

Instead of Increasing Seats, Provide More Resources to Members of Parliament

In this article, the author contends that Canadians need better supported parliamentarians, not more of them. While noting that there is no universal formula for determining the size of an assembly, many jurisdictions around the world function well with a higher per capita ratio of representatives who are adequately staffed and given the resources to be effective representatives. Suggesting that Canadians should ask whether their representatives are providing value for the taxes spent on their salaries and pensions, the author states that quality of services offered by parliamentarians should be privileged over the quantity of representatives. Using the intense research and labour required to draft legislation as an example, she notes that having enough staff to dedicate individuals to daily operations and special projects would likely offer a better return to Canadians than spreading these resources over more elected politicians whose limited resources cause them to rely on talking points from party offices.

Dr. K. Kellie Leitch

Many people are rightly concerned about ways to improve democratic representation in Canada. I believe that those who advocate for more elected people are on the wrong track. Increasing the number of members in the House of Commons, or a provincial legislature, will not improve democratic representation. We can improve our democracy without more politicians. There are other ways to provide better service, more grassroots contact and increased accountability to Canadians.

There is no universal formula to determine the size of a legislative assembly. I believe that the focus should be on the quality of the service that members provide, not the quantity of members. Any legislature should be fair and equitable, giving some flexibility to regional and per capita differences across Canada. But we must also be cognizant of the value a legislature provides for the tax dollars it uses. Having many MPs sitting on backbenches who later collect pensions helps no one except the MPs.



Kellie Leitch

Kellie Leitch served two terms as Member of Parliament for the Ontario riding of Simcoe—Grey, from 2011 to 2019. From 2013 to 2015, the Conservative MP was Minister of Labour and Minister responsible for the Status of Women.

I think Canadians are over-governed. We don't need more representation. If we are truly concerned about representation, then what we need are representatives to have a stronger voice for their constituents, and the resources to do their jobs in a way that is meaningful and independent of their respective leaders' offices. We need better supported Members of Parliament, not more of them.

Many other democracies operate with fewer politicians per capita in their national assemblies. By way of example, the population of the United States is roughly ten times the size of Canada's. Yet the American House of Representatives has 435 seats. In comparison, Canada's House of Commons has 338 Members of Parliament for just over 37 million people.

I believe we could reduce the number of representatives, provided it is done in a fair and equitable manner. But more important is that Members of Parliament are provided with the appropriate resources to support their work. The public assumes that MPs have unlimited resources. This is simply not the case.

Here in Canada, each MP usually has one or two staff in Ottawa and two or three in their riding. On Parliament Hill, staff work on committee business, meeting stakeholders, writing speeches and correspondences, scheduling, organizing events and a plethora of other day-to-day duties. In addition, they are expected to be substantive researchers and legislative draftsmen. In the riding, there is more casework for citizens, and events to organize. The work load is similar in both locations - busy - with it being impossible to ever get ahead.

US Representatives are limited to 18 full-time and 4 part-time staff to support their work. Often, they are able to have specialized sections in their offices, with staff focusing on research, some on day-to-day legislative matters, some handling communications and others working on organization. Contrast that with Canada, where MPs have a small team of overworked staff. This means that MPs are not conducting in depth research or taking a detailed look at policy issues. It often means using sound bites and relying on the leaders' office instead of your own research.

I am not advocating that each MP have 18-22 staff. That seems excessive, but an ideal number may be somewhere between the current support level and

the large number of staff we see in other jurisdictions. Even one person dedicated to scheduling, one person focused on communications, one research assistant and one person to develop legislation would help tremendously.

Having additional resources will allow Members of Parliament to have a stronger voice. MPs have several opportunities to have an impact. Crafting a Private Member's Bill is one of them. While they do not get passed often, these Bills can spark debate and influence government legislation if done well. But conducting the research and consultation needed to design a Bill is a huge undertaking. I spent over a year on consultation alone for C-450, my Private Member's Bill to modernize the Canada Health Act. My team was continually weighing the balance of supporting constituent issues versus developing legislation for debate.

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There are few opportunities to have your Bill brought forward and only so many speaking slots on any given legislation in the House of Commons. More MPs will not improve the debate or magically improve our democratic governance. MPs who are better supported and who are more independent will have an impact by developing well-researched Private Member's Bills.

When I was first elected in 2011, there were 308 MPs. The number was more than sufficient. We now have 338 MPs. I have not seen an improvement in democratic representation. Nor is there an improvement in debate. What we have are 30 more people sitting behind their leader hoping to have an impact. It would have been better to invest in the MPs we had already and help them have a stronger voice for their constituents.

I realize there is a need for regional balance and equity among Canadians. The components are the per capita numbers, the absolute population number, geographic variances, and what is the value for money proposition. Ontario's large population makes for a very different scenario compared with less populated provinces. Using Ontario's formula, it would result in 1 MP and 1 MLA in Prince Edward Island. Clearly you cannot have a legislature comprised of one person. There must be a degree of reason. It depends on what you think is a reasonable weighting of representation to taxpayer expense.

I must note that whatever the number of seats, the people who often tend to lose out are those living in the

far North and rural areas. That is where representatives noticeably lack substantive additional supports. For example, the electoral district of Kenora covers an enormous area. At over 321,000 km², this Northern Ontario riding encompasses a landmass larger than the combined size of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, PEI and the island portion of Newfoundland. There is only a minimal supplement for the Kenora MP to ensure adequate representation. Geographic considerations and equity are significant considerations when one MP can easily drive, or even walk, around their electoral district and another MP cannot.

I encourage academics and others who advocate strongly against seat reductions to get involved in the political process. They should see how it functions before assuming that having more politicians is the solution. I believe we need to extend more resources to fewer MPs instead of diluting the voice of those currently elected. Let's make the job of a MP more effective by supporting them properly. A smaller number of effective and independent MPs will be better for Canadian democracy than more backbenchers collecting a pension while reiterating talking points.