

Canada's system of parliamentary democracy is no closer to democracy than North Korea's is, argues Rafe Mair

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Bottom line, voters transfer their rights to MPs who then transfer your rights to party leaders for their exclusive use.

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Rafe Mair

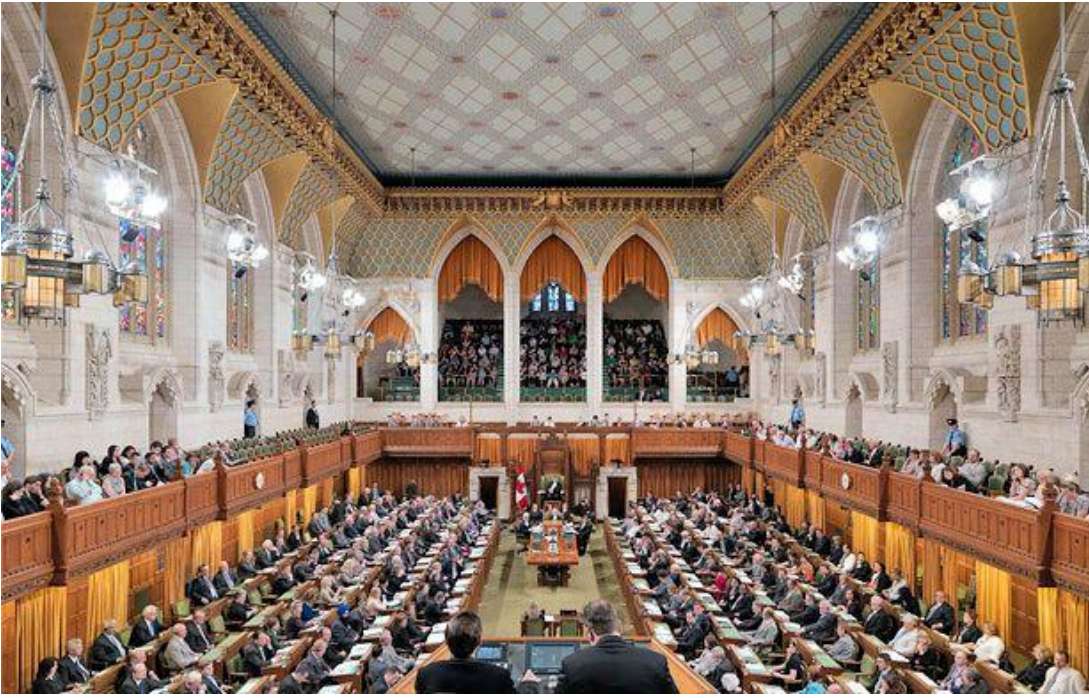
“We operate under a system known as ‘responsible government,’ where the word ‘responsible’ is not meant to describe the behaviour of politicians but has a very technical meaning, namely, that the government (the prime minister and his cabinet) are ‘responsible’ to Parliament and can be removed by a majority of the House of Commons upon a vote of non-confidence, whereupon the government must resign and either a new government is formed which can win a vote of confidence, or an election is held. That is an excellent technical description which bears very little, in fact no, resemblance to reality.” —Rafe Mair, CommonSenseCanadian

Rafe lifts the veil on our parliamentary democracy and finds a charade of a system based on “in order to get along, you must go along.”

In this post, Rafe explains how our so-called democracy really works. To read his original article, click on the following linked title. Alternatively, below is a slightly edited repost absent a couple of photos.

Rafe Mair, LL.B, LL.D (Hon) was a B.C. MLA 1975 to 1981, and Minister of Environment from late 1978 through 1979. In 1981 he left politics for talk radio.

[‘Responsible Government’ and how it blocks democracy – Pt.1](#) by Rafe Mair, CommonSenseCanadian, May 31, 2016



Canada's House of Commons

What I'm about to say is not about nit-picking technicalities or shades of meaning but demonstrates that Canadians are governed by a fraudulent charade called a "parliamentary democracy" and I challenge any educator or politician to debate me on that assertion.

(Throughout I refer to the federal system, it's equally applicable to provincial and territorial governments).

