
The Case for Party Discipline

by Hon. John Reid

There is much discussion today about the need to reduce party discipline. Free votes have been suggested as a cure for all that ails us. This article outlines some of the reasons for party discipline and suggests that its elimination might be counter productive. This article was originally delivered in the course of a debate organized by the Canadian Study of Parliament Group on June 6, 1993.

When I was first elected in 1965, two individuals took me aside and offered some advice. The first was Senator Bill Benidickson, my predecessor as MP for Kenora-Rainy River. He advised me to be myself and to speak up for what I believed. He noted that advancement in politics came to those who could take the heat and as long as you were serious about your concerns, things would work out. But you had to be able to take the heat from both your colleagues and constituents.

The second bit of advice came from a member of the Whip's office. "Are you going to be successful or are you going to be a yapper?", he asked. He told me that of the fifteen biggest talkers in the Liberal Caucus, thirteen had been defeated, one had retired and one had gone into the Cabinet. He told me to remember that we had "responsible government". I asked what that meant. He replied that "the Government is always responsible; the opposition parties are not responsible, and government supporters are always caught in the middle".

So far as I can see, little in the House of Commons has changed. There are new rules and new procedures, some of which have improved matters, but by and large the problems backbenchers have with their leaders, colleagues and constituents has not changed. I recall one time when the Government was getting beat up by the Opposition, and I said to one of my more experienced

colleagues, "Why do we have to put up with being beaten up by our enemies?" He told me I had it all wrong. "The people across the floor are Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. Your enemies are on this side of the floor." It took me some time to understand what all of this meant, but eventually when I understood politics a little better, I realized that this was excellent advice.

Essentially, we accept our Party's leadership, its policies, its methods of decision as well as its methods of discipline when we join with them to fight elections on their behalf.

Team Sport

Canadian politics is a team sport, not unlike football, hockey or baseball. It is dependant on mutual trust, on close cooperation by all members of the team and confidence that each individual will play his role. As individuals, we join voluntarily the team of our choice. No one forces us to join a Party and seek election under its banner; no one compels us to run in an election. We are all volunteers and we choose our team for better or worse. We do not accept everything our team does, but we accept most of what it stands for or we would not last long.

There are no formal rules of behaviour in politics, and if there were any, they are constantly changing. There are no rules in the *House of Commons Act* or the *House of Commons Standing Orders* that compel a Member to vote with his Party at all times. I understand as well that

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there are no rules in any Party in the House of Commons today which compel a Member to vote with his Party. Members do have the right to vote against their Party, and occasionally they do. Yet, by and large, Members do vote with their Party and when they do not, the exception is well noted.

Why should this be so? Anyone who has ever played team sports understands perfectly. It is not the Leader, it is not the Cabinet Minister nor is it the Whip who lashes the reluctant Member into line. It is the Member's colleagues. Remember that it is the Government which is responsible in our system. There is a great burden on all members of the governing party to do what has to be done – especially now that the palmy days of ever expanding revenue have passed. So if a Member decides to vote against his Party, it is not his Leader or his Whip whom he crosses, it is his fellow colleagues, down in the trenches.

What it means is that you cannot have all the benefits of Party when you want and need them and not pay the price. You cannot vote in response to your own drummer and expect the members of your caucus, who must pick up the extra burden you have placed on them, to look on kindly and applaud your action. The psychological reaction to letting down the team is a powerful one. And the other members of your team will judge your vote and take action accordingly.

Now, no one in politics would argue that a Member should vote against his conscience. In my day, we had a series of free votes on capital punishment – surely a question of conscience. But when I look back and examine the votes I cast against my party, none of them had anything to do with my conscience nor were they about regional concerns. They did have to do with my judgment against that of my colleagues in cabinet and caucus. With the wisdom of hindsight, the differences in judgment were not as great as I had thought at the time. None of them took place in minority Parliaments nor when we were briefly in Opposition. Fortunately, no harm to public policy came about as a result of my youthful indiscretions!

Caucus

One of the great mysteries to people outside elective office is the role and activities of the Party Caucus. Each Party, with a different history and philosophy, has a different caucus system. But each system has the same end in view: to ensure that all members of the party have an opportunity to debate an issue so that all members will accept a position that all are comfortable with. This is easier said than done, but all Parties work hard at it because their credibility rests on their success.

I always found that debates in the Liberal Caucus were much more entertaining and enlightening than debates in the House of Commons, the Committees or even public debates. Members of other Parties confirm this interpretation. There were real issues fought out. From the view of the party managers, it was vital that the debate resulted in a position almost all Members would find acceptable. The debates in the House were important to convince the electorate that what was proposed (or opposed) made sense. The Committee debates were about the means of accomplishing the goals set out in the House debate.

