

The virtues of a parallel chamber

Canada needs what Australia and the UK have: a second, more convivial chamber where MPs have more time and opportunity to make a difference.

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The UK and Australia parliaments have been using a second, parallel chamber to aid the parliamentary process for more than 20 years. Reviews of the value and purpose of the chambers have been resoundingly positive and have generally assuaged the early skeptics. Parallel chambers are a way to deal more efficiently with backbench business, routine proceedings and deliberations on relevant but less contentious matters before the House. They allow more work to be done in any given week without having to extend House hours, and they afford MPs more opportunities to go on the record on matters that are relevant and meaningful to their riding and constituents.

It's encouraging, then, to see the idea of a parallel chamber for Canada's House of Commons gathering some steam.

I wrote about [the innovation](#) in the summer of 2018, a couple of months before the Samara Centre for Democracy raised the topic in [its annual survey of MPs](#). In the survey MPs were asked about their interest in a parallel chamber. Most of the responses were ambivalent, which is not surprising as few MPs know how it would work and what benefit it could bring to their work.

But two members of Parliament think it's time we had a second chamber in Canada and they're putting the wheels in motion. Frank Baylis, MP for Pierrefonds-Dollard in Quebec, is working with Scott Reid, MP for Lanark-Frontenac-Kingston in Ontario, to propose an amendment to the standing orders to create – or at least run a pilot project for – a second, parallel chamber after the next election.

Where is the interest in this coming from?

The [Standing Committee](#) on Procedures and House Affairs (PROC) touched on the topic in [a 2016 study](#) titled *Interim Report*

on Moving Toward a Modern, Efficient, Inclusive and Family-Friendly Parliament. At that time, the Prime Minister instructed the government house leader Dominic LeBlanc to work with opposition house leaders to examine ways to make the House more family-friendly for members of Parliament.

The PROC committee's interim report fell short of recommending a parallel chamber; but it did suggest the idea be given further consideration. At the same time, the report considered the question of compressing the work week into four sitting days — Monday to Thursday, a family-friendly move that has long been bandied about by MPs. Fridays are short days anyway: the House sits for only five and a half hours, and standing committees do not sit on those days. Those lost Friday hours would be added to the other sitting days. Nonetheless, MPs and their parties have been reluctant to vote themselves what would appear to be a four-day work week.

The report underlined an important principle: It is incumbent on MPs to ensure Parliament is efficient and productive; that the deliberations are meaningful and relevant, not only for the questions before the House but also for the public. Only MPs can change the rules and structure that govern the debates and deliberations. This subject is not one that will garner headlines or political points, but it is necessary housekeeping from time to time.

We are in an era when more Canadian MPs are younger, many of them also full-time parents who are pressed for time. This is part of the backdrop to the interest in making our parliamentary deliberations more meaningful and efficient.

Australia's and the UK's parallel chambers, the [Federation Chamber](#) and [Westminster Hall](#), respectively, gather in large meeting rooms not unlike Canada's Railroad Room or Reading Room, in Centre Block.

The second (parallel) chamber does not take votes. When a matter needs to be settled, it is referred to the House. Proceedings are open to the public.

It can be used for take-note debates on subjects that are timely and relevant to constituents. It affords much more time for debates on subjects that could impact ridings and regions. In the UK, a backbench



business committee receives and reviews MP proposals for these debates, then schedules the debates selected. It is a great way to empower backbenchers with a voice and mandate that is supplementary to their role in supporting debates on government business in the House.

The chamber can be used for debates on less contentious Bills, freeing up time in the House for debates on Bills that are more consequential and divisive. The two types of debate can proceed concurrently.

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It can be a great proving ground to test innovations proposed for the House or procedural changes to standing orders. For example, Australia's Federation Chamber was able to test a new format for debate that permitted interventions: members could rise and seek permission to pose a question while another member was speaking. The format was added to the standing orders for Australia's House of Representatives in 2013 and remains in use today.

