



Having a hard time coming up with a point of view on things?

WEATHER | CAREERS | HEADLINE SCAN | E-MAIL UPDATE

---Shortcuts---



April 18, 2002

- MAIN ▾
- NEWS ▾
- FINANCIAL POST ▾
- COMMENTARY ▾
- SCIENCE & TECH ▾
- ARTS & LEISURE ▾
- SPORTS ▾
- ENTERTAINMENT ▾
- FORUMS

- SITE MAP ::
- SUBSCRIPTIONS ::
- ADVERTISE ::
- CONTESTS ::
- NP EVENTS ::
- CONTACT US ::
- USER HELP ::

HAVE YOUR SAY



Should Canada lessen its military commitment to the war on terrorism?

CLICK HERE TO VOTE



TRAVEL

Looking for getaway ideas? Check **POST TRAVEL**.

» **LET'S GO**

WAKE UP INSPIRED.



SPECIAL REPORTS

The most recent NP supplements online:

- » **POST HOMES**
- » **DRIVER'S EDGE**
- » **FP MUTUAL FUNDS**

» **ARCHIVES**

60-DAY SEARCH

He dared expose our sham Commons

MP violates taboo and grabs Mace after Liberal "poison pill" kills 4 years of work

Andrew Coyne
National Post

Sitting in the House of Commons watching four years of work go down the drain, feeling more than usually **despondent** about the irrelevancy of the ordinary MP, Keith Martin finally snapped.

Moments before, his private member's bill calling for simple possession of marijuana to be decriminalized had been killed when Liberal MPs, on the Prime Minister's strict orders, stood and voted for a "poison pill" amendment denying it second reading -- an unprecedented bit of parliamentary sleight of hand designed to sidestep the convention that private member's bills are not "whipped." His Alliance caucus mates rose to walk out in protest. The member for Esquimault-Juan de Fuca had another idea.

"I said to myself, this is your last, best chance to draw attention to this issue, so you'd better have the courage to pick that thing up."

"That thing" was the Mace, the large, gold-encrusted staff that rests upon the clerks' table immediately in front of the Speaker's chair when the House is in session: symbol of the Speaker's authority and sacred totem of parliamentary democracy. Mr. Martin walked down to the centre aisle, picked up the five-foot-long Mace, and turned toward the Speaker. "We don't live in a democracy any more," he declared in a loud voice. He glared over at the Liberal front bench, then put the Mace back where he'd found it.

"I was fed up," he says -- fed up at the rights of MPs being slowly whittled away to nothing, fed up with MPs being treated as "nothing but voting machines," fed up with seeing his every effort to change the system go nowhere, most of all fed up that nobody seemed to care. And now this: A sneak procedural trick had not only killed his bill, but eviscerated the parliamentary tradition on which whatever slim hopes a private member's bill has of passage depend.

"The public need to know what's happening in this House, and they don't," Mr. Martin comments. "When they do find out, they're shocked." He had to do something to grab the public's attention. Grabbing the Mace seemed the most logical way.

Understand that this is in violation of every parliamentary rule and convention. The last time an MP so much as touched the Mace, more than a decade ago, he was called before the Bar of the House and reprimanded: the parliamentary equivalent of six of the best. Mr. Martin's actions are now under investigation by the Speaker; the government is pushing for him to be suspended until the end of the current session, a month or more from now.

At least they take some conventions seriously. Mace-grabbing they take very seriously



Tom Hanson, The Canadian Press

Gus Cloutier, the House of Commons Sergeant-at-Arms, carries the Mace of the Commons in the foyer outside the House last year. The Mace is the ornamental staff that symbolizes the authority of the Speaker.

sort by: date rank



Trade Directory

 Product / Service

 Company Name

indeed. On the other hand, that little convention about MPs being elected to Parliament to represent the people -- deliberating and voting on legislation according as either their conscience or their constituents dictate -- well, that's a nice little fiction, isn't it? Members of the Parliament of Canada, as everyone knows, have one role and one role only: to stand up and sit down when they're told.

And private member's bills? Legislation put forth, not by the government, but by ordinary, individual MPs? Don't make me laugh. In the current Parliament, some 229 such bills have been introduced in the Commons. Most of these die then and there: A small fraction win a lottery -- literally -- which entitles their sponsors to go before a committee to plead why their bill should be brought to a vote. A small fraction of these -- just five out of the original 229 -- succeed in persuading the committee, a majority of whom are government MPs, to make them "votable." And that's just the start of the many legislative hoops through which they then pass. Exactly two of those five bills have even made it as far as Mr. Martin's bill did, and none have made it to committee: the clause-by-clause examination that bills receive after passing second reading.

So Mr. Martin was entitled to feel a little bit heady. He had spent the better part of two years researching and drafting his bill. It had taken another two years for it to get to this stage. And its chances looked good. It enjoyed support on all sides of the House -- 55% to 60% of the Members were in favour, he estimated. And there was that convention that votes on private member's bills were free votes. Why, the Prime Minister himself was on record to the same effect. Could it be that his bill might actually pass? More than that, could an ordinary MP, not even a member of the governing party, actually make a difference?

No, actually. The bill itself might not be whippable, but amendments could: so ruled the Speaker earlier in the session, after an awkward 15-minute deliberation. From that moment, Mr. Martin's bill was toast.

Of course, not every private bill meets the same fate. Three have passed in the current Parliament, all originating in the Senate. There was the bill to name Canada's horse. And the one establishing a parliamentary poet laureate. And a third honouring Sir Wilfrid Laurier. "If my bill had dealt with making April 2 disabled dog day, it would have passed," Mr. Martin says. But because it dealt with something substantive, because it called upon MPs to think and act on a matter of public interest on their own, as free individuals freely elected, it was deemed too threatening. "It just makes a mockery of democracy," he says in frustration.

Parliamentary reform is of course one of the youthful Mr. Martin's passions. Until last night, he might have permitted himself to hope that, in some small sliver of a way, it might become a reality. He was wrong.

[News](#) | [Financial Post](#) | [Commentary](#) | [Science & Tech](#) | [Arts & Leisure](#) | [Sports](#) | [Diversions](#) | [Forums](#) | [Weather](#) | [Careers](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Headline Scan](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contests](#) | [NP Events](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [User Help](#)

Copyright © 2002 National Post Online | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Corrections](#)

National Post Online is a Hollinger / CanWest Publication.