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## ***Reform Act, 2013***

On December 3, 2013, Michael Chong, Member of Parliament for Wellington-Halton Hills, introduced the *Reform Act, 2013*. The *Reform Act* is an effort to strengthen Canada's democratic institutions by restoring the role of elected Members of Parliament in the House of Commons.

The proposals in the *Reform Act* would reinforce the principle of responsible government. It would make the executive more accountable to the legislature and ensure that party leaders maintain the confidence of their caucuses.

Responsible government was introduced to Canada in the 1840s by Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, reformers whose contributions to responsible government are commemorated in a monument behind Centre Block on Parliament Hill. Together, they led the first responsible government in Canada. Responsible government is the principle that the Executive Council (cabinet) is responsible and accountable to the elected Legislative Assembly (House of Commons), and not the appointed Governor.

Since Confederation, numerous and gradual changes have eroded the power of the Member of Parliament and centralized it in the party leaders' offices. As a result, the ability of Members of Parliament to carry out their function has been curtailed by party leadership structures. The *Reform Act* proposes to address this problem by restoring power to elected Members of Parliament.

### **The Need to Reform Parliament**

In Canada's single-member district plurality (first-past-the-post) system, Canadians directly elect Members of Parliament to represent them in the House of Commons. This is the only franchise (excepting the occasional non-binding ad-hoc consultative Senate elections) that Canadians exercise at the federal level.

It is important to note why the role of the Member of Parliament is so vital to our system.

In many systems of government, citizens exercise three franchises, three votes. For example, in the United States, citizens exercise three votes at the federal level: A vote for the President, a



vote for a Senator and a vote for a Congressman or Congresswoman. So, citizens have three avenues to pursue their democratic representation.

But in Canada, citizens exercise only one franchise, one vote: A vote for their local Member of Parliament. And they rightfully expect that their local member be responsive to their views.

It is for that reason that the role of the Member of Parliament in the Canadian system is so critical.

However, evidence demonstrates that Canadians are becoming increasingly disengaged with their elected Parliament. Recent public opinion research reveals that only 55 per cent of Canadians report being satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada,<sup>i</sup> dropping 20 per cent from 2004.<sup>ii</sup> Voter turnout during federal elections has reached an all-time low, and in the last federal election, four out of ten Canadians chose not to vote.<sup>iii</sup>

Studies have found that many Canadians are disengaged because they feel that politicians work for someone else, and are therefore indifferent to their views.<sup>iv</sup>

The *Reform Act* will help to re-engage citizens by introducing bottom-up reforms, giving greater decision-making authority to electoral district associations, and strengthening accountability in parliamentary party caucuses. When electoral district associations have the final authority over selecting party candidates in the electoral district, it ensures local control over who represents the district in Parliament. The *Reform Act* also provides greater power to elected Members of Parliament to hold their party leaders to account, thus reinforcing the confidence that caucus must have in the leader, and strengthening the principle of responsible government, the foundation of the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy.

The reforms proposed in the *Reform Act* are not new. If enacted, they would restore Parliament to the way it worked in Canada for many decades. Furthermore, many of the reforms proposed in the *Reform Act* are similar to current practices in other Westminster parliaments. The *Reform Act* would, however, codify into statute practices that are currently governed by unwritten convention.

The *Reform Act* proposes three main reforms: Restoring local control over party nominations, strengthening caucus as decision-making body, and reinforcing the accountability of party leaders to their caucuses. The *Reform Act* amends two Acts of Parliament: The *Canada Elections Act* and the *Parliament of Canada Act*.



It is important to note that the *Reform Act* would not come into force until seven days after the next general election.

### **Restoring Local Control over Party Nominations**

Currently, the *Canada Elections Act* effectively gives a party leader authority over the selection of a candidate by an electoral district association. According to paragraph 67(4)(c) of the *Canada Elections Act*, a prospective candidate must submit to the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, proof that a party leader has endorsed his or her candidacy. Only after this proof has been submitted, can the Chief Electoral Officer approve his or her nomination as a candidate for a party in an election. This requirement was introduced when the *Canada Elections Act* was amended in 1970.<sup>v</sup> Without such endorsement, the name of a prospective candidate and the political party with which he or she is affiliated cannot be put on the election ballot.

In other Westminster parliaments, the leaders of political parties do not exercise this type of centralized authority. For example, in Australia's Labor Party and Liberal Party, decisions on candidate nomination are generally made by the local party membership.<sup>vi,vii</sup> In the United Kingdom's Conservative Party and Liberal Democratic Party, candidates are generally selected by the constituency membership or constituency association.<sup>viii,ix</sup> In these parties, the final decision on candidate nomination rests with the members of local constituencies.

The *Reform Act* proposes to amend the *Canada Elections Act*, restoring local control over party nominations by replacing a party leader with a nomination officer, for the purpose of endorsing a party candidate in an election. Nomination officers are to be elected by members of electoral district associations through a majority vote. The *Reform Act* ensures that decisions pertaining to candidate nominations are made locally and are binding; meaning that the decisions of the electoral district association cannot be overruled by a party leader. By restoring control to electoral district associations to nominate candidates, power is effectively restored to Canadians, since it becomes a local decision as to who gets to represent the party in an election.

