



Turner declares war on party politics

Ousted Tory says MPs should be free to speak their minds
By ALEXANDER PANETTA The Canadian Press

OTTAWA — Garth Turner is not just tearing up his Conservative membership card, he also hopes to lead a national revolt against traditional party politics.

The Ontario MP, who was turfed from the Tory caucus last month, held a news conference Tuesday to declare that he is done with his old party — and with all old-style parties.

Turner said the political system has become noticeably less democratic since he last sat in Parliament in 1993, with MPs now banned from voicing any opinion that strays from the government line.

Turner was dismissed by Tory brass as a loose cannon and kicked out caucus last month — just months after being elected in his Halton riding and weeks after being nominated to run in the next election.

He complained Tuesday that despite requests to senior Conservatives from his constituency executive, no evidence has been provided to back up the claim that he breached caucus confidentiality.

Now he says he wants to travel the country, introduce a private member's bill, and promote the idea that MPs should be free to speak their minds more often.

"Canada's new government is suddenly looking a lot like the old ones," Turner lamented.

"(It's) controlling power in Ottawa while it makes both voters and members of Parliament less relevant . . . But this is not just about the Conservative party. Sadly, they all work the same way."

He said he will remain one of two Independent MPs, along with Quebec's Andre Arthur.

And he's trying to recruit other disgruntled MPs — not just Conservatives — to sit in the House of Commons without any party affiliation. He says two MPs appear warm to the idea.

Turner plans to introduce a private member's bill that would extend the rights of Independent MPs and allow them to offer tax receipts for political donations.

He has also started a website dedicated to democratic reform — promiseskept.ca — and he plans to rack up plenty of frequent-flyer miles in the coming months.

"I will travel anywhere that people want to talk about democratic renewal, parliamentary reform, the role of our MPs and how citizens can get more involved to reclaim the system from the unrepentant, arrogant party bosses and the unelected backroom boys.

"We have to break this tedious cycle of electing politicians who sell us on change and deliver same old, same old."

The 57-year-old, who was first elected as a Brian Mulroney Conservative in 1988 and served as a minister in Kim Campbell's short-lived cabinet in 1993, says parties have taken too much onto themselves, at the expense of the electorate.

He says it's inexcusable that he was pushed aside after getting elected, and after being nominated twice by members of the local Conservative riding association.

He also said he has now been told that he will not be allowed to seek the party nomination in the next election, despite the support of his constituency association.

"The pooh bahs of the parties of all colours have made themselves actually more important than the individual electors and voters," Turner said.

"The fight is not about getting me back into the Conservative caucus . . . The true fight is for democratic principle."

The Prime Minister's Office had no immediate comment, but government officials have defended Turner's turfing, noting that he repeatedly criticized government decisions, literally from the Tories' first day in office.

He blasted the appointment to cabinet of David Emerson, who was elected as a Liberal, and Sen. Michael Fortier, who wasn't elected at all. Then he ranted on his website against the government positions on same-sex marriage, the environment, tax policy, and gun control.

He published vague details about what went on at closed-door meetings with his colleagues, and hinted at unpleasant encounters with the prime minister's staff.

Turner denied that revenge is his motive.

"This is not about bashing Stephen Harper. This is not about bashing the Conservative party," he said.