Not so responsible

We operate under a system known as "responsible government," *where the word "responsible" is not meant to describe the behaviour of politicians* but has a very technical meaning, namely, that the government (the prime minister and his cabinet) are *responsible* to Parliament and can be removed by a majority of the House of Commons upon a vote of non-confidence, whereupon the government must resign and either a new government is formed which can win a vote of confidence, or an election is held. *That is an excellent technical description which bears very little, in fact no, resemblance to reality.*

"Responsible Government" developed over many centuries in Britain. Indeed, until around the middle of the 19th century, it was not uncommon for a government to lose confidence and resign, whereupon the sovereign would call on the Leader of the Opposition to form a new government from all members of parliament – even those who had been part of the defeated government – and see if he could get the House's confidence.

This was, as we will see, before party discipline took hold of the system and strangled it.

Prime Ministers don't like losing

We've had this system throughout Canada since 1867 and, looking at all the governments since then – federal, provincial and territorial – there has only been one example I can locate of a *government with a majority* losing confidence and being forced to resign. That happened in 1873 arising out of the "Pacific Scandal" when Sir John A. Macdonald, with a very slim majority, was forced out over charges of bribery involving the Canadian Pacific Railway. This was at a time when party discipline was much looser than today. In fact, during the

Charlottetown Debates of 1864, premiers took their opposition leaders along as delegates not because they were good sports but they knew that even with a majority they couldn't be sure of winning a vote.

That changed – big time. Prime Ministers didn't like losing. Neither did the party bosses that were responsible for raising the necessary money. Most importantly, neither did the donors, many very powerful, who gave the money.

What to do?

It wasn't rocket science to note that if you had the majority of MPs in your party, and they always voted for you, you'd never lose a confidence vote and never have to resign. Duh.

But MPs were often individualists, had their own beliefs and political obligations – it was like herding cats — Impossible!

Well, no. MPs are also human. They don't like fighting elections once they're safely in. They respond to rewards and Prime Ministers have bags of them. These can be little goodies such as the PM speaking for you in your constituency or perhaps making sure that your constituent, [Mr. Warbucks](#), gets an appointment with the Finance Minister over that little favour he'd like.

Perhaps it's a bit more personal. The PM knows about your sciatica and about that conference next Winter in the Bahamas that he needs a delegate for. Or he knows you like to travel and the Commons Special Committee on Tourism has a vacancy. The list of that sort stuff is endless.

Buying loyalty

Let's get more serious, There are 35+ Parliamentary Personal Secretaries to Ministers to appoint. This is half again more money, often lots of first class travel and prestigious tasks like taking the Minister's place in the House when he's away and taking his questions in Question Period or even piloting a bill through the House.

Now we get really serious because next comes the big spot itself – cabinet! Double the money. “Honourable” in front of your name for life. Chauffeur-driven limousine, prestige, travel and, by no means least, an assured, cushy position when you leave government.

All these things bounce before your eyes and you're just Charlie Harkenfarker, a car salesman representing the “great constituency of Lower Yahk” out there in BC.

The carrot and the stick

But, it turns out, Charlie is a bit of a rebel by nature. Always the guy with the opinion. By the lord Harry, no party whip is going to tell Charlie what to do, no sirree!

Well, in that bag on the PM's other shoulder, next to the carrots, is a big stick. He'd rather use a carrot, however ...

If Charlie votes against the whip's instruction, he can and will, in any but a minor misdemeanour, be chucked out of caucus, expelled by the party and denied the right to run under the party banner in the next election. Wow, Charlie, how do like them apples? Sure sands off those rough edges of independence, doesn't it?

And just on the say-so of the PM – no presumption of innocence or trial by your peers. Out the door. Now Charlie must run as an “independent” and while independents occasionally win – we’ll meet John Nunziata in a moment – that’s very rare.

The prime minister doesn’t have to remind his MPs of this power. But how does he maintain it?

On a day to day basis, the PM uses a judicious blend of the stick and the carrot. The carrots include appointment to cabinet, as parliamentary secretaries, as whip or deputy whip, as committee chairs and so on. The stick here, of course, is that the PM can unmake these jobs too.