The main job of a Cabinet Minister with legislation to move through the House is to establish and maintain caucus support. Without that, the Bill would surely fail. Many Bills do fail, by attrition or by not being taken up for further debate. None of these defeats attracts much attention but defeats they are nonetheless.

The Caucus is also the place where the Party Leadership must come to justify itself and to build up the moral of the party. If the Leadership cannot do this, then the Party will not last long. The best attenders of Caucus are the Party Leaders. They understand that their ability to stay where they are is to ensure that the Caucus is supportive. If it is not, caucus members will destroy their Leader and render him ineffectual. This is a continuing problem for Opposition Leaders as they lack the satisfaction of power to help instill discipline in their ranks.

Who Benefits

If we were to change our system of party discipline so that Members of a Party could choose to vote for party policy or not as it suited them, who would benefit? If we look at changes, we should look at where the benefits will likely flow. Perhaps that question should be rephrased. In any change in the political system, who should benefit?

There are a number of possibilities – civil servants, journalists, Members, Senators, the Party, the institution, i.e. the House of Commons or the Senate, the electorate, the Party Leaders, etc. The list could go on. However, I believe that if there are to be benefits they should go to the electorate. Any changes should empower the public.

I believe that the public is best served by a political system that permits it to exercise its ultimate authority

readily and easily. To do that, it needs a system in place to permit it to judge the performance of the participants. If each Party and each Member can simultaneously stand for something and against something, the public will not be fooled for long, but their confidence in the system and in the players will surely decline even lower than it now is. The system of responsible government permits the public to judge and decide.

This is difficult for some politicians to accept. The argument to permit Members to vote anyway they please when they choose is only an attempt to escape the onus of responsibility our system places on them. Under our system of responsible government, the public at an election has great power to make decisions. If the electorate does not like the government, it knows how to vote effectively; if it does not like a policy, it knows how to vote effectively; if it does not like the leader, it knows how to vote effectively, and if it does not like the local Member, it knows how to vote effectively.

But this ability to vote effectively results from party discipline. If there is no party to hold responsible for actions, how can the general electorate act effectively? In our society, we talk a great deal about rights but very little about the opposite side of the equation — one's responsibilities. Those who support the relaxation of Party discipline are very keen on the Member's right to vote as he pleases. But from the view of the electorate, it must have the responsibility side of the equation or it loses significant power over its politicians.

Essentially, to relax party discipline is to put power and authority in the hands of the Member at the expense of the electorate, and to empower the Member by diminishing the power of the electorate.

Unity Function

If you look at what we Canadians have in common, the list of items continues to shrink, in some cases by direct action and in others because times have overtaken the programmes. It becomes more difficult to sustain some unifying programmes because Canada no longer is producing the amounts of wealth necessary to sustain them. Indeed, as our deficits at all levels of government demonstrate, we are having difficulty in maintaining what we consider to be essential services.

Parties are under intense attack, as the attempt to diminish party discipline shows. Our society has broken down into little interest groups, whose interests are narrow and parochial. I have never heard an interest group speak of the general good but rather of their special needs along with their power and right to have

these needs met, no matter what the cost to whom. Parties are one of the few institutions we have left to control these interest groups. (As Pogo said, "we have met the enemy and he is us.") They perform an important integrating function, and they are one of the few institutions in our country that consider the general good, and not the special good.

The need to attack Party is important to special interest groups as the integrating function of Parties is in opposition to their narrow interests.

System Flexibility

One of the questions that always emerges is whether or not party discipline has to be absolute. Each Party has its own system for developing positions. These systems will vary with the quality and inclinations of the Leadership and the Caucus. But essentially our system of responsible government drives each Party along that road.

To ensure that power goes to the people, responsible government needs responsible parties, however difficult that may be for some individuals. There is considerable flexibility in the system. For example, what constitutes a vote of non-confidence is a decision for the government of the day to make. I was in the House when the Pearson Government lost a vote on Third Reading of its budget, the supreme elaboration of government policy. Nonetheless, the government came back to win a direct vote of confidence, introduced a different budget and proceeded along its way.

This demonstrates that what is non-confidence is defined by the parties in the House of Commons at the time. But it is important to remember that governments do not like to be defeated for the very same reason sports teams do not like goals scored against them. It is very hard on moral, they make it more difficult to come back and win and it is a black mark against the Party and its Leaders and policy. You do not build up winning habits by deliberately scoring against your own goalie.

It is difficult enough to find consensus in our country. Electorates, I am certain, do not want to make it more difficult to govern than it already is, especially by rewarding the irresponsible among us. Voters want to be able to make their will known. Responsible government and party discipline give them that power. And that is as it should be. ♦