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## Speaker gives backbench MPs freedom from party's whip

By STEVEN CHASE

*In his first major decision, Andrew Scheer rules that MPs not bound by caucus lists that dictate who can deliver 60-second statements*

In a ruling that challenges the centralized discipline of Stephen Harper's Conservative government, the man who presides over the House of Commons is inviting MPs to slip the yoke of party discipline when it comes to who says what in the chamber.

Commons Speaker Andrew Scheer, in his first major decision since being elected to the post nearly two years ago, told Members of Parliament on Tuesday they need not feel constrained by caucus lists that dictate who can deliver 60-second statements or, for that matter, who can ask questions in Question Period.

The decision loosens the leash on MPs, particularly Tories, who have chafed at party control. It offers the potential to change how the Commons functions — leaving party whips to merely co-ordinate, rather than control, their backbenchers.

But it will be up to individual MPs to decide how far they want to take this, and whether, as in the U.K. House of Commons, members will begin bobbing up and down in their seats to secure a chance to speak.

Mr. Scheer was responding to complaints from more than 10 Harper government MPs who rose in the Commons to challenge the iron grip of the Prime Minister's Office over what caucus members can say in the chamber. They asked Mr. Scheer to rule on this point of privilege.

One of the Conservative MPs agitating for change, former PMO communications director John Williamson, hailed the decision as an opportunity for backbenchers.

"This ruling is astute. It affirms the Speaker's authority over the whips, which was paramount, while putting the onus on MPs to stand and be recognized for a scheduled statement or indeed whenever they wish, including Question Period," said Mr. Williamson, MP for New Brunswick Southwest. "I like that opening."

Late last month, the Conservative government tried to play down the Speaker's role in deciding who speaks. Government whip Gordon O'Connor declared that the Speaker is little more than a "referee" in the chamber and that it is up to the party or "coach" to draw up a list of "which player to play at any given time."

Mr. Scheer rejected this on Tuesday in his ruling, reaffirming the office's long-standing rights and saying the

Speaker's "authority to decide who is recognized to speak is indisputable and has not been trumped by the use of lists, as some members seemed to suggest."

He said he will continue to be guided by lists in choosing which MPs may speak, but added that if members want to change this, they need to stand up and "catch the Speaker's eye" in the chamber.

"If members want to be recognized, they will have to actively demonstrate that they wish to participate. They have to rise in their places and seek the floor," Mr. Scheer ruled.

Mr. O'Connor appeared to be irritated as he rushed from the chamber to his nearby office after the ruling.

"The Speaker's made his ruling and that's it. I live by the Speaker's ruling," he said. When asked if MPs would be allowed to pop up when they want to speak as their British counterparts can do, Mr. O'Connor said he had nothing more to add.

The battle over the independence of MPs is a consequence of the Conservative Prime Minister's efforts to silence a Tory who wanted the Commons to pass judgment on sex-selective abortions.

Backbenchers sought Mr. Scheer's ruling after B.C. Conservative MP Mark Warawa was silenced when he tried to complain in the Commons about how the Tories and other parties sidelined a motion condemning sex-selective abortions that he wanted to bring to a vote.

The agitators argued for the right of Members of Parliament to speak their minds in the Commons, and asked Mr. Scheer, as referee of the House, to grant them more autonomy.

Alberta MP Leon Benoit predicted MPs will be inspired to participate of their own volition in the Commons rather than at the prompting of their party. "I think you're going to see people rising both to make statements and ask questions," Mr. Benoit said.


Canadian MPs are constrained by some of strictest party discipline among Western democracies. In the seven years since his Conservatives won office, Mr. Harper has kept his MPs on a tight leash. Tory MPs are often assigned member's statements to deliver instead of speaking about their constituents' concerns and the party whip decides who gets to speak. The questions Conservative MPs ask of their own cabinet during Question Period are also written by the government.

This ruling was the first big test for Mr. Scheer, a 33-year-old Conservative Regina MP, who had to adjudicate a dispute between fellow Tories and Mr. Harper, the man who signs his nomination papers before each federal election.

*With a report from Bill Curry*

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