

Abolish Political Parties

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The easiest and simplest way to improve our democracy is to abolish political parties. I don't mean that they should be illegal; people can form whatever political groups they want. I mean only that political parties should have no official role to play in elections and in parliament.

In principle, a political party is a coalition of like-minded people, who seek to advance their agenda, or “platform”. We do not vote for, nor elect, a party. We vote for a candidate from a list of candidates, and the winner is elected as our member of parliament (MP) to represent our interests. What, then, is the role of a party?

The first role of a party in the electoral process is to choose a candidate for each riding, and to finance and run that candidate's campaign. A candidate who was not chosen by one of the major parties has almost no chance of being elected. A political party diminishes democracy by controlling the message of its candidates. If you ask someone who they are voting for, most likely they will say a party name, not a person's name; often they do not even know the names of the people who are running.

When a parliament is elected, its first task is to propose its ministers, including a prime minister, for the approval of the governor general. In this task, there is no role for political parties ordained by our constitution. But the task is made easier by the tradition that the party with the most winning candidates chooses the ministers, and thus forms the government. The task of choosing the government is taken away from the elected representatives, and given to a party. This is a serious subversion of democracy, but we are so used to it that we have come to think it is the right and only way to choose a government. In the 2008 federal election, when the Conservative Party had again won a precarious minority, and the Liberal and NDP Parties proposed a coalition that would form a majority, the ignorant public protested that it was undemocratic for any party to govern other than the one with the most seats, apparently unaware that coalitions are standard practice in many countries. The argument about which party should govern is spurious anyway; parties are not elected; people are elected.

The government, which in practice means the party in power, sets the legislative agenda, and proposes the bills for parliament to vote on. In principle, individual members of parliament, whether in the government party or not, can propose bills; in practice, only the bills proposed by the leaders of the ruling party stand a good chance of passing.

During the life of a parliament, each party continues to tell its elected MPs what to say, and more importantly, how to vote on issues. In 2013, several Conservative MPs complained publicly that they are being muzzled by their party, and cannot speak out on issues of interest to them. Their party leader, Prime Minister Harper, called a meeting of all Conservative MPs; when the dissatisfied members emerged from the meeting, they said they were wrong, that they are not muzzled, and that they won't be saying any more about it. They were even being muzzled about being muzzled.

A party controls its members by blackmail. If you ever want to advance within the party, to become a minister, or even just be a candidate in the next election, you must toe the party line. The people who advance are not those who have their own ideas and integrity; MPs are reduced to parrots. Power is concentrated in the hands of a handful of people: the rulers of the ruling party. This is not democracy.

Among the handful of rulers, the prime minister and cabinet ministers, there are sometimes disagreements. A minister might believe that the position adopted by the cabinet is not in the best interest of the country. But it is in the best interest of the ruling party for the

minister to show “cabinet solidarity”; any sign of disagreement would be fuel for the opposition. Sometimes a minister disagrees with the cabinet position on an issue in their own portfolio. In that case, they must tell the public why the cabinet position is right, and implement it. Ministers of the government are sworn to act in the best interest of the country, but whenever a minister believes that the best interest of the country differs from the best interest of their party, they almost always act in the best interest of their party.

In the USA, the situation has been even worse. During Obama's presidency, on any issue supported by Obama, all Democrats voted for it, and all Republicans against, even when Obama had adopted policy proposed by Republicans. Partisan politics is poisonous to democracy.

Suppose for a moment, that there are two parties, and that in every riding, the vote was 51% for the candidate belonging to Party A, and 49% for the candidate belonging to Party B. Then Party A wins every riding. Even though Party B got 49% of the vote, its policies and viewpoint are shut out of government, and even shut out of parliament. This is a serious problem, pointed out by many people. Some people have proposed what they consider to be a solution: proportional representation. According to these people, each party should have the proportion of members of parliament that it has of the popular vote. The immediate objection is that there would be members of parliament who were not elected by anyone, and do not represent any riding. I agree with the objection. The proposal would, for the first time, make parties, rather than candidates, the official contenders in an election. In my opinion, the problem is the assumption that a riding is represented by a party; it is not; each riding is represented by a person. In my opinion, the solution is to abolish parties.

Without political parties, elections and parliament and government all work perfectly well. In an election, every candidate is an independent, and is free to speak their mind. Voters choose the candidate they feel best represents them. In each new parliament, the first order of business is for MPs to elect the ministers of a government from among themselves. Those ministers then serve parliament. If the ministers (including prime minister) lose the confidence of parliament, then parliament can replace them, without triggering a general election. On each issue, an MP is free to vote as they think their constituents want them to vote, or to vote according to their conscience. This is how it works in Nebraska, in the Northwest Territories, in Nunavut, and in most city and regional governments. For our provincial and federal governments, the easiest and simplest way to improve our democracy is to abolish the role of political parties in elections and government.

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