



Jonathan Wilkinson

NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

March 22, 2023

The threat of Parliamentary hyper-partisanship

Political partisanship and political parties are an accepted and important part of any democracy. I believe political pluralism leads to better outcomes. It ensures a range of voices and perspectives are heard, policy approaches are tested and validated, and policy makers can be held to account.

Moreover, the development of political maturity and thoughtful approaches require engagement with people who have different perspectives.

However, I believe a compelling argument can increasingly be made that in recent years a kind of hyper-partisanship is becoming ingrained in the culture of Canada's Parliament - fueling an unprecedented and unhealthy level of social and political polarization that is a danger to our democracy.

Canadians need look no further than the House of Commons' daily Question Period. The level of acrimony and animosity from all sides is more than political theatre. It manifests an increasing level of parliamentary disfunction at a time when our country is facing decisions of utmost and lasting consequence.

A succession of minority governments may have something to do with this - with members of all parties constantly aware they might be thrown into a partisan campaign on a moment's notice. However, we must not lose sight of the real and tangible consequences.

Hyper-partisanship contributes to public distrust and cynicism in Parliament's ability to serve the common good, with Canadians much more likely to say their democracy is becoming weaker rather than stronger.

Dystopian outcome

Harvard political scientist James Hankins describes hyper-partisanship in a manner that underlines the dystopian nature of its potential outcome:

"Hyper-partisans live in bubbles, cut off from rival claimants to public authority by mutual incomprehension and mutual revulsion. They are dogmatic, intolerant, unable to sympathize with alien points of view."

"Opponents are demonized, their reputations destroyed by all means possible. Democratic deliberation becomes impossible. Politics turns into a battle between non-negotiable demands. Compromise is impossible; the enemy must be crushed."

Former MPs tell me there used to be more of a willingness to find compromise. But as parties have become increasingly polarized, there's been a decline in collegiality and civility in Parliament - with the increased polarization and partisanship spreading to the public realm.

Research suggests that when politicians become more hostile to one another, they model and normalize behaviour that can affect the public discourse and contribute to growing online incivility.

Where is this leading?

As Members of Parliament, I believe we must ask ourselves - how does any of this serve our constituents? Does it have to be this way? And where might this reluctance to work constructively together to make Parliament work lead? No one wants the discord and deadlock that has afflicted our counterparts in the U.S. Congress for the past two decades.

Hyper-partisanship cannot be reversed without the involvement of partisans themselves. I believe Members of Parliament can effect meaningful change working from within our respective parties and caucuses. But we must have the courage and conviction to take that path - and the risks that may come with swimming against the tide.

Systemic change can begin with the little things. Small non-partisan gestures can have a lasting impact. 'Leaving it in the Chamber' is something I would truly encourage of all MPs. Dropping the partisan shield opens opportunities to engage as individuals and, honestly, as Canadians.

As MPs, let's move toward trying to find common ground with Members opposite - personally and on policy matters. It's been said that politics is the art of compromise and conciliation. Let's create space for empathy and deep listening. Let's work to find opportunities away from the bright lights and official work to build informal relationships. Let's treat our political adversaries as colleagues.

Canadians are presently reflecting deeply on the health of our democracy. This is a moment that must not be wasted. By confronting hyper-partisanship, Members of Parliament have an opportunity to leave our democracy - and our country - better than how we found it.

Contact us: Constituency Office 604-775-6333

Email: Jonathan.Wilkinson@parl.gc.ca

Website: JonathanWilkinson.libparl.ca