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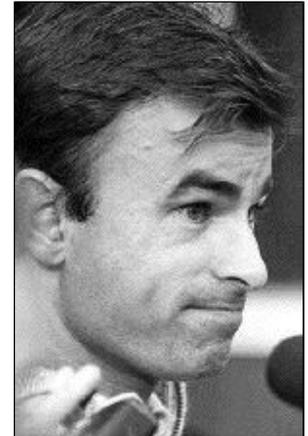
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Undemocratic

Keith Martin
 Ottawa Citizen

The Mace, the golden staff that sits on the floor of the House of Commons, is a hallowed symbol of democracy. MPs are forbidden even to touch it, out of respect for our democratic institutions. On Wednesday, I broke that tradition and hoisted the **Mace** into the air, declaring "Parliament is not a democracy anymore." I took this extreme step to draw attention to an unprecedented attack by the government on the rights of every MP **and every Canadian**.



Keith Martin

Just before I picked up the Mace, the government **drove a stake** through the heart of private-member business **by introducing a poison-pill amendment** to prevent a private member's bill I had introduced from being freely voted upon by the House. The bill called for the decriminalization -- not **legalization** -- of the simple possession of marijuana. The bill, supported by a majority of MPs, and by 70% of Canadians, could have saved **lives and a great deal of money** in our justice system.

The government's poison-pill amendment is important because private member business is the only time when MPs can vote freely. It is the last area in Parliament where MPs can innovate and push ideas forward for their constituents and country. It is the last bastion of democracy in a House where committees are used as make-work projects for MPs; where the legislative agenda bears no relevance to the concerns of Canadians; where Cabinet ministers cannot innovate, for fear of losing their jobs; and where MPs must vote according to the dictates of their leaders, instead of the wishes of their constituents.

private member business has become a farce.

Since the last election, MPs from all parties have introduced 239 private member's bills. None has passed third reading, and only two have made it to a vote after second reading. The cost is extraordinary. Since the beginning of this session, 150 hours of debate on private member business have taken place in the House, costing taxpayers \$45-million. The outcome of this effort is absolutely nothing.

Indeed, MPs from all parties recognize how undemocratic Parliament has become and have offered many substantive suggestions to rectify the situation. The committee on House procedure, the PC-DRC and the Canadian Alliance have all offered constructive solutions. I have introduced seven motions and have written about this subject on numerous occasions. All efforts to make our parliamentary system more effective have gone unheeded.

I picked up the **Mace** on Wednesday to draw attention to a system that is so undemocratic that MPs are now voting machines, with little opportunity to work for the people. This is our most serious problem in Canada today. If MPs cannot use their talents to fight for ideas for the public good, then MPs truly are irrelevant. Canada is not a democracy, Parliament cannot address the challenges we face, and we will continue to have a government driven by polls, not public need. If you have nearly 50% approval ratings, why rock the boat? Why

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do anything substantive?

I do not regret violating a custom of the House. The Prime Minister's Office violated the greatest right we have. It took away our right to vote.

Unless the public wakes up to how our government has quietly transformed our parliamentary democracy into a dictatorship, we will not see solutions to the problems Canada faces. The result will be a nation that is a pale shadow of what it could be. Shame.

Keith Martin, a medical doctor, is the Canadian Alliance MP for Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca, B.C.



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