

# ‘Mr. Speaker, I don’t belong here’: The reality of Institutional Discrimination inside Canada’s Parliament

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## Introduction



Discrimination faced by MPs within Canada’s House of Commons is most often discussed as a historical issue, rooted in laws of the past that disenfranchised many communities within so-called Canada (Ditchburn, 2015). This history is seen blatantly in the photos that line the walls of parliament, the majority of which are white men, with very few women of colour (Parliament of Canada, 2023). The current reality of discrimination within the House of Commons is rarely discussed.

This study takes a critical intervention in this trend, by mapping the institutional discrimination faced by women of colour Members of Parliament (MPs) within Canada’s House of Commons from 2015-present. Specifically, it focuses on the lived experiences of three former MPs Jody Wilson-Raybould, Celina Caesar-Chavannes and Mumilaqa Qaqqaq. Ultimately, This study finds institutional discrimination is systemic within Canada’s House of Commons and that many within power are still unwilling to properly address these issues.

## Being the ‘Outsider’

When you are an outsider in the space, you notice just how inhospitable the space itself feels. How clearly, no one like you had a hand in designing this space, even on the most material level like the architecture or the decor. From there you begin to notice the bigger things, the subtle comments, the racial profiling, all the ways they keep you and everything that you bring out. Thus, when women of colour begin to enter these spaces they immediately feel like they are “out of place” (Ahmed, 2023).

## Institutional Inertia

Institutional inertia describes the tendency of institutions to resist change at all costs and thus move very slowly towards new policy (Rosenschöld et al., 2014; Kanter, 1977). Examples relating to my cases include the following: refusing to take action on discrimination faced by those marginalized in the House of Commons, paying lip-service to representation, and furthering tokenism.

## The ‘Feminist Killjoy’

Women of colour MPs often are seen and also become “feminist Killjoys.” The term Feminist Killjoy was coined by Sara Ahmed (2023) and as she explains:

*“You become a feminist killjoy when you get in the way of the happiness of others, or when you just get in the way...You become a feminist killjoy when you are not willing to go along with something, to get along with someone...You become a feminist killjoy when you react, speak back, to those with authority, using words like sexism because that is what you hear...The feminist killjoy begins her political life as a stereotype of feminism, a negative judgement...In reclaiming the feminist killjoy for ourselves, we turn the judgement into a project, because if feminism causes misery, that is what we might need to cause” (Ahmed, 2023 p.1-2)*

## Nice Words, No Action

In April of 2019, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women released their fourteenth report entitled *Elect Her: A Roadmap for Improving the Representation of Women in Canadian Politics*. This report was the result of the Committee gathering evidence from the testimony of 43 witnesses and 12 briefs. The report outlines fourteen recommendations for the Government of Canada to adopt and four observations for all in the House to consider. While all the findings and recommendations contained within this report are important, we must not ignore who and what is absent from the report. Most notably the experiences of gender-diverse peoples and women of colour are absent from the report. Thus the Elect Her report ultimately fails to address how the space created within the House of Commons itself is keeping women of colour out of electoral politics.

On February 5th, 2019 the Committee adopted the draft report, and on April 10th, 2019 the Elect Her report was presented to the House. Within this presentation and within the document of the report itself the Committee submitted the report for government response. At the time of writing this, the report still has yet to receive a government response.

The lived experience research I have conducted alongside the lack of action regarding the Elect Her report showcases a disconnect between the nice words about equality and inclusion spoken by government actors and the lived realities of discrimination, and the reluctance from those in power to change that women of colour MPs face.

## Research Questions

1. What types of institutional discrimination did women of colour MPs experience in the House of Commons from 2015-2023?
2. Have issues of discrimination led women of colour MPs to exit politics entirely?

## Methodology and Approaches

### Qualitative Data Collection: Interviews and Discourse Analysis

I engage with as many lived experiences as possible for my primary sources. I draw from these sources of knowledge by conducting interviews with women of colour MPs (past and present) within Canadian federal politics. Lived experiences are important primary sources to my research because of the approaches I am using to conduct my research. I focus on critical discourse analysis alongside collecting interview data. This analysis consists of looking at discourse through primary and secondary scholarly sources, analyzing news media and magazine articles, and looking through social media discourse.

### Approaches: Feminist Institutionalism, Anti-Colonialism, Anti-Oppression

A key theme that emerges within these approaches is what hooks (1989) calls “talking back,” in which those whose voices are dismissed speak their truth loudly and definitely. “It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back,’ that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice” (hooks, 1989 p. 9). Thus, my evidence talks back to those who believe that the current House of Commons is an inclusive space. My evidence talks back to those in power who believe they are doing everything in their power to support women of colour participating in politics. In talking back my evidence aims at setting the groundwork for change.

### Mumilaqa Qaqqaq



Image Source: Chan, David. NDP MP Mumilaqa Qaqqaq at Her Home in Ottawa. June 11, 2021. Photograph. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-i-walked-into-a-building-on-fire-ndp-mp-qaqqaq-speaks-out-about-the/>

*Mr. Speaker, every time I walk on to House of Commons grounds, speak in these chambers, I’m reminded every step of the way I don’t belong here. I have never felt safe or protected in my position, especially within the House of Commons (Qaqqaq, 2021)*

### Jody Wilson-Raybould



Image Source: Gable, Blair. Jody Wilson-Raybould in Her Confederation Building Office in Ottawa. August 4, 2021. Photograph. <https://maclean.ca/langforms/jody-wilson-raybould-interview/>

*I was already hearing rumblings that were to come from those ‘unnamed sources’ in the days ahead: I was difficult (bitchy they meant). I was not up to the task (I was not a regular politician, they meant, or I was incompetent). I was not a team player (I was an independent Indian, they meant, not part of the old boys’ club) (Wilson-Raybould, 2021 p.191)*

### Celina Caesar-Chavannes



Image Source: Toronto Metropolitan University. (n.d.). Celina Caesar-Chavannes - Co-Lead, Institute for Future Legislators at Ryerson: former MP & Parliamentary Secretary. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from <https://www.torontomu.ca/id/about/18-past-presenters-and-facilitators/presenters-facilitators/celina-caesar-chavannes/>

*I have heard individuals say that I might be a one-term MP because I continue to speak up about issues. And I accept that. I accept that because my feminism requires me to be bold. It requires me to have uncomfortable conversations and to speak my truth. It requires me to smash and challenge the status quo. But my feminism isn’t for everybody. Not everyone likes black coffee, no sugar, no cream (Caesar-Chavannes, 2020 p.208).*

## Conclusion

My research showcases not only do women of colour MPs face institutional discrimination within the House of Commons, but those in power still seem unwilling to take action towards necessary changes in this regard. Despite lofty rhetoric from those in power about inclusion and equality the House of Commons continues to be a space where the voices of women of colour are left out and silenced. Additionally, there needs to be more research conducted on this topic, especially in providing policy recommendations to government.



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