

Parliamentary Reform: Where We've Been and Where We Might Be Going

In May 2015, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group held a conference in Ottawa to discuss parliamentary reform initiatives of the past, present and future. In this roundtable, some of the presenters from that conference discuss reforms from recent history and the prospects for change in parliament in the near term and whether they are optimistic or pessimistic that positive change will occur.

Kelly Blidook, Jane Hilderman, Gary Levy, Jonathan Malloy, Jack Stilborn, and Paul Thomas

CPR: The Canadian Study of Parliament Group's conference programme was loosely structured on where we've been, where we are now and where we're going, and I'd like to adopt a similar structure here. Can you tell us a bit about how parliament has changed and evolved over the past 20 to 30 years?

JS: With respect to the House committee system, things started out, post-McGrath Report, with very high expectations and high engagement of many of the MPs, especially some of the committee chairs. But it evolved in the direction of diminishing enthusiasm, and the replacement of some of the early elements

of what looked like the beginning of a cross-party working culture in some of the committees with activity more consistently based on party lines. I think this happened partly because the governments of the day discovered they were less enthusiastic about these new committees than they might have expected to be. The MPs liked them but the governments found that they tended to become allied with stakeholders and develop more and more ambitious proposals without paying due heed to money. As budgets were constrained through the 80s and into the 90s I think governments began to view them as a bit of a thorn in their side. That may explain why the formal government responses were frequently ambiguous. The committees were left wondering if the governments were actually doing anything because the committees had recommended it. The ambiguous responses from governments have been a chronic source of the complaint from the MPs and I think the basic lesson here is that the procedural reform doesn't really change the distribution of political power or the incentives that influence how governments and parliamentarians behave. We should really think of it more as a kind of good management for parliament. If you think of the committees that way, I think they actually have accomplished some very useful things, but they haven't really changed in any fundamental way relationships in parliament or how parliament works.

PT: If I could just add to that. This question made me think back to Kelly's conference presentation on private members' business. To be honest, the message I took away from your presentation was quite similar

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to what Jack was describing – that once governments come to realize that a change may have made a difference, it comes to be exploited for partisan ends. When you started seeing more and more hand-out bills being given by the party it kind of took away the meaning of the reform. It was just private members' bills being government bills or opposition bills by other means. The question is whether changing the procedure actually changes the culture if you still have the colonization of all these reforms by the old partisan cut and thrust.

KB: I wanted to make a similar point. The sorts of reforms that happened in Private Members' business were similarly coming out of the McGrath report. The basic idea was to give MPs more space in which to make proposals and to ensure those proposals would actually come to a vote, whereas earlier private member bills had to be determined to be votable. This built up to the point where MPs could present as many bills as they wanted and everything was votable. In fact, in some cases we saw some MPs later lamenting this change because it could be used for partisan purposes. My research showed that in the interim we actually saw what looked like helpful changes. MPs were coming up with proposals and they were getting the opportunity to lobby and gain support for their proposals. In some cases the laws being passed were having an effect on what the government was proposing – either an indirect or direct effect. It seemed like MPs were directly building on what the department was doing. But the story ends in much the same way as Jack's does because of the power of party leaders, the nature of the MPs requiring party leader support to remain in caucus and to be nominated for upcoming elections, et cetera. These are the sorts of levers that I think ultimately really speak to the power of each member within parliament. Until those levers are changed, I think what we saw in terms of private members' business was that power did seem to shift a little bit in the short term, but in the long term parties were in a perfect position to use these changes to their own ends. We saw far more bills the party wanted to have proposed and they tended to be passed by the governing parties.

GL: My overall feeling is quite optimistic after years of gloom and doom about parliament. The main reason is a change in attitude which has to precede reform. And I think this is best exemplified in an article published in a 2008 article in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* by (former NDP MP) Bill Blaikie. He said, "Parliament is very much driven by the sense of revenge – you exaggerated what we did so

now we're going to exaggerate what you did. What is needed and what is missing is a sense of forgiveness." The first indication that we may have made a step towards that sense of forgiveness was in the last week of the election campaign when (Liberal leader) Justin Trudeau gave a speech in Ottawa. In front of a cheering crowd he said, "the Conservatives are not our enemies they are our neighbors." If that carries over into the new parliament then I think reform can really happen and we can have a much healthier parliament.

