

Claire Hoy ? A preposterous notion

Perhaps the most common debating trick you'll find is the notion of first setting up a straw man and then tearing it down to ?prove? your point.

It's used as often as it is because, if your audience doesn't give it a lot of thought, it can be quite effective.

Which brings us trundling along to the debate over a private member's bill authored by Tory backbencher Michael Chong, a bill currently before Parliament and supposedly designed to give Parliament back to the Parliamentarians, or, as The Globe and Mail's Saturday editorial put it, ??to shift some power back to the MPs.?

Those who support the bill ? and there are many in the media and in parliament (including both Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau and NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair) think that the current prime minister, i.e. Stephen Harper, has too much control over his own party. Each political party does have a mechanism in its constitution to demand a leadership review ? the rules vary, but if enough party members are unhappy it can work effectively (remember Joe Clark anyone?) ? but Chong's bill would take all this out of the hands of the party representatives and hand it over to the elected caucus.

And by reducing the role of party loyalists and handing power to only their elected MPs, we're told that this is somehow ?more democratic.? Actually, it's quite the opposite.

But before we get more into that, let's examine the main argument being used to justify the need for Chong's bill.

We are told, time and again, that Parliament used to be there for the benefit of all the elected MPs, but that over time ? and more particularly under Harper ? the prime minister and his unelected officials have grabbed more and more control to the point that MPs are powerless pawns.

The late Pierre Trudeau once famously quipped that MPs were ?nobodies? the moment they stepped off of Parliament Hill. Chong's bill, it seems, takes this one step further, and argues that MPs are ?nobodies? even when they're sitting in their Commons seats. The crux of the argument is that there was a Golden Age of Democracy in Canada, where being an MP, while not exactly being an equal to a cabinet minister or prime minister, certainly gave you the right to vote whichever way you wish without fear or favor from the party leadership.

Or, as the aforementioned Globe editorial describes Chong's bill: ?Canada is a representative democracy. An MP is supposed to be a constituency's representative in government ? not a party's or government's representative to constituents. That this would surprise many voters, not to mention MPs and party officials, shows how far off course things have gone.?

When, pray tell, was this golden age when regular MPs went to Ottawa ? all, no doubt, solely to do good works and make the world a better place ? unhampered by party leaders and/or partisan considerations, but motivated solely by what is best for their constituents?

I have covered political discourse in this country at all levels for almost 50 years, and have yet to experience this Utopian ideal of politics. I've also read widely on our earlier political history, and have yet to discover anything close to what is being touted as the ideal ?used-to-be? parliamentary democracy.

The whole notion is preposterous. Historical revisionism run amok.

Prime ministers have always run the show in Ottawa ? just as premiers do at the provincial level. To the extent that MPs feel helpless, that says more about their own lack of spine than it does about anything else. And by the way, if Trudeau the Younger and Mulcair think Chong's idea is so great, there is nothing stopping them from adapting it into their own party constitutions. Don't count on them doing that, however.

How is it ?more democratic? to give MPs exclusive power to oust a prime minister, thus taking that power away from the broader party membership? After all, the membership picks the leader, not the caucus. Why should caucus be allowed to fire a leader and not the membership? It would mean that a small cabal of party malcontents could bring an action against a leader. Even if it failed, it would do irreparable harm to their leader.

Chong also wants party leaders to lose their power to veto a candidate's nomination. That too would be a good idea if, in the case of candidates who say or do something stupid, everyone wouldn't immediately hold the leader directly accountable. But that's not how the real world works, so that too is a non-starter.

Fact is, our system works as well ? or even better ? than any system of parliament in the world.

It ain't perfect. But then, what is?

