
Parliamentary Discipline: An Informal Survey of Opinion

by Bert Brown

In 1991 the author conducted a survey of past and present federal and provincial legislators about their views on the effects of party discipline. Following the 1993 election another survey was sent to 230 members of the last Parliament. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity if they wished. The surveys indicate that the strongest opinions on the effects of party discipline are held by sitting members who are captive to it. Those no longer serving in a legislative body were far less concerned.

There are no binding or even informal votes held in federal governing caucuses and very rarely in provincial ones. How many Canadians fully understand that when they vote for a member of parliament or provincial legislator, they are choosing a person who will rarely be allowed to vote in caucus and only allowed to vote in their legislature when such a vote exactly coincides with the interests of their party?

When asked why they voted the party line one MP responded, "No doubt members have ambitions to move into new positions or cabinet, and votes against the party line reduce such chances very rapidly to zero." Another said, "Voting against the party line is not exactly career enhancing". Not wanting to precipitate an early election was another excuse used to justify toeing the line.

When asked about trade offs in voting party line, a number of those surveyed said an interesting phenomena occurs when members want to make a trade off, but cannot 'stomach' voting the party line. They do not bother to show up for votes or abstain. Some members simply become ill.

Asked if he feared party retaliation one member who had experienced it said, "Yes, members never like to

think about fear of party retaliation, but it is always lurking in the background and is constantly reinforced by the party whips".

A question about incentives for party loyalty evoked a long list of perks including, trips to other countries, positions on committees, boards and chairs of committees, parliamentary secretary positions, and hopes of a cabinet position. Approval of caucus or the "herd instinct" were also cited as incentives to loyalty.

When asked if caucus was a team or an army, most participants replied caucus either began as an army or became one after a short period as a governing party.

One MP said, "I thought I went down there to play halfback or defensive lineman. Instead, they gave me a couple of pom poms and sent me to the cheering section".

When a policy on daycare was announced to caucus at 11:00 a.m. and the position paper for the 3:00 p.m. news conference was handed out before caucus discussed it, the members responded with howls of protest, "Are we robots, or nothing but a bunch of trained seals?"

Asked how a party can punish a member for disagreeing with policy, one member said, "If you get on the wrong side of the whip, forget it." Another said, "You were supposed to park your brain at the door". Finally,

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one frustrated member said, "When you differ from the party, all the Marquis of Queensbury Rules go out the window and anything is tolerable anything in the name of squelching dissent."

My favourite story about party discipline comes from Peter Lougheed at the Alternatives 91 Conference. "All a leader has to do", he noted, "is look across the table and raise his eyebrow". That raised eyebrow says ... "you ain't getting in cabinet buddy".

Changes suggested to help strike a balance between demands of party discipline and the needs of the electorate included reducing confidence votes to a very short list or simply, proclaimed votes of confidence as in the British Parliament.

The frustrations of the current system were perhaps best summed up by the leader of the Reform Party, Preston Manning, when he said, "Despite the fact that Canadians from coast to coast feel taxed to death, the Canadian House of Commons is incapable of exercising effective downward pressure on federal spending and taxation. This is because the government treats every vote on a government motion, including every vote on a spending or taxation motion, as a confidence motion. In the Canadian Parliament, you cannot defeat a government spending proposal or a taxation proposal without defeating the government, and as a result, proposals to increase government spending or taxation are never turned down."

Other reforms to improve our system that were suggested included fixed election dates to prevent taxpayers being bought with their own money and the expense of early elections foisted on reluctant voters purely to accommodate party interests. Some suggested giving more legislative powers to committees and less to party whips. Finally, there were suggestions for fundamental reform of the House of Commons, reform of the electoral system, and Senate Reform each in varying degrees.

When asked if they envy their American counterpart or pity them, those surveyed expressed more envy than pity. There is no check and balance between what the Prime Minister decrees and what happens in the House. There is no check and balance in committees. There is no other House that can provide checks and balances. The Prime Minister basically has power without any checks and balances.

It is worth quoting Lord Hailsham, a keen student of Britain's parliament, who said, "no restrictions on the powers of parliament have been written into a formal constitution. There is nothing legally which it cannot do. The Party which controls parliament can do what it likes. The Party-in-Power is our ruler."

When asked how they felt about conflicts between their own ideas and party policy and/or the wishes of constituents, the responses are best summed up by one MP who said, "Things around the House of Commons and support for the government are very much ambition driven. There are very few who ever speak out on issues. There is so much virulent ambition down here that it seems to drive everything."

In summing up participants feelings about conflicts between MPs and the public, it appears that in this area, our parliamentary system falls far short of the expectations of Canadians. In striving to reach consensus and to insure the party's re-election, the governing party will ignore one interest after another, until effectively, it ignores them all. Members call this, "putting water in our wine". Examples of such compromise are familiar. They include the CF-18 contract, the National Energy Program, the shakes and shingles dispute, the cod fisheries disputes, the GST, the Meech Lake Accord, and finally the rejected Charlottetown Accord. Examples already in the current government include the tobacco tax and the current federal budget. During the survey on MP said, "The lie of 'party interest' as 'national interest' is perpetrated so often that any true national interest ceases to exist."

At the end of this survey, one is left with the feeling that our parliamentary system has become so distorted by party discipline, so narrowly focused on achieving and retaining power that all other interests are swept aside in favour of party interests as perceived by the PMO. In the end, the interests of small groups, such as aboriginals, large and often powerful minorities such as francophones, and even majority interests as those of women, go unanswered, as do those of outer provinces, when they do not agree exactly with governing party interests. In the words of one former provincial cabinet minister, "Party interest ultimately becomes so paramount and discipline so great, that no new light can get in."

Canada has reached a stage where party interest holds hostage all other interests. Even the drafting and amending of the constitution is held hostage to the whim of how parties see their plurality of seats in the next election. Many of the reforms suggested by respondents in the survey such as fewer confidence votes, fixed election dates, direct election of leaders by party members, strengthened committee make-up and