

The Rise of Partisanship and How it Paralyzes Parliaments

Partisanship permits groups of like-minded people who share similar ideas to organize themselves efficiently in politics. It's an accepted and acceptable part of parliamentary democracy. But when hyper-partisanship takes hold in politics it can be detrimental to the way parliamentarians serve their constituents and severely diminish how they see their representatives. In this article, the author reflects on his experiences in Alberta's Assembly and suggests three ways he, his colleagues, and other parliamentarians across the country can reverse the trend towards hyper-partisanship. First, he suggests parliamentarians treat our political adversaries as colleagues, and seek opportunities to get to know them away from the legislature. Second, he urges parliamentarians to seek options for dealing with legislation in a less partisan, more collaborative environment in committee. Finally, he recommends making a conscious effort to elevate the level of debate, discussion, and decorum in each of our respective Legislatures. This article was originally presented to the 39th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Canadian Regional Seminar in Charlottetown, on October 11, 2017.

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When first elected as an MLA in April 2012 I sat on the government benches. Upon my re-election in 2015, I found myself sitting on the opposition side – one of nine members of a much smaller Progressive Conservative caucus. Within the limited space I have for this article, I won't go into all of the goings on and machinations that have occurred in Alberta politics since then, other than to say it's rather like going to SeaWorld and being forced to sit in the first three rows to watch the Shamu Show.

In approaching the topic of partisanship as an MLA who has sat both in Government and in Opposition, both as a private member and as a Cabinet Minister, I'm able to draw on experiences that offer some differing perspectives on the topic at hand.

But my experience as a parliamentarian extends back many more years, to when I was a teenager and joined what was at that time known as the TUXIS and Older Boys' Parliament of Alberta. This is a model youth parliament that has been operating continuously in Alberta since 1919—parallel organizations exist in



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most other provinces—and I was a member from 1975 through 1981. During my time in parliament I served in a number of Cabinet positions as well as serving as Alternate Leader of the Opposition, Premier, and Speaker of the House.

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I mention this organization because it was unique in how it approached parliamentary debate. Members were divided into Government and Opposition sides, but every vote in the Parliament was a free vote. There were no political parties, and each member was free to speak their own mind, and conscience, on every issue. We followed Beauchesne's Rules of Order, and we learned a lot about what it took to craft good legislation, how it could be amended to improve it, and how it was important to listen to the views of others, even those that you disagreed with.

Fast forward 30 years to 2012 and I found myself sitting in those same seats in the Legislature in Edmonton. I arrived, as I suspect many newly elected members do, full of idealism and naïveté. In my maiden speech, I told my new colleagues that no one party has a monopoly on all the good ideas, and that it shouldn't matter if it was a Liberal idea, or an NDP idea, or a Wildrose or Progressive Conservative idea, what should matter is that if it was a *good* idea. I remember a hearty round of desk pounding after that, and felt that my 86 colleagues and I were prepared to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

How quickly that all changed.

Let's start with Question Period. There's little doubt that this is the one hour of the Sitting day that gets the most media (and therefore public) attention. In many ways, that's a shame. It's not that the theory of QP is flawed—it should be the time where the Government is held to account, by private members on both sides of the Assembly. In a perfect world, members ask probing, insightful questions, and the Premier and cabinet ministers give clear, thoughtful answers.

That's the theory.

But if your legislature in anything like ours, they call it Question Period and not Answer Period for a reason. There are lots of questions, but precious little substance in the answers that are given. And the fault for this must be shared by both sides of the Chamber. When a question is punctuated with phrases like "culture of corruption" or "the Minister so inept he needs help finding the washroom," it's small wonder that the answer that ensues is equally inflammatory in nature.

The temperature in the Chamber inevitably rises, along with the volume and frequency of heckling. All this while Grade 6 school children, who have come from across the province to watch their representatives

in action, are watching. We have already received a number of letters from the teachers of those students stating that they will never again bring a class to the Legislature, or if they do, they will leave before Question Period. They point out that such childish and disrespectful behavior would never be tolerated in their classroom, and that they did not want to expose the students to it as being normal or acceptable.

Question Period is political theatre. I get that. But if that's the case, it vacillates between tragedy and comedy, sometimes within the same series of questions. As a cabinet minister I was coached to use the question only as a "door-opener" that would allow me to pivot to the Government's key messages of the day. And the final answer of the series, the one where you get the last word, to be sure to take a shot at the Opposition, however obtuse or tangential the connection was to the question at hand.

And, while it may seem hard to believe, there are people that are watching. A surprisingly large number of people. It never ceases to amaze me how many people come up to me and tell me that they watch Question Period every day. I always reply that there is a 12-step program for getting off that habit, or that they should look at cultivating a more productive hobby.