Debates in committees are usually less charged (in a partisan sense) than they are in the House and they are therefore a good place for members to hone their debating skills. Those considering a role as a chair occupant can hone their presiding skills. The parallel chamber's reduced formality and more conciliatory decorum enables members to participate in debates in ways that invite more inquiry and response, unlike the delivery and counter-delivery of prepared speaking notes in the House. Business in the second chamber is scheduled and time-limited, as it is in the House.

The second chamber has evolved to be more than an adjacent lane for House business.

Without the heavy volume of business that passes through the House, the second chamber can be more generous with time limits when it is most useful for MPs, for example, during statements by members, private members' business, the presentation of petitions and adjournment debates. MPs get more opportunity to debate, ask questions and make statements on topics of importance to them and their constituents.

More time for adjournment debates would be especially welcome in Canada's Parliament, especially by opposition members. MPs use these daily debates to hold the government to account, following up on matters covered in question period. Things move quickly in question period: The asking of a question can't last more than 35 seconds. The adjournment debates allow members four minutes to speak. But the House allows only three of these debates a day, and they are strictly structured. After the member speaks, the minister or parliamentary secretary has four minutes to respond. The MP has one minute for a rebuttal, and lastly the government has one minute, for a total of 10 minutes.

This is not enough time for all the MPs to ask any questions they have. A longer adjournment debate in a second chamber would be a valuable fallback for them.

Australia's Federation Chamber reserves 30 minutes every day for what they have called constituency statements. Members — and even ministers — are permitted up to three minutes to go on the record

on matters of urgency and importance to their constituents. Constituency statements have been so successful that the chair of the Federation Chamber is often asked to extend this segment to 60 minutes to accommodate the demand. In contrast, Canada's House has only 15 minutes in total for what we call members' statements, one minute for each, which is not much time to properly make a point. And ministers are not permitted to give members' statements.

A second chamber in Canada would help expedite government business, especially the less contentious of it. It might even reduce the use of [two rules](#) known as time allocation and closure. These two rules curtail debate and force a vote in certain circumstances, and it was the excessive use of these rules that led Australia to create its second chamber.

House leaders and whips, who are responsible for moving business along, would be able to move some of it to the second chamber, to be debated while the House continues with other business. Members would have more opportunities to go on record on Bills and other business of importance to their constituents.

The premise of my 2018 [article](#) is that our time in Ottawa during sitting weeks is already extremely compressed. The most valuable, and most perishable, commodity members of Parliament have is time. How we use our time in Ottawa and in the riding speaks to the value we bring to the people who elect us.

In Ottawa, for 26 weeks a year, from the early morning hours and well into the evening, MPs are engaged in their duties: attendance at and attention to committee, the House, their constituents, stakeholders, their party and their administrative work. House officers, ministers and other members of the ministry do even more.

Second concurrent chambers, a modern innovation in two of our Westminster sister Parliaments, have won praise from parliamentarians and the public. They have become necessary and effective elements of their parliamentary processes.

Our House of Commons already runs upwards of 25 standing committees with all the necessary supports: interpretation, transcription, clerks and analysts, and audio and in many cases video broadcasts. Adding one more and using existing spaces would not be overly consequential or expensive.

A second chamber should be given careful study by the Standing Committee on Procedures and House Affairs for many reasons, including the following:

- the time constraints imposed on people serving in our House of Commons
- the need for government to advance its legislative agenda
- the need for effective opposition in order to better serve Canadians
- the integrity of our parliamentary process.

Perhaps a pilot project could be run in the next Parliament, after the next general election in October.

Who knows — if MPs could get more work done in four sitting days a week than they do in five, then the Friday spent in the riding with the people they represent might not be so objectionable after all.

Photo: Liberal MP David Graham speaks with Parliamentary Guards in the House of Commons before the start of the first session in West Block, Monday, January 28, 2019 in Ottawa. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Adrian Wyld

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