottawa is too far away, then we must take Parliament to them. For example, why not consider travelling commissions or even the possibility of using virtual technology to present briefs to a commission? Maybe we should also consider the possibility of a regional House that would focus solely on defending the interests of the regions. Perhaps this new regional focus would help to resolve certain problems, such as the exodus of young people from the regions.

***People must be given back the means they need to take charge of what is theirs: Parliament. They have an important responsibility: to ensure the respect of their values.***

As a Member of Parliament, I represent more than 85,000 constituents; that is, 85,000 people who are entitled to a voice in Parliament through me. However, for this to happen, what I say and the positions I take must be reported and interpreted correctly and accurately.

In this regard, it is my opinion that the mass media have completely changed the dynamics of parliamentarism. I am not saying that this is a bad thing;

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*Caroline St-Hilaire was first elected to the House of Commons in 1997 as the Bloc Québécois MP for Longueuil. Re-elected in November 2000, she is the Deputy House Leader for her party. She was a speaker at the Symposium on Parliamentarism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century held at the Parliament Building in Quebec City on October 9-12, 2002. This is a condensed version of her presentation.*

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however, I believe that too much of our energy is being spent making headlines and satisfying the demands and appetite of parliamentary journalists.

In my opinion, most of the opposition parties devote far too much effort to Question Period—often in order to trip up a minister or the government—and if the sound bite is not as resounding as the media would like it to be, it will not make it into the news. Too many of our interventions are dictated by the morning paper rather than by the needs of our constituents. We attach too much importance to the media, which decide what is important.

Moreover, the media are often interested only in a number of “hot” topics; consequently, other matters go completely unnoticed. This is an unhealthy situation, which has the potential to distract members from the mandate they have been entrusted with, and it prevents Canadians from having an accurate view of the work being done by Parliament.

Do people really know all the work that goes on in the Chamber? Are they aware of the work that is done by parliamentary commissions or committees? The gap between what actually happens and what people think happens can be significant. Right or wrong, people often think that the work of parliamentarians is rarely productive, that the end result is often decided in advance, and that the work done is not necessarily in the interest of Canadians. Of course, people should not use Question Period as their frame of reference, because, clearly, the big show does not accurately reflect the work done by Members of Parliament.

Another major problem I see is partisanship. Because of the way our electoral system is currently structured, people are voting more for a party and a leader than for a Member of Parliament. There are advantages to this system as well: one can identify issues and have a clear picture of the platform each party is promoting. However, once the election is over, this partisan system somewhat distorts the true meaning of parliamentarism. Because of the limitations of partisanship, the interests of our constituents are likely to be relegated to a subordinate position. At times, we feel that we are speaking not so much on behalf of those who elected us to office as on behalf of our political party.

In my opinion, therein lies a potential danger that all Members of Parliament could face at one time or another. It would be dangerous and, unfortunately, quite easy to allow ourselves to be carried along by this huge machine and forget whom we really represent. Granted, political parties are essential instruments. However, the agenda of a political entity, much less a government, is not always consistent with that of the average citizen. I am not speaking here about a member’s freedom of speech. While constant disruption would not be acceptable,

Members of Parliament should be allowed to express their opinions without fear of penalty, even if they do not dovetail completely with those of their party, provided, of course, that they contribute to the debate and that everything is done correctly and with a view to defending the interests and wishes of the public.

This is especially true for the party in power. How could a lowly MP openly contradict the positions of his or her government? How would a minister be received at the next Cabinet meeting? It goes without saying that the public finds this aspect of parliamentarism increasingly irritating, and detracting from the credibility of parliamentary activity, if not that of Parliament itself.

***In my opinion, we will inevitably have to undertake a major reform and even consider changing our political system.***

The British parliamentary system strengthens government at the expense of Parliament. I believe that a presidential-type system may be more appropriate. Under it, executive power is separate from legislative power. Cabinet solidarity does not exist and the absence of party lines is nothing if not beneficial as far as the control of government is concerned. Therefore, there are reforms that we can and must carry out today.

It would be a mistake to end this presentation without saying a few words on a topic that is especially important to me: the role of women in politics.

The active involvement of greater numbers of women in politics is relatively new. And yet, representation is fundamental to democracy. It is often said that Parliament should be representative of society. In order to achieve this, the composition of Parliament should reflect the diversity of society. That being the case, women, who constitute 52% of the population, should be better represented in Parliament. Yet, there are still very few women in politics. Women continue to find it difficult to integrate, and the current parliamentary system and the mentality that prevails within certain political parties are at least partly to blame.

For this reason, it is vital that we give some thought to their integration and take the necessary measures to ensure more equitable representation. Should we rethink our electoral system? Why not? Achieving equality could be another objective.

Truly reinventing Parliament would entail reconsidering too many things, questioning everything and examining how things are done in other countries.

I want institutions that are democratic, a government that governs, an executive body that executes, a legisla-

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tive body that legislates, a public service that serves and media that inform.

There are numerous options to consider.

But who will venture to make the changes? One must be realistic; each of these reforms involves a loss of power. What political party, what kind of government—whose ultimate goal is to be in power—will work to eliminate some of its own authority?

Therefore, reinventing Parliament involves refining our democratic instincts. Reinventing Parliament is not a matter of structure; it involves changing a culture. Democracy is not a technical matter that concerns only the elite; it is an affirmation of a common will to live together.

Democracy is an effort; it is a discipline. People must never forget this. Having the best elected officials in the world means nothing. If people do not feel involved in the nation's key issues, they will not achieve anything

collectively. It is our responsibility, by respecting our laws and our country, to ensure that democracy is expressed.

Democracy is also a challenge, especially for elected officials who exercise great privileges on behalf of the voters. In all of our interventions, we have a duty to seek a balance between the specific interests of our constituents and our collective well-being. Democracy is also an ideal, one we must strive for every day. Perfection exists neither among individuals nor among democratic institutions; nonetheless, we must get down to the task at hand without ever losing hope.

Reinvent Parliament? Perhaps not, but we must consider rehabilitating Parliament to ensure that it reflects the expectations of a society that is better educated and more informed and, therefore, more demanding. This is quite the challenge.