Thankfully being a legislator extends beyond Question Period. But even through the very serious business of crafting, debating, and passing legislation, partisanship reigns. I find this to be especially true when it comes to dealing with amendments to legislation. One of my most vivid memories of my first session was debate on our Government's Bill One. The Opposition brought forward what I thought was an eminently reasonable amendment. It was thoughtful, well worded, and would strengthen the intent of our legislation. I thought that supporting it would be a no-brainer, and when to our Caucus Whip to indicate that I thought we should vote in favor of the amendment.

He looked at me and smiled. "You're new here, aren't you?" The only thing missing was a condescending pat on the head.

"Well, yes", I replied, "I'm new, but I think this is a good amendment. It makes the legislation better. We should vote for it."

Our Whip responded, "Well, that may well be the case, but you see, we don't vote for Opposition amendments. Ever."

I was incredulous. “Why not? I thought our job was to craft the best legislation possible, and to do it as a group effort.”

Again, the condescending smile. “No, you see, if we voted for Opposition amendments, it would just give them hope. We don’t want that.”

And that was the pattern throughout my first term in office. Oh, a few very minor amendments, that either addressed a blatant oversight in the legislation, or that made a very slight change, were accepted. But the vast majority, well over 90 per cent, were summarily rejected by the government majority.

Now, as some of you may have heard, 29 months ago we had an election in Alberta and there was a change in the governing party. We don’t do this often in Alberta, but when it happens it is usually accompanied by promises of doing things differently, finding a better way of governing. I found myself over on the Opposition benches but was prepared to take the new Government at its word. After all, they had promised to do things differently.

Well, it didn’t take long for that balloon to burst. Opposition amendments are being rejected with the same speed and consistency that our Government practiced. Now don’t get me wrong—our new Government is doing some things very differently, and I will say straight out that some of those changes are welcome. But inside our Chamber, while the names, faces and parties have changed, the dance has not. Question Period is a raucous free-for-all. Opposition amendments are rejected; in many cases, the Minister sponsoring the Bill being debated is not even in the Chamber to explain why.

We have to ask ourselves, does this serve our constituents? And where might refusal to work together across the benches lead? My fear is that we will soon find ourselves in a situation that has plagued our American counterparts in Congress for the past two decades: deadlock and discord.

It hasn’t always been that way. Prior to the mid-1990s, Congress was a place where Democrats and Republicans worked together. For decades, the Democrats had the majority, but the focus was on the task at hand, and the measure of success was on the quality, and quantity, of legislation that was debated and passed. Both parties recognized the need to work together in order to get legislation passed. By cooperating, both sides could incorporate changes

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important to their particular base. It wasn’t about winning or losing, it was all about getting things done. As Harry Truman famously said, “It’s amazing what you can accomplish when you do not care who gets the credit.”

What changed, and why?

In his book “Leaders Eat Last,” author Simon Sinek describes how, prior to the mid-1990s, Members of Congress were encouraged to move their families to Washington and spent much of their time there. There they existed in their own small world, their kids attended the same schools, and they worshipped at the same churches. So while they debated tooth and nail on policy by day, their attended the same school concerts, backyard barbecues and cocktail parties by night. Friendships formed, many that crossed party lines. While there were the inevitable political differences, there was a level of mutual trust and respect even between political adversaries, and this cooperation ensured that Congress actually worked.

But Republican leaders of the mid-1990s grew frustrated with the Democrats’ long string of majorities and decided to make a series of sweeping changes to the way things were done in Washington. Cooperation

was out, control was in. The focus shifted from “getting things done” to “winning the next election”. One of the key changes was a greater emphasis on fundraising. This meant Congressmen now spent the vast majority of their time in their home districts, and much less time in Washington. They would fly in Tuesday morning, sit for parts of three days, and return to their districts Thursday evening. As a result, most left their families at home, and the opportunity to form relationships of trust and mutual respect with members of other parties disappeared. The desire to win supplanted the desire to serve.

How many of you have heard people lament, “I wish politicians weren’t just worried about winning the next election”? I know I certainly have. And I get it, in the political world, is important.

But we have to remind ourselves that the vast majority of the population, the people we are elected to serve, don’t live in the political world. They live in the real world. They live in a world where every conversation does not turn to confrontation, where common solutions are sought, where there is give and take, and where plans are made that extend beyond the next election cycle. And because they don’t see those behaviors in our political world, many have grown frustrated, disillusioned, and disconnected from our world.

One of my favorite quotes is from American author, theologian and abolitionist Henry Freeman Clarke. “A politicians thinks about the next election—a statesman, of the next generation.”

