



Opinion

Turner had a message on his 90th birthday: protect Canada's democracy

John Turner is still passionate about democracy and the central role of politics and public life. And these passions were on full display last week: he talked about the importance of a healthy democracy, and a strong political engagement by Canadians, and a central role for MPs in setting the country's agenda, debating policy and determining the laws of the country.



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TORONTO—Former prime minister John Turner's 90th birthday on Parliament Hill was more than a party last Monday. Turner is passionate about democracy and the central role of politics and public life. And these passions were on full display: he talked about the importance of a healthy democracy, and a strong political engagement by Canadians, and a central role for MPs in setting the country's agenda, debating policy and determining the laws of the country.

There was, to be sure, a party atmosphere to celebrate his birthday, but Turner had a sobering message: our democracy is in trouble and we have to do something about it. It clearly struck a strong resonance in the room where there were figures from the Conservatives, NDP, and Greens as well.

This is how Turner put it: public service is undervalued. Too few Canadians are politically engaged. The role and importance of Parliament itself is in decline. Partisanship has become too intense and too personal. And MPs have abdicated, or lost, the central role they should play in driving policy and setting the priorities for the country.

While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was there to introduce Turner, his comments were largely perfunctory and he left as soon as he had spoken, not staying to hear Turner's message. It was left to former prime minister Joe Clark, in his response to Turner, to most eloquently pick up Turner's message, and amplify it, questioning whether today any political party, including his own, would tolerate debate within its own ranks.

"Democracy doesn't happen by accident," Turner repeated many times that evening. It takes commitment. And "engagement doesn't happen by accident." Turner recalled that as a young Montreal lawyer he had been invited to speak at the 1962 Liberal Party policy conference in Kingston where he urged the implementation of legal aid so that all Canadians had the chance to defend their rights before the courts. By 1968 he was an MP, serving as justice minister. In that position he was able to introduce legal aid. His message: "Hang in there."



The Prime Ministers' Club: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, front left, with John Turner, right; former Liberal prime minister Paul Martin, rear left, former Progressive Conservative prime minister Joe Clark, centre, and former Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jean-Marc Carisse

minister," he said, arguing that it was time for MPs to reassert their central role.

MPs have tried to fight back by advocating rules to limit the power of the leader's office and restore the role of MPs. Conservative MP Michael Chong's private member's Reform Act in 2015 marginally expanded the role of MPs and caucus, but only after his bill was seriously watered down and only if party caucuses opted in. The Trudeau government failed to opt in after winning the 2015 election. When Trudeau expelled Jody Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpott from the Liberal caucus, he ignored Chong's intent that the decision to remove someone from caucus should be made by the caucus, not the leader.

More recently, Liberal MP Frank Baylis has recruited Conservative, NDP, and Green MPs to support a motion—the Democratic Empowerment motion—to set the stage for a review of House of Commons procedures that has to take place after this year's federal election. It would take away the power of party whips to determine which MPs speak in debate, leaving the decision instead to the Speaker.

It would share committee chairmanships among the different parties in Parliament and require secret ballots to choose the chairs. This would limit a leader's office in determining the makeup of committees and prevent a party leader from removing the chair of a committee. The motion would also expand significantly the time available for private members' bills and petitions.

The Samara Centre for Democracy, a non-profit established to strengthen democracy in Canada, has focused on promoting the role of MPs, strengthening caucus over the leader. In one project, it interviewed former MPs from all parties who had served in Parliament between 2004-2011 to learn from their experience. It found that many former MPs felt intimidated by the leader's office and resented the effort by political staffers to diminish the role of MPs, and faced an incessant pressure not to step out from the party line or in any way diminish the stature of the leader.

Trudeau's own centralization of power in the PMO, and rocky relations with his own caucus, has, on the eve of the election, forced him to belatedly respond to criticism. He has now set up a caucus relations office in the PMO and promised to be more accessible to MPs.

Yet, in spite of efforts at reform, leaders still have many ways to intimidate MPs. In a rule introduced by former prime minister Pierre Trudeau (he once referred to MPs as "nobodies"), leaders have to sign off on each candidate running for their party so that a leader can punish an MP who has questioned party policy. Leaders can also override constituency associations and impose their own candidates. Under current rules they determine which of their MPs can speak in debates. MPs can be deprived of committee positions or opportunities to travel. They can be blocked from promotion.

In many ways, Canadian politics have been Americanized, with much greater use of political consultants, much more focus on the leader as a presidential-style figure, much more concern over constant fundraising, and much more promotion of the leader's message. This has meant a reduced role for MPs, a decline in parliamentary debate, more intense partisanship, as well as diminution of the role of grassroots riding associations and membership in political parties.

Yet if Canadians lose faith in the vitality of their political institutions and the role of the people they elect, then they will lose faith in the democratic process itself. That was Turner's warning as his 90th birthday was celebrated on Parliament Hill.

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Lisa Haley and Marc Kealey, two former staffers to former prime minister John Turner, organized the 90th birthday bash. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jean-Marc Carisse



John Turner, centre, flanked by Paul Martin, left, Mr. Turner's daughter, Liz Turner, Justin Trudeau, Joe Clark, and his granddaughter Fiona Jasper, Jean Chretien. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jean-Marc Carisse

Turner has also been a strong booster of the role of MPs. "I don't like the term 'backbenchers,'" Turner said, arguing that it was MPs, not prime ministers, who should

be the masters of the House of Commons. Under our system, "it is they who choose who shall form the government and it is they who determine who should be prime