In effect, the *Reform Act* gives local associations the final decision on which candidate will run for a political party in that electoral district. Strengthening electoral district associations would enhance local engagement with political parties by giving these associations a stronger voice in a party's direction.



### **Strengthening Caucus as a Decision-Making Body**

Caucus is central to the functioning of a Westminster parliament. Most parliamentary power flows from the institution of Parliament through the caucus leadership to individual caucus members. Therefore, the structure and governance of caucus, as well as the accountability of the caucus leadership to its members, becomes vitally important in the Westminster system. Those members who sit outside a recognized party caucus are distinctly disadvantaged.

It is important to draw a distinction between registered political parties (Conservative Party of Canada, Liberal Party of Canada, New Democratic Party of Canada, etc.) which are created and exist outside Parliament, and parliamentary parties – also referred to as caucuses or recognized parties – which exist inside Parliament. While there is significant correlation between both types of parties, they are separate in structure and governance.

It is clear that, due to a series of changes going back decades, the ability of Members of Parliament to carry out their functions has been curtailed by caucus leadership structures. This stands in stark contrast to the significant power that members have in other Westminster parliaments, such as Australia and the United Kingdom.<sup>x,xi,xii</sup>

While the *Parliament of Canada Act* implicitly recognizes House of Commons caucuses by providing for the remuneration of House of Commons caucus chairs, no detail is provided as to how these caucuses should be structured or governed. In particular, no mention is made of how a House of Commons caucus chair is to be selected, nor is any mention made regarding caucus membership and expulsion. Currently, the structure, governance and membership of caucuses are regulated by unwritten convention. Over the decades, this unwritten convention has evolved in a way that has advantaged caucus leadership and disadvantaged caucus members.

The *Reform Act* proposes amendments to the *Parliament of Canada Act* in order to formally define the structure and governance of House of Commons caucuses.

The *Reform Act* would amend the *Parliament of Canada Act* by adding the definition of a House of Commons caucus.

The *Reform Act* would also formalize the procedure for the expulsion and re-admission of caucus members. Currently, the process for expulsion and re-admission is an undefined process



that can vary between caucuses and individual cases. Under the *Reform Act*, a caucus member may only be expelled if the caucus chair has received a written notice signed by at least 15 per cent of the caucus members requesting that the member's membership be reviewed at a meeting and the expulsion be approved by a majority vote by secret ballot of the caucus members present at that meeting.

Expelled caucus members may be re-admitted if one of two criteria is met. One criterion for re-admission is that the expelled member is re-elected to the House of Commons as a candidate for that party. The second criterion is that the caucus chair has received a written notice signed by at least 15 per cent of the caucus members requesting a vote to re-admit that member at a meeting, and the re-admission is approved by a majority vote by secret ballot of the caucus members present at that meeting.

The *Reform Act* also sets out a formal procedure for the election of a caucus chair. The chair of caucus is elected following every general election, or following the death, incapacity, resignation or removal of caucus chair. The chair is elected by a majority vote by secret ballot of the members of caucus who are present at a meeting of caucus. That meeting is presided over by the caucus member with the greatest number of years of service in the House of Commons.

The *Reform Act* also sets out a formal procedure for the removal of a caucus chair. The chair of a party caucus can only be removed if the chair has received a written notice signed by at least 15 per cent of the caucus members requesting that the occupancy of the chair be reviewed at a meeting, and the chair's removal is approved by a majority vote by secret ballot of the caucus members present at that meeting. That meeting is presided over by the caucus member with the greatest number of years of service in the House of Commons.

These measures will enhance the accountability of caucus leadership to caucus members, ensuring party leaders and their caucuses are mutually accountable by virtue of requiring the maintenance of confidence. This is particularly important in House of Commons caucuses, since it is only members of the House of Commons to which the constitutional convention of confidence applies.



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**Reinforcing Accountability of Party Leaders to Caucuses**

By convention, leaders of parliamentary parties must maintain the confidence of their House of Commons caucuses. While this convention is frequently used in Australia and the United Kingdom, it is rarely used in Canada.

Since the 1960s, party leaders in most Westminster systems have become more powerful in relation to elected Parliaments. With a few exceptions, the checks and balances on the power of party leaders has weakened. One of those exceptions is the ability of party caucuses to conduct a leadership review, which is the most important check and balance on the power of party leaders. In the United Kingdom's Conservative Party, Australia's Liberal Party, and New Zealand's National Party and Labour Party, the party caucuses retain the power to review their party leaders.<sup>xiii,xiv,xv,xvi</sup> Within the last two decades, caucuses in all three countries have exercised this important power.

However, in Canada registered political parties have increasingly displaced the role of caucus in reviewing the party leader. Furthermore, the by-laws of registered parties make it difficult to initiate a leadership review.

