

Editorial ? Is there a problem in Harper's caucus?

The last couple of weeks saw the continuation of the soap opera that has represented the political career of Eve Adams; at least her career in federal politics.

The former Mississauga City and Peel Regional councillor crossed the floor of the House of Commons, abandoning her Conservative roots to embrace Liberalism, Justin Trudeau style.

Now it is true that Adams has run into problems that have gained a certain amount of national prominence, and it looks like she can take the credit for most of her troubles. It was reported that she had already been told she would not be allowed to carry the Conservative Party colours in any riding in Canada in the upcoming federal election.

But there is something that might be rather systemic in the way Harper's caucus operates, with Adams being the latest of a number of MPs who have abandoned his leadership; or been kicked out.

We all remember Belinda Stronach, who was elected as a Conservative under Harper's leadership and that memorable morning in May 2005 when she crossed the floor of the House and became a Liberal (and cabinet minister too).

There have been other cases in which Harper has demonstrated a certain lacking when it comes to getting along with his caucus. In 2006, Garth Turner, who had previously represented Caledon in the House of Commons, was unceremoniously bounced from caucus. A couple of years later, Helena Guergis was forced to leave both the cabinet and caucus. To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a clear reason given for either move; not to Turner or Guergis or to their constituents.

As was the case with Adams, any one of these instances could possibly be explained away. But as they become more frequent, the issue of leadership must come into play. One would hope that effective leaders would be able to keep their followers in line.

And by that, we don't mean having MPs salute their leaders, get in line and do as they're told. No, Canadians expect more than that from their MPs.

The people who sit in the House of Commons were not just randomly gathered off the street, handed fancy titles and pretty good pay cheques just to sit there and follow marching orders. With very few exceptions, these are high-calibre people who have endured a demanding and competitive process to get where they are. They have their brains and their strengths, and they are expected to use them, and use them to the benefit of their constituents, as well as the country as a whole.

As is often the case when a Parliamentarian crosses the floor, there have been suggestions that there should be restrictions on MPs' ability to do that.

Let's all hope that never happens.

True, it could be argued that such a move on the part of an MP is a betrayal of the voters who sent that person to Ottawa. That might have been particularly the case in February 2006, when David Emerson crossed the floor to sit as a Conservative (and minister) just weeks after being elected as a Liberal.

But if we want high-calibre people representing us in Ottawa, and if we're prepared to pay them accordingly, then we have to be ready to let them think and act with a certain amount of independence.

If floor crossings become too frequent, then it might be seen as a reflection on the leader's ability to lead.

Harper has a reputation of being able to boss people around. But can he lead?