

OPINION

Politics of Parliament gets in the way of MPs' environmental leadership

By BRITTANY STARES MARCH 24, 2022

To better serve the planet, we need to re-examine how we do politics. We can't afford another decade of fits and starts while the solutions we need wait in the wings. We don't have time.



In December 2021, NDP MP Richard Cannings, left, introduced private members' bills to strengthen waterway protections and create an environmental bill of rights. Green Party MP Elizabeth May tabled Bill C-226 to tackle environmental racism.

Cannings' environmental bill of rights resurrects the work of former Edmonton-Strathcona MP Linda Duncan, right, who championed such a bill for 11 years and through four Parliaments without success. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade and Sam Garcia



If you've experienced déjà vu lately when it comes to environmental news from Parliament Hill, you're not alone.



In December 2021, NDP MP Richard Cannings introduced private members' bills to strengthen waterway protections and create an environmental bill of rights. Soon after, Green Party MP Elizabeth May tabled Bill C-226 to tackle environmental racism. Then only a few weeks ago, the government introduced Bill S-5, the Strengthening Environmental Protection for a Healthier Canada Act in the Senate.



These bills are thoughtful, worthwhile, and would represent significant victories for the environment, if passed.



We've also seen them all before.

Cannings' environmental bill of rights—which would catch Canada up to the 100-plus other countries that have enshrined the right to a healthy environment in law—resurrects the work of former Edmonton-Strathcona MP Linda Duncan, who championed such a bill for 11 years and through *four* Parliaments without success. Cannings' other bill seeks to reinstate watershed protections that are *still* missing since being stripped by the Harper administration a decade ago.



The government's *Strengthening Environmental Protection Act* was first introduced in April 2021 before the election killed it. May's environmental racism bill is an updated version of the one introduced by former Liberal MP Lenore Zann even earlier, which made it all the way through committee with cross-party support before it died on the Order Paper when Parliament was dissolved. As May noted when tabling the bill, "Part of me thinks it is appropriate to present it on Groundhog Day, because here we go again."

These bills reflect a troubling pattern: that it's hard to make the environment a priority in politics, and harder still to drive change through the slow, grinding wheels of Parliament. Some obstacles are obvious—like pushback from industry lobbies, and pressures from other levels of government—but others are more embedded in the structures and dynamics of our parliamentary system.

For our new report on [Environmental Leadership in Canada's Parliament: Realities, Opportunities and Constraints](#), GreenPAC interviewed current and former MPs across the political spectrum about their experiences as environmental champions in office, including what obstacles they encountered to environmental leadership. We found that extreme partisanship, slow and inefficient parliamentary processes, and the limited autonomy of individual MPs have tangibly impeded environmental progress at the federal level. Most environmental victories cited by interviewees were hard-won, the product of long, concerted effort, collaboration and grassroots engagement. Even optimistic change-makers noted the frequency with which crucial initiatives were watered down, turned into a political football, or left vulnerable to electoral whims.

If the links between the inner workings of Parliament and on-the-ground outcomes for the environment seem nebulous, consider some of what we heard from interviewees:

- *"My greatest contribution [to the environment] was not achieved because of the partisan nature of Parliament."*
- *"I've seen [knowledgeable environmental champions] pushed out of critic files, because [party leadership] didn't want to hear any disputes."*
- *"There are a lot of [MPs] who would love to hold [their leader] to a more stringent standard on the Paris targets, but not one of them dares to do that."*

Environmental champions from across the political spectrum certainly help keep the pressure on. But dogged determination does not lessen the steep incline these advocates face in Parliament. To make progress, we can't just focus on the nuts and bolts of environmental policy. We also need to look at what's clogging the gears.

Report interviewees cited a range of changes that would grow the space for environmental leadership in Parliament, from allocating more time to private members' business to implementing measures to reduce party discipline. Changing how MPs are elected (electoral reform) came up time and again, as interviewees found the current system permits harmful games of "wedge politics" and policy flip-flops as administrations change. Though beyond the scope of our report, we would also highlight that barriers to representation in the political system continue to limit the diversity of who gets elected to office—a dynamic that muffles the voice of the most vulnerable and too often reinforces the status quo.

To better serve the planet, we need to re-examine how we do politics. We can't afford another decade of fits and starts while the solutions we need wait in the wings—we simply don't have time.

Brittany Stares is the former manager of GreenPAC's Parliamentary Internship for the Environment and lead author of [Environmental Leadership in Canada's Parliament: Realities, Opportunities and Constraints](#)