

OPINION

REFORM ACT

British 1922 Committee: How MPs can take back control without legislation

The average backbencher is going to have to become much more knowledgeable about the philosophy underlying our institutions and courageous in the face of executive power if we are ever going to improve our Parliamentary institutions along the lines proposed by Michael Chong.

By GARY LEVY

The Westminster model is frequently criticized for the dominance of the executive and the power of the party leaders. Executive dominance is one of the strengths of the Parliamentary system at least when compared to the potential for stalemate in the U.S. Congressional system. But what happens when a leader crosses certain ethical lines?

In theory, it would not be that difficult to remove Prime Minister Stephen Harper. If 10 Conservatives were willing to vote with the opposition on a non-confidence motion Harper would be out on the election trail fighting for his job. If 10 of them were even to sign a confidential letter saying they were planning this, he might take the hint and resign.

If Rob Ford were prime minister

(and specifically if he ignored a vote of censure) the governor general would dismiss him in the blink of an eye. If he were premier of a province the lieutenant governor would do the same. So there are ways to get rid of a leader.

But the governor general is not going to dismiss prime minister Harper nor are a sufficient number of Conservative backbenchers going to mutiny. That is why Michael Chong decided to bring in his Reform Act to legislate restraints on party leaders.

His bill would allow caucus members to call for a leadership review and dismiss an unpopular leader. It would also strip party leaders of their right to appoint and approve candidates in upcoming elections and give MPs the right to decide who sits in caucus.

These are radical ideas with no chance of passing but members

who are sympathetic to the principles behind the bill should familiarize themselves with the British 1922 Committee. A recent book by Professor Phillip Norton (Lord Norton) on the 90th Anniversary of the 1922 Committee suggests a better way to control party leaders.

The 1922 Committee is a completely unofficial group of members of the British Conservative Party. It consists of all Conservative private members in the House of Commons. When in opposition this includes everyone except the leader and when in government includes all the party backbenchers.

In its early years the 1922 Committee was seen as a neutral forum for conveying information to members and, at times, serving to rally support for leaders like Baldwin in 1931. It was during the Second World War that the committee became more of a force for policy by opposing various policies supported by the coalition government on matters of coal rationing and wages. The committee also developed its independent reputation by inviting speakers who were not Conservatives to address the committee. Clement Attlee, the Labour leader, was even invited to speak to the committee at one point.

Following the Suez Crisis in 1956

the Committee began to focus more on leadership. Under prime minister Edward Heath, Tory MPs began to vote against the government in greater numbers. Following his loss of the 1974 general election Heath tried to get his supporters elected to the executive of the 1922 Committee in order to stop the internal criticism. Their defeat was the first step in a process that led to a leadership review and Heath's replacement by Margaret Thatcher.

For nearly 20 years, from the end of Thatcher's government through the administration of John Major and then the long period in opposition during the Tony Blair government, the 1922 Committee appeared to have lost some of its influence as its leadership was divided between different factions of the Conservative Party.

The coalition agreement following the 2010 election opened a new role for the committee as the authentic voice of the Conservative Party in Parliament. Its influence can be seen in the way it has slowed down, and, in some case, stopped, the more radical institutional reforms of the Liberal Democrats such as electing the Upper House and introducing proportional representation.

Lord Norton suggests it has played and continues to fulfill seven

important functions many of which are performed by our party caucuses. But the final function, choosing and removing the Leader of the Conservative Party is significantly different. This role has changed several times in the last century.

Between 1965 and 2001, Tory MPs alone comprised the electorate. After the electorate became the entire party the role of the Parliamentary party was to narrow the choice to two, but if 15 per cent of the Parliamentary party write to the chairman of the 1922 Committee requesting a confidence vote, such a vote is then held. If the leader loses, the election of a new leader is triggered, with the defeated leader not being eligible to stand. The chair of the 1922 Committee is the returning officer and key official in the organization of party leadership contests.

The experience of the 1922 Committee shows there are ways for a Parliamentary system to hold the executive and the party leaders more to account. Canadian parties would do well to take a closer look and reflect upon how such a body could change our political and parliamentary system. No legislation is needed, but the average backbencher is going to have to become much more knowledgeable about the philosophy underlying our institutions and courageous in the face of executive power if we are ever going to improve our Parliamentary institutions along the lines proposed by Chong.

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