JS: I have a rejoinder to that. I hate to sound like a jaded old man, but we've been through this before. It seems after every election there's an idealistic cohort of MPs that assume that since they, in contrast to all of the previous MPs, are pure of heart and honourable of intention, it's going to make a difference. And then it all melts away. Changes of attitude collide with realities that haven't gone away. It seems to me, as political scientists we have to ask who's got the power, why do they have the power, and what are the incentives likely to influence what they will do with the power. I don't really think that any of that has changed. Although I certainly would agree with Gary that it is immensely healthy and refreshing to have these new cohorts coming in with a little bit more energy and a little bit more optimism about parliament.

GL: These positive statements are not just coming from newly elected members where, I agree with Jack, there will always be some disillusionment that sets in. This is coming from the Prime Minister and the Government House Leader.

KB: At the end of the day I wonder if what we're going to have are cabinet ministers with bigger smiles as they answer questions, or are we going to see differences in terms of outcomes. We're simply a little too early in the game to really know if that's where we're going. I would be flabbergasted to find that suddenly MPs have a little more space and time for their Private Members' Business in this new parliament, but if it happens I will be happily surprised. But, my guess would be the trajectory on this particular area would be difficult to reverse.

PT: If I could bring a practical example from the current situation. One of the things Gary and I have talked about is the Liberal suggestion to remove the vote of parliamentary secretaries from committees. Many initially thought that that must be just an odd way of saying they would remove parliamentary



Kelly Blidook

secretaries from committees. Instead, they still send the parliamentary secretary to advance the government's position. It's one of these reforms whereby you can say that you have done something but if the practical effect is still to have someone there carrying the torch for the government and also keeping an eye on the government members, then it appears good but the proof is not necessarily in the pudding into how it will change in practice. It's just very strange that despite all the talk about empowering backbench MPs, they are not necessarily ready to release the reins and let the MPs be on committees independently. That reform in particular has made me quite skeptical. But we shall see how things progress. One of the problems we have right now is that there are two calls going out for quote-unquote 'all party committees,' one on assisted suicide and one on electoral reform. I think one of the truest tests of how the government is committed to working with parliamentarians is going to be seeing if all-party committee means that all parties have an equal say or if it is just a government majority that will win on questions like whether there should be a referendum for electoral reform.

JH: I was reading something that Jay Hill wrote in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* describing the arrival of almost 200 new MPs in 1993 and optimism that was felt. It was a real reminder that what goes around comes around and whether this time will be any different. The leadership seems to be making some positive changes in tone, but I do worry about observing right now how the promise to listen to backbench MPs is not yet being born out in practise. It's still very much a time to wait and see. What excites me, building on what Kelly said, is that we have some really good – better than in the past, I think – benchmarking data to compare parliaments in a way that's a bit more systematic. We might be more scientific about comparing what effect a change in tone and attitude has on things like time for private members' bills, or heckling (the subject of a recently released report by Samara), between different parliaments. We have a Speaker who has stated that he will be more proactive about limiting the nasty side of heckling in the House, so I'm curious to see if that will change. Are these reforms in structure, or are these reforms in tone, attitude and cultural norms around the Hill? If norms are really fundamental, how do we say that they've changed at some point?

JM: My general sense is the reforms that work best are the ones that are difficult to really notice. It's hard to think of a transformative reform that's really changed the place overnight. I think the more successful reforms tend to be gradual. But, over the past 30 years the committee system certainly has strengthened. It's had its ups and downs, but there's never been a giant leap for committees. McGrath tried, but it didn't really happen, though overall things have improved. The election of the Speaker is another example of a reform that has not led to a much stronger Speakership, but it's certainly an improvement. I think that's the story with most parliamentary reforms – it's difficult to think of any that have been transformative. The ones that are enduring tend to be more subdued and long term in their influence and impact.

