



Back benches do work Harper doesn't want to be seen doing himself, NDP says

Gloria Galloway - OTTAWA - Monday, Oct. 03, 2011

One Tory MP is taking on the unions. One wants to prohibit Canadians from stopping someone from flying the flag. Another wants to make it illegal to wear a mask during riots.

All three backbench Conservative MPs have introduced private member's bills for their controversial measures, moves that play to the party's small-c conservative base. There are others, as well: a private member's bill to eliminate prohibitions on hate speech and another member's motion asking the government to condemn an agency that provides abortions.

Is Prime Minister Stephen Harper doing from the back row of the Commons the work he does not want to be seen doing himself?

The NDP thinks so. "The private members from the back benches are firing missiles," Jinny Sims, the New Democrat who represents Newton-North Delta, told reporters on Monday.

Mr. Harper is renowned for the control he exercises over the members of his caucus, she added. "Has he lost control of his caucus? Or is he encouraging the backbenchers to do this?"

Monday was the deadline for the introduction of the first batch of private-members bills to be debated in the current session of Parliament.

Most proposals from Conservative MPs aim to toughen sentences for criminals or promote nationalism.

Tory MP Blake Richards introduced his bill on Monday, asking his government to make it illegal to wear a mask in a riot. Last week, rookie Conservative MP John Carmichael presented a bill that would fine or jail Canadians who prevent others from flying the Maple Leaf.

Alberta MP Brian Storseth wants to delete the sections of the Canadian Human Rights Act that prohibit hate speech – a long-time cause for many small-c conservatives. And British Columbia Tory Russ Hiebert would force Canadian unions to make their financial records public.

Leon Benoit, a backbencher from Alberta, has moved that the government condemn the International Planned Parenthood Federation for honouring of its founder, Margaret Sanger, "whose philosophy constitutes eugenics." The IPPF, which provides abortion along with other reproductive treatments, recently received government funding of \$6-million over three years and anti-abortionists in the Conservative caucus were not mollified by the condition that the money be spent in countries where the procedure is illegal.

When François Boivin, an NDP MP, asked about Mr. Benoit's motion in the House of Commons, Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan said: "Our government's position is clear that we will not be reopening this issue."

But Mr. Van Loan said later that backbenchers do communicate with his office before tabling their own legislation.

“Private members consult widely on the bills that they submit, Mr. Van Loan said. “Some of them do because, obviously, they want to see their bills achieve support of their caucus colleagues because that’s critical to getting them passed.”

Jonathan Malloy, a political science professor at Carleton University, pointed out that at least one private member’s bill on abortion has been openly opposed by the Harper government.

“My own sense is that the Conservative caucus is so cohesive and disciplined that the leadership doesn’t need to centrally direct private members’ business,” Dr. Malloy said. “Most of its MPs are inclined to introduce bills that fit with Conservative priorities already, even if they have little appeal to the other parties, and so that’s what we’re seeing.”

© Copyright 2011 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.