The lure of promotion amongst backbenchers is very strong, for as Napoleon said, “every foot-soldier carries a marshal’s baton in his knapsack”. Backbenchers badly want into cabinet and, once there, stay there. Yes, technically, they could rise against the PM *but somehow that never happens*.

A heavy punishment



John Nunziata

Let’s meet John Nunziata, a Liberal from Toronto. During the Mulroney governments he was part of a Liberal “rat pack” which made the government miserable, especially over the hated Goods and Services Tax (GST).

In the 1993 election, Nunziata, *following the official Liberal platform*, promised his constituents that the Liberals would abolish the GST. So did their leader, Jean Chrétien. The Liberals were elected, in part on this pledge.

After they won, Finance Minister Paul Martin tabled his first budget, and there, sticking out like a sore thumb, was the GST alive, and well!

Nunziata warned the PM that he had been elected on his pledge, along with his party’s, to abolish the GST – how in all conscience could he vote for the budget?

He voted “No” and all hell broke loose. Nunziata was instantly turfed out of caucus and the party, thus unable to run again as a Liberal. This last penalty is a very serious one indeed. In Nunziata’s case, astonishingly, he actually won the next election as an independent – a very rare case indeed – but they got him the one after that.

The Liberals weren’t through. In order to keep the monster, child-killer Clifford Robert Olson, from having a chance to taunt his victims with the hearing he was entitled to under the “faint hope” clause in the Criminal Code, Nunziata tabled a private member’s bill to prevent this. It actually won the ballot it takes for a private member’s bill to be debated and it then was passed by the House. It was referred to the Justice Committee for

clause by clause approval, which should have been a slam dunk – except *Justice minister Allan Rock ordered the committee not to pass it and it didn't.*

Olson got his chance to taunt his victims and, thereafter, Rock brought in virtually the same bill that Nunziata did and, of course, it passed.

Why didn't the Liberal government just let Nunziata's bill pass? Part of the penalty for his sins. Jean Chrétien wasn't going to let Nunziata look good; Chretien had to show all his MPs who was boss. Thus, even Olson's victims paid for Nunziata keeping his word!

No questions asked

Believe me, there is much more to the Prime Ministerial diktat – especially note the absence of any real voice to an MP in the budget process, the basic reason we have a parliament in the first place.

But can't a member of Parliament simply stand up and ask questions? What about Question Period! What about something critical to his constituency?

It doesn't work that way. Question Period is dominated by the major opposition parties and who does the actually questioning is determined by the leader, as are the questions themselves!

In debates, there are limited numbers of speakers and whether or not an MP gets to speak at all is a matter of permission from his leader and being recognized by the Speaker; then he's confined to the Bill being debated.

When MPs are criticized for not speaking out, they invariably take refuge in the assertion that they really let the government have it behind closed doors in caucus.

Bullshit, pure and simple! When the Prime Minister is in the Caucus room, I can assure you everybody behaves like good little boys and girls will when they want a favour. Every backbencher sees themselves as cabinet ministers or, at least, parliamentary secretaries and aren't about to piss off the PM. Ever.

Your MP is irrelevant

Here's how utterly irrelevant your MP is. In the kerfuffle over the Trudeau government's decision to approve an LNG decision in Squamish, our Liberal MP in West Vancouver Sea-To-Sky-Howe Sound, Pamela Goldsmith-Jones, wasn't even advised, much less consulted.

Her choices were three – speak out against the government and be tossed out of caucus, resign, or keep her mouth shut and go along. She went along, is Parliamentary Secretary to the Foreign Minister and a sure thing for cabinet – if she keeps her skirts clean. And she will.

The Canadian MP likes you to believe he's integral to the system of government. He's a nothing. Which is why our system is no closer to democracy than North Korea is. A bit more polite perhaps, but sure as hell no democracy.

Here is the one-line bottom line: In a parliamentary democracy the voter transfers his rights to his member of parliament to exercise on his behalf – the trouble is, by running for his political party, the MP assigns your rights to the leader for his exclusive use!

As the famous US Speaker of the House, Sam Raeburn said, "Under our system, to get along, you must go along".