GL: I would add the 'question and comment' procedure to that list. It's not been transformative, but it was important. It's hard to believe that before the McGrath reform speeches in the house were completely disconnected from each other. I mean one person speaks and then someone from another party would rise and they would talk about something completely different. That little five minute period of question and comment allows at least a little bit of genuine dialogue where you don't read from a sheet of paper because you don't know what the other person is going to say.

KB: Thinking back to what we were talking about at the CSPG conference, the *Reform Act* hadn't passed yet and we were all wondering what sort of impact it would have. In my opinion, it had the potential to present us with a really big change. But it was changed over time and watered down in terms of amendments and now we've seen most parties have done next to nothing with it in terms of their caucus vote. It comes back to what Jon was pointing out – there are no big magic bullets or changes, and although this had the potential to be one of them, it was watered down to the point where it couldn't be. That's probably always going to be the story of our Parliament. We don't see major shifts quickly in large institutions that have so many processes for how they run. Having said that, we can't just depend entirely upon a culture of good behavior and respect; we also have to depend on rules and things that are actually limiting for the times when we have leadership that wants to push those rules to the nth degree. I'm not that optimistic, but I do recognize that culture on its own plays a valuable role and we might see something come of it. My pessimism just causes me to think that eventually we'll revert back to what we've seen in the past.

GL: The move to a Wednesday prime minister's Question Period would be a significant improvement; not transformational, but its impact would ripple through the rest of the Question Periods where the Prime Minister would not be present. I think it makes a lot of sense and it would be something I'd be happy to see.

JS: Before we leave the *Reform Act*, I agree with the sentiment of no magic bullets, but incremental improvement. It's not worthwhile to pursue delusional thinking about a magic bullet solving everything, and I think the *Reform Act* crossed into that territory because the basic test of any reform in the short term is 'are MPs going to like it?' If they don't like it, it's not going to happen. And then in the long-term, for sustainability, 'is the government going to like it?' If the government doesn't like it, it won't stay. If you look at the basic incentives that determine political behaviour, it's hard to imagine any political party leader, responsible for getting the party re-elected, agreeing to hand over control of the members who run in the next election entirely to an independent authority. How are you supposed to win elections if you do that? I think there are parts of the *Reform Act* that simply fly in the face of the modern realities that have concentrated power in the hands of party leaders because they need them in order to fight elections effectively.



Jane Hilderman

PT: Just to backtrack a little bit, the reforms that have been introduced over the past few years may not have necessarily changed the outputs of parliament, but there is something to be said for changing the process as well. It's interesting if you look at the pre-budget consultations where many political scientists lament that they don't have much impact on the actual budget document. But there are actually many more people who request to appear than the committee is able to accommodate. There is something to be said that increasing the process – giving people the opportunity to think their voice is being heard, even if it doesn't matter in the end – and increasing the representative function of parliament might slowly start the ball rolling. Maybe we are too jaded in thinking about this. How did the reforms appear to the average citizen? And how do they change the way they engage with committees?

CPR: Perhaps we can use that point about engagement as a jumping off point to talk about electoral reform. Will a national debate over how we elect parliamentarians prompt Canadians to consider or reconsider how they envision the role of an MP?



Gary Levy

Will it lead to a change in the way Canadians view their MPs and perhaps change the culture of the institution itself?

JM: Whenever there's a discussion about changing the voting system there's always an assumption that parliament itself will remain unchanged or somehow improve. That's not always necessarily the case. Sometimes it can increase partisanship as parliamentarians are even more tied to their party. It can become more fractious like New Zealand and its mixed-member proportional system that is more party-based and unstable. It may be a better system. A lot depends on the kind of electoral system chosen because the MPs will not remain constant themselves. An MP's role is going to change depending on the system, and not necessarily for the better.