Given that choice, whom do you think our constituents would elect?

There are real and tangible consequences to this shift to hyperpartisanship in our legislatures. The level of disillusionment and disconnection people feel towards their representatives is deeply concerning. The political world, what they see in newscasts, on YouTube or other social media platforms, is simply not reflective of their real world. Normal human beings don’t behave this way, and they don’t treat colleagues the way we do.

Remember that Grade 6 class? Is it any wonder that younger voters, millennials like my two sons and their circle of friends, feel completely disconnected from the political world. Political parties spend huge amounts of time and money in an attempt to engage younger voters without ever pausing to ask what caused

them to become disengaged in the first place. As my professor at vet school used to remind us, “Any fool can see that horse is lame. You’re supposed to figure out why he’s lame.”

Our constituents see us hoarding political power instead of sharing it. Public elected office, once viewed as a noble pursuit, is now seen as a vehicle for selfish personal gain. This has yet another consequence: Who in their right mind would choose to participate in that environment? Not only is voter participation and interest declining, but interest in seeking elected office

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has also declined. I worry that this disproportionately discourages women from seeking elected office—in our province, when I see the vicious misogynist attacks leveled at former Premier Allison Redford, current Premier Rachel Notley, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne or many of my current colleagues, it’s no wonder that we need to make special efforts to increase the voice of women in our Legislatures.

So if we agree that hyperpartisanship in our Legislatures is a real problem, and that it has real consequences, and that these consequences need to be addressed, what can we do about it? As elected officials, as legislators, and as parliamentarians, what role can we play in reversing this trend?

There’s no shortage things we could try. But I believe there are three concrete things that we can do to address the current parliamentary malaise.

First, let’s treat our political adversaries as colleagues, and seek opportunities to get to know them away from the halls of Government. This shouldn’t be that difficult. We are, after all, still human, and humans are

social creatures. Our basic human physiology dictates that we perform best when we are in an environment of safety and trust.

So, let's make a special effort. It may be as simple as organizing an evening out at a local bar, or organizing a recreational activity like a pond hockey game. Goodness knows that we could all use the exercise—elected office has to be one of the least healthy lifestyles ever devised—long hours, constant stress and demands on time, criticism (deserved and otherwise) from all quarters, irregular and nutritionally incomplete meals, and virtually no time for exercise.

Second, let's seek options for dealing with legislation in a less partisan, more collaborative environment. I'm talking about Committees here. Much of the legislation we deal with is not so urgent that it needs to be passed within a week of being introduced. And yet, that is the course that is followed in many legislatures.

I understand that some Assemblies are already referring the majority of pieces of legislation to standing policy committees for further review, study, and debate. I think that's an excellent idea. I'm not saying do things behind closed doors—our constituents demand that public policy be debated in public and that's exactly what should happen. But all-party Committees are, by their nature, less partisan and often give members a real opportunity to sink their teeth into an issue, hear from stakeholders and experts, and arrive at decisions cooperatively.

Third, let's make a conscious effort to elevate the level of debate, discussion, and decorum in each of our respective Legislatures. This can seem like a lonely task. It can seem like something that nobody notices. But I can assure you that people do notice, and people do appreciate it. It will start with those unfortunate

Question Period groupies that watch us every day, but it won't end there. It took a tragedy to prove that.

In November 2015 my colleague and friend Manmeet Singh Bhullar was killed on Highway 2 between Edmonton and Calgary while stopped to assist a motorist who was stuck in the snow. Two days later, by agreement with the official opposition, each of the 8 members of the Progressive Conservative caucus asked heartfelt questions on issues that were close to Manmeet's heart, and received equally heartfelt and thoughtful answers. It was an amazing day—and even the most grizzled members of the legislature press gallery agreed that they had never seen anything quite like it, and asked why every day couldn't be like that.

Well, maybe every day can't be like that. There will always be partisanship in our Chambers, and people will vociferously disagree. That is normal, it is expected, and it is most definitely part of the thrust and parry of debate. I know that the 25 men who gathered in Charlottetown 153 years ago didn't agree with each other on everything either. But they sought common ground, and they took the time to get to know each other (I'm told there were some incredible parties every night) and they managed to hammer out a framework that would eventually lead to Confederation. It was rather like breeding elephants—it was done at a high level, there was much trumpeting and stamping of feet, and it took two years before anyone knew if the effort was successful.

Like those great statesman, those nation builders, it's time for us to take up that torch. If we make a conscious effort to debate policy, not personality; to question methods rather than motives, and to pursue statesmanship rather than showmanship, we too can make a lasting contribution to our provinces and to our nation.