

Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century: The Role of MPs

Since the spring of 2002, four of the 38 MPs who were elected as Bloquistes on November 27, 2000, have ceased to be members of the Bloc Québécois caucus. Two of them, Michel Bellehumeur and Stéphan Tremblay, tried their luck in provincial by-elections, while Ghislain Lebel had to resign from the caucus after a run-in with the sacred rules of party discipline. More recently, Pierre Brien also jumped ship to join the Action Démocratique du Québec.

These departures led me to reflect at length on the role of a Member of parliament in our parliamentary system. I have come to the conclusion that, more often than not, we MPs are just a kind of "potted palm," decorating the background while the party leaders, ministers and others take the foreground. Freedom of speech and freedom of thought have become forbidden ideas that no longer have a place in our democratic institutions. Party discipline rules! Even though it is difficult to question the status quo, it must be done so that ideas can progress. MPs must be able to express points of view that differ from their party's official position, without attracting bolts of lightning from above.

At this time, our parliamentary system suffers from a serious democracy deficit, since MPs are hobbled in their freedom of expression. Certainly, party affiliation implies respect for a basic philosophy and some degree of unity. Nevertheless, when issues do not involve the essential principles of a party, MPs should be free to speak and vote according to their own consciences. The heavy shackles of party discipline—a plague that afflicts all parties—only support the general public's cynicism about politicians.

But why are MPs so docile and submissive? The rewards they receive, such as the chance to travel abroad and

prominent positions in the party hierarchy, including, in the latter case, a nice increase in pay, must have something to do with it. It is easy to understand that those who conform to the wishes of the establishment find they can get closer to the leadership of the party. Would a code of ethics for party leaders be the remedy for this abuse of power?

With its new ethics bill, the government believes it will be able to restore the former glory of our institution. Aside from the occasional case of driving under the influence, it is rather rare for scandals to involve backbench MPs. As a general rule, it is cabinet ministers who end up on the front pages. And yet, all parliamentarians, from ordinary MPs to ministers, are now subject to the same rules. Moreover, considering the Prime Minister's nonchalant attitude to the scandals involving him and his ministers, the new ethics rules we have been promised do not seem very credible. But how could it be otherwise? Stuck in the role of potted palm, or rubber stamp, excluded from the corridors of power, and moreover, with no resources and no discretionary

allowance to spend, an MP—even if he or she were the most immoral being on the face of the earth—would have trouble violating any rules. In this context is it really necessary to table a draft bill to establish a *Code of Ethics for Parliamentarians*? I think not. It is only an exercise in government image-polishing, trying to divert attention from their permanent crisis, and making themselves feel better about their past scandals.

And with respect to ordinary MPs, the new measures are completely pointless, since there are already many rules governing our behaviour. One only need think of the *Parliament of Canada Act*, which devotes one entire section to conflicts of interest and another to giving the Board of Internal Economy the responsibility to settle financial and admin-



istrative problems involving MPs. The Board has the power to govern MPs' use of the funds, goods, services and space provided to carry out our parliamentary duties. Moreover, administrative rules impose certain restrictions, making it impossible for the MP to enter into contracts for employment, purchase of goods, services or provision of space with a member of his or her family. There is also the *Canada Elections Act*, which regulates the financing of parties and candidates and now, the Prime Minister is about to give us new and more restrictive regulations on the financing of federal political parties. In addition, the *Criminal Code* punishes corruption by a maximum sentence of 14 years. Finally, the most coercive of all these rules of conduct is undoubtedly that of party discipline, since it acts as a frame of reference for rewards and punishments. This last item does pose a serious problem. Its effectiveness—or rather its ineffectiveness, since it denies a fundamental principle of democracy, namely, the free championing of ideas—is dependent on the ideals of a small, often unelected group that gravitates around the leader. In the current state of affairs, the new code of ethics could have been limited to apply to just a few people and called the *Code of Ethics for Tyrants*.

Here is a very concrete example of MPs' servility toward their leaders. For many years, parliamentarians have gone through sham elections when choosing the chair and vice-chair of each parliamentary committee. Despite the provisions of the *Standing Orders* of the House of Commons, the chairs and vice-chairs were not elected, but rather appointed by a motion as dictated by the Prime Minister's office, and all the party leaders required their members to play the game. So it is not astonishing that certain backbench Liberal MPs went along with the Official Opposition's proposal to hold a secret ballot to truly elect committee officers, in opposition to the recommendations of their leader, Jean Chrétien, thus provoking considerable commotion within all the parties.

As we saw then, some of the potted palms can get up and walk. If they were really aware of the important role they could play if they assumed their full responsibilities as MPs, they would finally get the respect they deserve and a parliamentary revolution would take place. When it is a question of reforming institutions, as is now being done in Quebec, there is a total lack of understanding of the whole issue. The issue is not institutional order, but the kind of relationships prevailing within each party. The institution is not operating the way it should for one and only one reason: the actors cannot play their roles freely. The political parties are no longer the rainbow coalitions the Bloc once was. They have become the antithesis of democracy, that is, monarchies with the leaders as kings and the MPs their subjects, or perhaps armies where soldiers must carry out the generals' orders without disputes or questions.

Questions of ethics go well beyond the application of a code of ethics for parliamentarians. First and foremost, it is a question of integrity, a value that ought to be intrinsic to the individual and not dependent on the existence of a Code and a Commissioner. This, of course, is a very utopian statement. Unfortunately, in an environment where power is strongly concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, it appears that, for the Prime Minister, the ministers and the party leaders, the absence of a real will to overcome the democracy gap must be offset by multiplying the numbers of rules and codes. Thus, someone is trying to fool the MPs by leading them to believe that, because they are subject to punishment, they have a certain amount of free will. But when our only purpose is to stand at the back of the stage and to vote mechanically as the leader wishes, do we really need a code of ethics? The answer is obvious.

Pierrette Venne is the Member of Parliament for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert. This editorial was written before she left the BQ caucus on February 4, 2003.