JS: I'd like to take a more positive position here. If there is a national conversation on electoral reform it could only be positive because it could lead to Canadians paying more attention to how electoral incentives influence behavior in parliament. Preferential voting is especially interesting because it

might offset incentives to micro-target voters for all the parties because political parties would have to think of second choice support and how to marshal that support during election campaigns, and also through their behaviour in the House. Whether there is any empirical evidence to support that theoretical possibility would be very interesting to see.

KB: I, for one, would like to see the government take this question to a referendum. I think it would do much to foster citizen engagement on it. There may be cynicism if the consultation process appears to be designed to reach a decision the government already had in mind. But that may simply be how I look at it. I tend to view these important questions as ones which should be decided not just through a majority vote in parliament. I would like to see parliament, and especially government, give up its power on the reins of this one and allow not only for a full debate, but also to ensure that citizens have an opportunity to engage one at a time on an equal level.

JH: I have to echo Kelly. The government hasn't revealed its plans for consultation yet, but the 18-month time frame is quite aggressive to have a national conversation that allows the public to get engaged on the subject and talk about it. That is a lost opportunity in our view at Samara. But the focus on electoral reform is also sometimes a bit of a red herring in terms of some of the broader changes our political system might need and the problems we want to solve. Party financial reform is another one that changed a lot in the last 10 years and we haven't really had a good talk about whether reducing donation limits and expenses during campaigns has been positive or negative.

GL: On the issue of electoral reform, contrary to what I said at the outset, I'm very cynical. I don't see this happening. I don't see a consensus on it. And I don't think the government will push it. What I see happening might be similar to what happened in the UK on the issue of electing the House of Lords. Tony Blair and Labour pushed this in their manifesto. They won the election, they had the votes to do it, but they knew there was not a consensus. So what they had was many studies and free votes which demonstrated that there was no consensus. Given the lack of consensus, the government did not push it.

PT: I was going to make a comparison to the UK, but on their most recent referendum on electoral reform. There, it was seen to be driven by one party, the Liberal Democrats, and the referendum failed

rather miserably. Unless there is consensus that it is solving a particular problem, then I personally think it would be quite dangerous for the government to pursue it because if the electoral system isn't seen as legitimate, there could be more disenchantment and disengagement.

KB: I'm not a betting man in terms of money, but on this issue I think the government is set in its plans and we will see a change. I can appreciate the perspective that they will find a way out of it, and actually I would prefer that they did. I think they could have a debate, and stand back from that debate about whether it must change aside from stating they would like it to change. But, nobody would want to be a prime minister if a referendum is held and it is seen to have failed, even if ultimately they stand back from that, so I do believe the government will pass something.

JS: I think we might be underestimating how influential the public will be in whatever happens. Even if it's just a parliamentary committee to start with, it will mobilize a lot of stakeholder input and stimulate a conversation. To some extent what the government will do and what it will be able to do will depend on the level of consensus that appears to be present or possible among the public.

GL: When you get into it there's not a consensus. Some people support one system, others support another system and still others support a third system. So if there is a free vote on this it will quickly emerge there is no consensus in the House, no consensus in the country, and so the logical thing to do is to drop it. To use a majority to push it through would remind people why they came to dislike the Harper government and I think the Liberals, if they are astute, will avoid that.

JS: Perhaps I'm providing a segue here but, like Senate reform, there may be a consensus about what we know we don't want, but not a consensus about what we want to do.

CPR: That is a perfect segue to talk about Senate reforms over the past few years and what lies ahead. It appears from the recent Supreme Court reference that substantive reform will not be possible without constitutional amendments. With that in mind, what is the prognosis for any hope of Senate reform?

GL: I'm back to optimism when we talk about the Senate. I think the uncoupling of the Liberal caucus



Jonathan Malloy

in the Senate from the leadership in the House is positive. The idea of higher quality, less partisan appointments is great. The idea of having ministers from the House coming to answer questions in the Senate is excellent. The theory behind Senate Question Period has always been dubious – to think that one person can answer for 30 government departments is nonsensical. But you could have a good 15-20 minutes with different ministers over periods of time. I don't think there's anything wrong with that and it could be quite positive. There are a lot of good things that could come out of these reforms. I am less happy about not having a government house leader of the Senate. I'm not sure how you get the business done and that's quite fundamental.

