



THE DECLINE OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

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On Friday February 18th Aaron Wherry wrote in *Macleans* about [the sham the House of Commons has become](#). While observing the largely empty Chamber pass perfunctory law, Wherry reflected that “to witness such a moment is to see the House of Commons at both its most serious and least relevant, to understand the gravity of the institution and the sense of neglect that hangs over its proceedings. Indeed, of all the questions the House of Commons must consider on a daily basis, there is one that underlies everything: does this place still matter?”

I found the article quite a sad but unsurprising illustration of key issues related to a much needed rethink of the outdated form of Westminster democracy we use in Canada. Issues such as the irrelevance of MPs; the respect for citizens; the lack of learning; the superficiality of political debate; and the absence of a sense of community are all illustrated by this story.

As Jeff Simpson once observed, we have allowed our elected leaders to become “[friendly dictators](#)”. The people we elect to Parliament no longer represent us to government but they represent the government to us. Since the time of Trudeau, the House of Commons has been stripped of its primary authority for approving annual budgets by the imposition of time limits for debate and the process of ‘deeming’ budgets to ensure their approval should debate take too long. The practice of padding the budget with all sorts of extra legislation in omnibus bills further erodes respect of Parliament and its power. Government seems no longer capable of representing even a majority of Canadians, let alone Canada. Governments are content to merely represent the largest special interest group. We have allowed Parliament to drift into irrelevancy at just the time when we need it the most as the country’s foremost forum for public dialogue.

For you see, the House is in decline because no one cares to listen any more. Wherry pointed out that “attendance is not necessary to follow what is said”. But attendance is not necessary because no one is paying attention to what is said there in Parliament, or for that matter elsewhere. No one really wants to listen to anything anybody else is saying. the House is therefore simply reflecting a major culture shift that has occurred in Canadian society in the last generation.

A generation ago, Joe Clark pitched Canada as a “community of communities”. For a while this notion seemed like it actually represented where Canada was going. Today, however, we are a collection of competing communities with apparently with fewer and fewer links between us. We are strangers today when we used to be neighbours. We behave as if we have nothing to learn from anyone else. We behave as if we didn’t depend on anyone else. We have no shared purpose. Our relationship with others is basically self-serving -- to gain as much as we can from them with minimum cost to ourselves.

On the other hand, a community is by definition a group of different people, with different knowledge, different skills and different perspectives. These differences are the community’s strength. Its recognition of everyone’s inter-dependence is the basis of its security, its innovativeness and its resilience. But community is based on the pooling of each others resources and knowledge together with the learning made possible by the ‘mashup’ of

differing views. The bedrock foundation of community is, however, the ability to listen to one another honestly in an environment of mutual respect and trust.

Canadians have largely forgotten how to behave as community members, so why should it be such a surprise that the members of the House behave in the same way. Instead of celebrating our differences, the House tries to eliminate them -- either through the force of party discipline or by ridiculing opponents. There is only one possible view -- the party leader's -- and all others must be stamped out. It leads politically to the same inevitable outcome as a lack of diversity does in any ecological system -- extinction! If one wants an quick rationale for the public's disengagement with politics, I would say it's because they can no longer see themselves reflected in the few narrow, superficial and often irrelevant (to them) perspectives being offered.

Parliament is supposed to be the place where our most important conversations take place. It is supposed to be where all Canadian communities can be represented as a single community to hammer out their shared purpose and common agenda. It is understandable that the House has declined as the premier place to get a message out to the public as more communication alternatives became available. And with more and more channels available through social media, we can expect further decline in the House's capacity for information 'push'. However, this is only a partial explanation for the House's decline.

Traditionally, the House was Canada's foremost forum for Canadians to listen to each other's stories and to allow them to have a conversation together. It was in fact Canada's foremost social learning vehicle. Although the potential for this type of learning remains with Parliament -- few bother to make use of it because no one cares to listen any more. Why listen when you already know everything? You already have all the answers you need. The only goal is to dominate the group. Such shallow conceit is not be the basis of community. It is in fact the basis of its erosion.

The problem of Parliament is not just a matter of MPs feeling impotent or not caring enough to do something about it, as Paul Dewar suggested. It's about Canadians relinquishing their ownership in Canadian democracy. We have so delegated our democratic obligations that we think listening is someone else's job. We want our entitlements and let someone else take care of the rest. And for all our talk about multiculturalism, we are afraid of diversity; terrified of opening up to someone who doesn't think like we do; fearful of entertaining the thought that someone else's perspective might be as valid as our own.

We are like the six blind men and the elephant, where each man argues for a view based on incomplete knowledge. One feels the elephant's tail and claims it's a pig. Another feels the leg and says it's a tree. A third feels the elephant's side and believes it's a wall. The fourth feels the trunk and warns it's a snake. The fifth feels the elephant's ear and says it's a fan. The last feels the tusk and believes it's a spear.

Which of them is correct? The obvious answer is, of course, none of them. But such an answer is only possible from the perspective of seeing the whole picture. But from the different perspectives of men whose senses are not providing them with complete information, they are all correct -- at least partially.

A better question than "who's right?" is, "what can be a pig, a tree, a wall, a fan, a spear and a snake all at the same time?" What reality is it that allows all six blind men to be correct? This is the perennial challenge for our Canadian community, as much as it has traditionally been for the House. Of course, the only way an accurate and complete picture can emerge is through conversation with one another and through the confidence in each other's claims.

In truth, we elect 308 men and women to the House all of whom are partially blind in one way or another. They know some things but not everything. While their collective strength and wisdom (and Canada's) is great, it rests on their ability to reconcile all the differing truths which they embody. If they can't listen they can't learn. If they can't learn they will continue fighting the same old battles and making the same old mistakes. Unlike Egypt and Libya we don't have a tin-pot bogeyman to throw out. Our bogeyman is ourselves. If we won't spend the time to listen to each other, then how can we expect our representatives to?