Much like caucus structure and governance, little is set out in Canadian statute regarding leadership review. The *Reform Act* proposes to amend the *Canada Elections Act* to ensure that party by-laws recognize the current caucus power to review the caucus leader, by making explicit what is currently unwritten convention. Quite simply, the bill takes the current unwritten constitutional convention and makes explicit in statute the rules and process for caucus to review the party leader.

The *Reform Act* proposes that a party leadership review may be initiated by the submission of a written notice to the caucus chair, signed by at least 15 per cent of the caucus members. The review will occur by secret ballot, and the result will be determined by a majority vote of the members present at the meeting. When a majority of caucus members vote in favour of a leadership review, a second vote by secret ballot occurs immediately to select a person to serve as the interim party leader until a new leader has been elected. Aside from the election of an interim party leader, the *Reform Act* does not specify how a party leader is to be elected, leaving that decision to the political party.



The *Reform Act* makes registration of a political party contingent on the party's by-laws conforming with these leadership review provisions. Registered political parties will have twelve months after the *Reform Act* comes into force to bring their party by-laws into compliance.

The *Reform Act* does not affect, in any way, the current power of registered political parties and their members to review a leader or to select a leader, regardless of what their current practises are.

Evidence shows that Westminster parliaments that operate under the rules proposed in the *Reform Act*, like those in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, are no more unstable than the system Canada currently operates under. The length of time between leadership changes are about the same in both systems.<sup>xvii,xviii</sup>

Currently, party leaders exercise a great deal of control over caucuses, with the result that caucuses decreasingly function as decision-making bodies. The provisions proposed in the *Reform Act* would make explicit the requirement that the party leader maintain the confidence of his or her caucus, making the leader more accountable and restoring the role of elected Members of Parliament.

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<sup>i</sup> Anderson, Kendall, et al., "Lost in Translation or Just Lost?: Canadians' Priorities and the House of Commons", Samara Democracy Report #5, Samara Institute, February, 2013. p.2.

<sup>ii</sup> Anderson, Kendall, et al., "Who's the Boss?: Canadians' Views on Their Democracy", Samara Democracy Report #4, Samara Institute, 2012. p.1.

<sup>iii</sup> Bastedo, Heather, et al., "The Real Outsiders: Politically Disengaged Views on Politics and Democracy", Samara Democracy Reports, Samara Institute, December, 2011. p.2.

<sup>iv</sup> Bastedo, Heather, et al., "The Real Outsiders: Politically Disengaged Views on Politics and Democracy", Samara Democracy Reports, Samara Institute, December, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/bp437-e.htm>

<sup>vi</sup> Australian Labor Party National Platform and Constitution, Constitution, part D. s.9.

[http://d3n8a8pro7vhnmx.cloudfront.net/australianlaborparty/pages/121/attachments/original/1365135867/Labor\\_National\\_Platform.pdf?1365135867](http://d3n8a8pro7vhnmx.cloudfront.net/australianlaborparty/pages/121/attachments/original/1365135867/Labor_National_Platform.pdf?1365135867)

<sup>vii</sup> *The Liberal Party of Australia is a Federation of Divisions.* <http://www.liberal.org.au/the-party/our-structure>

<sup>viii</sup> Constitution of the Conservative Party, Schedule 7. s.15

[http://www.bracknellconservatives.org.uk/sites/www.bracknellconservatives.org.uk/files/constitution\\_0.pdf](http://www.bracknellconservatives.org.uk/sites/www.bracknellconservatives.org.uk/files/constitution_0.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> Liberal Democrat Federal Constitution Article 4 and Appendix *Leadership Election Regulations.*

<http://libdems.org.uk/constitution.aspx>

<sup>x</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1922\\_Committee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1922_Committee)

<sup>xi</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary\\_Labour\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary_Labour_Party)

<sup>xii</sup> Australian Labor Party, "National Executive Guidelines for the Election of the Labor Leader", Ballot Rules, [http://www.alp.org.au/ballot\\_rules](http://www.alp.org.au/ballot_rules)



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## ***Backgrounder***

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<sup>xiii</sup> United Kingdom, House of Commons Library, Leadership Elections: Conservative Party, Standard Note, SN/PC/1366, 7 December 2005, pp. 7-9.

<sup>xiv</sup> Guaja, Anika, “Labor leadership spill: the rules of the game”, *The Conversation*, [University of Sydney], 27 February 2012. <http://theconversation.com/labor-leadership-spill-the-rules-of-the-game-5575>

<sup>xv</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1922\\_Committee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1922_Committee)

<sup>xvi</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary\\_Labour\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary_Labour_Party)

<sup>xvii</sup> <http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2012/06/keeping-party-leaders-honest/>

<sup>xviii</sup> Blais, A., & Cross, W. P. (2012). *Politics at the Centre: The Selection and Removal of Party Leaders in the Anglo Parliamentary World*. New York: Oxford University Press.