JS: I think what's happening in the Senate is very interesting, but I wouldn't say that I'm fully optimistic yet. One reality that we have to confront comes out of the Supreme Court decision. Our constitution has become so misaligned with current practise that it doesn't really provide helpful guidance about what to do with the Senate. The Supreme Court is in the unfortunate position of having to enforce a vision of



Jack Stilborn

the Senate as a federal institution that is manifestly politically dead. That throws us back on our own resources and should prompt us, I think, to look for incremental reforms and non-constitutional options that could make the Senate work better. Gary pointed to some interesting developments. I have no idea how well the decoupling of the Liberal caucus in the Senate will work. My best guess is that it's almost impossible to sustain anything in Ottawa that is isolated from any political affiliation. I suspect we'll see a discreet informal clustering in the Senate that will replicate political affiliations in the House in order to work. And if it's discreet enough I don't think it will offend the public too much. It may, at least in the short term, provide a way for the institution to work.

PT: If I could draw us back to a talk Meg Russell gave at the conference last spring about House of Lords reform, one of the things that happened when they rid the Lords of most of the hereditary peers and established a more transparent process for selecting the new members, was that the new members viewed themselves as more legitimate and began to actually have an impact. The title of her most recent book

is *Bicameralism Revived*. It will be interesting to see if Canadians will be more content with the idea of a reformed Senate that is more legitimate but also content if this reformed Senate starts doing the kinds of things which legitimate actors do such as defeating the government. I think with the provincial orientation of the Senate, you could have a situation where one area of the country could block something desired by another. How will this reformed Senate fit into the broader political system?

KB: I would concur with the 'interesting but not necessarily optimistic' view expressed by a number of people here. Building on what Paul mentioned, I think we will see an impact in terms of perceived legitimacy, but unfortunately we won't have accountability. I have a preference for elected and accountable Senators who must answer when they do pass or don't pass laws. I think these reforms maintain some assumptions about the Senate's ongoing lack of legitimacy. They're based on the idea that we will still have a somewhat illegitimate Senate. If we don't tackle these issues we're likely going to end up with one House that doesn't work particularly well beside another when it comes to passing legislation. Of course, it'll take 10-15 years to really know the effect of this because for a while we'll have two sets of Senators and they might view themselves as having different levels of legitimacy. There will be a lot of adaptation and it may be quite some time before we know how this new Senate works in practise. But my concern is the constitutional powers the Senate has. We are possibly moving towards something in the long-term that will end up being quite problematic.

JH: Kelly and I are on the same wavelength. I'm more concerned about how changes to the Senate may end up influencing the House of Commons. I do wonder what will happen when a more muscular Senate or Senators take their mandate quite seriously to be a second set of eyes on legislation. What will this mean? Right now a lot of bills will go through the Senate without that rigor and attention if the government states they need to be passed by a certain date. If you have a Senate that takes a much more rigorous process it will affect the way the House works. That will be very interesting to watch.

JM: I have to say I'm optimistic about the government's Senate reform proposal right now. I don't know where it will go, so everything that Kelly said is quite right; there's potential to go awry in many ways. We certainly don't know how the Senate is going to function in the coming months with no

government caucus and now this new appointments system. The Senate is probably the single biggest conundrum among Canadian political institutions because it has a legitimacy problem, but it is very strongly constitutionally entrenched and extremely difficult to make major changes to it without opening the constitution. What I like about the government's proposals is that it looks as though it is an attempt to address some of the widespread concerns about the Senate in a way that is constitutionally possible. Prime Minister Harper's ideas for reform were judged not to be possible constitutionally without significant provincial support. It feels shallow to give the government points for trying, but considering these reforms tackle the appointment process and the perception of legitimacy, I'm willing to take a leap of faith and express some optimism that something good will come out of this.

GL: I do think there is a way to address the legitimacy issue and it's with a constitutional amendment, a *Parliament Act*-type amendment, that limits the time the Senate can block a bill, as in the UK. If we had that, I don't think there would be an argument about the Senate's legitimacy. It would be able to review legislation, propose amendments and delay legislation up to a point, but it cannot actually stifle a democratically elected chamber. I don't think a single, standalone amendment to make that change is impossible.

KB: We'd still be talking about a significant constitutional change at that point – not on the level of unanimity, but you're not talking about something that could simply be changed by the House and Senate itself?

GL: No, you'd need the seven out of 10.

KB: But if you're going to go that route, you may as well... (*Laughter*)

JS: Gary put his finger right back on the issue that Jon raised initially – legitimacy is the problem. As this process of what seems like experimentation goes on, some things will become apparent quite quickly. One is that simply being non-partisan or post-partisan does not in itself confer legitimacy. It may give people some reassurance that some old problems have been addressed, but Senators still have to have a mandate and have to demonstrate legitimacy. Merely preventing them from stopping a bill and permitting them only to hoist it for a little while won't give them legitimacy. The problem of creating legitimacy is still



Paul Thomas

there. As long as we have an appointed body, in the absence of becoming some sort of elected body they have to become some sort of belief authority. That brings us to the idea of expertise and hopefully an appointment process that will be more successful in selecting Senators who can be more consistently effective in doing the policy studies and legislative review that is their central contribution at this time.

CPR: I'm not sure how many of you do work on comparative politics, but looking at the provincial and territorial level and the international level, are there any recent reforms in other Westminster systems that might be beneficial to consider in the Canadian system?

PT: If we look to the UK, I'd say my favourite reform is the election of committee chairs by the whole House. The current process set forth by the government is for committee chairs to be elected by the committee. That looks good on the surface, but if you scratch a bit deeper and note that each party gets to determine which of its members gets to serve on each committee, the government can effectively

limit the pool from which the chair is drawn. If you throw it open to the whole House, you're much more likely to get someone who the government does not necessarily approve of, but who might be a policy expert or who might be a reformer. And you could go further. You could allow elections within each party to determine which of its members will serve on which committees. The two big benefits are that it takes the control out of the whips and it also creates a channel for alternative career advancement. Someone has an incentive to become an expert in healthcare, to make sure other people around Parliament know they are an expert in health care and to work with people in other parties so that someday, when the vote comes for the new chair of the health committee, they might actually wind up getting that job.

JS: I'm going to be negative again here. I don't know much about other jurisdictions, but there are a few procedures here and there that seem interesting, like Quebec's interpellation procedure, but it seems to me that all representative systems using the Westminster model face a similar existential problem – the traditional model of representation doesn't work nearly as well in the modern environment. The scale of constituencies has grown vastly and relationships with constituents have become less personal, and the 24-7 news cycle puts pressure on parties to control the message and control behaviour in the assembly. Unless we can somehow come to terms with those basic challenges, to some extent we're rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

JM: I can't speak authoritatively on other jurisdictions, but we do know that there's a history of reforms being copied, usually from the UK House of Commons to the Canadian House of Commons; for example, think of the separate legislative committees that the McGrath Report recommended, that ultimately didn't work for a couple of reasons, including the differences in the size of the parliaments. I think the Canadian House can and should be looking elsewhere for innovations, but they may not always transfer well either due to size or political culture.

KB: If I could speak to one area where Canada is fairly unique, it's the party leader having a veto over candidates in individual ridings. I don't really buy the argument that this is a necessary argument for a party to run effective campaigns and to function as a party. I think it's possible for a separate selection committee that doesn't have the same link as the party leader might have to the parliamentary caucus, making decisions of this sort. I would look towards

that reform as something to consider in the future, that we would go further than the changes made in the *Reform Act* and say that this is not a necessary component and rather something that party leaders could still use to leverage power.

PT: To build on that, in the UK Conservative Party, which is the one I know best, the party candidates are screened by the party and then put on a list of pre-approved candidates, but once a local riding association selects you, you cannot be removed. This allows some degree of ideological purity, but once you've made it through the threshold, all you need to do is to keep your local constituency association on side. You don't have to be afraid of being thrown out of the party. If you look at the open rebellion that recently happened in the Labour Party you can see it at work. That is definitely detrimental to the party, so you could make the opposite argument. The leader and party do need a certain amount of power. I would never make the argument that MPs should be completely independent and solely answer to their constituencies and that's the end of the story. Parties do need be able to present a collective front to function, but I do believe we have a situation in Canada where MPs have lost the ability to voice concerns, raise issues and to make sure things are debated. There are avenues that are closed to them that shouldn't be. We can find a proper balance.

JS: If I can comment on the idea of finding the proper balance, I've become quite skeptical that this is primarily an intellectual exercise. We have a history of our parliamentary institutions evolving, and frequently the members of these institutions don't know where they're headed but end up there anyway. They evolve by responding to public input. As older-style assemblies with more independent members get replaced by parties competing on the floor of the House in what looks like a permanent election campaign, plainly an evolution is happening. It is responding to public input at election time. Parliament will evolve as a result of these successive inputs. It will probably take us to what is seen as a balance.

CPR: I'd like to open the floor to any last comments if we haven't covered something during the course of this conversation that you'd like to address, and also, since a theme of our discussion has been alternating between optimism and pessimism about the state of parliamentary reform, perhaps you could tell us overall whether you have a positive or negative outlook for the health of our parliament in the short-term.

JS: It seems to me that much of the discussion about the health of our parliament consists of a small group of political scientists telling MPs what they think of our institutions and then those MPs telling the next group of political scientists what they've heard and recycling convictions that don't have much basis in empirical evidence. (*Laughter*) One of the things we need is more solid empirical information about Parliament. There are some people on this roundtable who are contributing really useful studies and I hope we find a way institutionally to foster that more actively.

KB: I briefly felt very meaningless and then very meaningful there, so thank you. (*Laughter*). I am somewhat optimistic with the current state of things because parliamentarians are asking the public what parliament should be. I do think we're going to see, at the end of the day, a Prime Minister's Office about as powerful as the previous one and we're still going to see a parliament that is still very much run by the central agencies. But having said that, if democratic elections send messages that this type of management is being rejected, at the very least we'll see a more careful use of that power. Throughout our conversation I've tended to express pessimism, and I do remain that way, but parliament is going to change slowly and it will respond to what the public wants, because all said, we do have a fairly democratic and responsive system.

JH: Building on these arguments, to see in the most recent election all of the new or returning voters who went to the polls and increased the turnout, it is a powerful reminder that parliament is an important place. Hopefully the elected members can continue to promote the message that Canadians should spend a bit more of their time being invested in what happens there between elections. If we can maintain that

turnout in 2019 or even grow it, it will be a broader metric of support for parliament. It's complicated by what will happen among the parties and during the campaign, but there's a lot of potential here, and also a great risk of increased cynicism if nothing changes.

PT: I think it will be interesting to see what transpires over the next few years because the new government campaigned on a platform which promised many big changes quickly, but it also vowed to be consultative in making these changes. Squaring that circle is going to be challenging. The more you open things up to input, the slower things will be. I think eventually the government will be judged for either not producing enough change or not consulting enough with respect to the change they promised. Knowing that more people will concentrate on output versus process, I think it will err on the side of simply moving things through. It's going to be challenging to live up to all of the expectations created.

JM: I think we're all jaded veterans so as not to be too optimistic about the pace of change, but there are some interesting things being talked about and I think we all appreciate that there is currently an appetite for discussion of parliamentary and related reforms. It reminds me a bit of the climate at the start of the Martin government and its six-point plan to end the democratic deficit. That government didn't have time to accomplish much on those points, but we now have a majority government so there may be more time for them to address their commitments. As people have pointed out, there are a lot of contradictions in these plans, but I think we're at a point where there is an appetite for discussion about parliament and reform that hasn't been present in Ottawa for at least a decade and arguably longer – at least not at a high level.

CPR: Thank you all for your thoughts on this topic.