



# **“It’s My Party”**

**Parliamentary dysfunction  
reconsidered**

REPORT ONE: THE ACCIDENTAL CITIZEN?

REPORT TWO: WELCOME TO PARLIAMENT

**REPORT THREE: “IT’S MY PARTY”**

REPORT FOUR: THE OUTSIDERS’ MANIFESTO

# Introduction

The resounding lament from the press and elsewhere is that Canada’s Parliament is broken. The floor of the House of Commons more often resembles a schoolyard than a chamber of public debate. Prime Ministers’ Offices, and their unelected staff, wield much of the decision making power. Polls indicate citizens feel poorly represented by their elected officials, or have chosen to tune out altogether.

Commentators point to a variety of factors behind these problems. They include weak or outdated rules governing Question Period, overly restrictive access to information, media coverage that focuses too heavily on personality and conflict, and an electoral system that doesn’t properly represent Canadians.

Yet when we asked those on the front lines of Canadian democracy—Members of Parliament—they pointed their fingers in a different direction. To them, it is often the way political parties manage themselves, their members and their work that really drives the contemporary dysfunction facing Canadian politics.

This report is the third in a series sharing the stories and advice of 65 former Parliamentarians who recently left public life, each of whom dedicated an average of nearly ten and a half years to being the bridge between Canadians and their government.

The first report, *The Accidental Citizen?*, detailed the MPs’ backgrounds and paths to politics. The second, *Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description*, described the MPs’ initial orientation to Ottawa and the varied ways in which they described the essential role of an MP.

This report picks up where the last left off, examining the MPs’ reflections on how they spent their time in Ottawa.

**T**wo overriding trends emerged from these reflections, raising provocative and important questions for the health of our democracy.

First, what the MPs described as their “real work” was done away from the public spotlight in the more private spaces of Parliament. In fact, the MPs told us that the politics most commonly seen by the public—that which took place on the floor of the House of Commons—did little to advance anything constructive.

Instead, the MPs insisted they did their best work—collaborating across parties, debating and advancing policy, and bringing local issues to the national stage—in the less publicized venue of committees and the private space of caucus.

Furthermore, the MPs claimed to be embarrassed by the public displays of politics in the House of Commons, saying they misrepresented their work. Many blamed this behaviour for contributing to a growing sense of political disaffection among Canadians. They were frustrated with the public performance of their parties, and said it led them to pursue their goals elsewhere, away from the public and media gaze.

---

The MPs told us that the politics most commonly seen by the public—that which took place on the floor of the House of Commons—did little to advance anything constructive.

---

The MPs’ insistence that important work was done only in private raises some serious questions for Canadian democracy and citizens’ ability to engage with it.

After all, how are Canadians to observe and understand the work of their elected representatives—to say nothing of their ability to hold them accountable—if all the “real work” is done away

from the public gaze? And if the MPs were so embarrassed by the behaviour on display in the House of Commons, why didn’t they do something to change it?

---

The MPs insisted they did their best work—collaborating across parties, debating and advancing policy, and bringing local issues to the national stage—in the less publicized venue of committees and the private space of caucus.

---

This leads to the second major trend: the consistent observation from the MPs that the greatest frustrations they faced during their political careers came from within their own political party. Although our interviews did not specifically ask about political parties, time after time the MPs articulated how decisions from their parties’ leadership were often viewed as opaque, arbitrary and even unprofessional, and how their parties’ demands often ran counter to the MPs’ desires to practice politics in a constructive way.

While these interviews were intended to explore the lives of Members of Parliament, much of what we heard actually reflected being a Member of a Party. Indeed, the uneasy relationship between the MPs and the management of their political parties resembled the relationship between the local owner of a national franchise and its corporate management. In fact, this tension is one of the central themes running through Samara’s MP exit interview project as a whole.

As we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2, the MPs consistently pointed to their parties’ management practices, and the incentives and punishments the parties put in place, as significant obstacles to advancing the “real work” of Parliament. While a certain amount of friction in

the relationship between MPs and their parties is unavoidable, it would appear that little is done to manage, never mind mitigate, the tension.

While these interviews were intended to explore the lives of Members of Parliament, much of what we heard actually reflected being a Member of a Party.

Democracy relies on citizen engagement to thrive, but if MPs themselves are disenchanted with their own parties, then it should come as no surprise when citizens also choose to opt out. After all, if MPs—who arguably benefit more than any other citizen from political party

membership—claim that the party leadership pushes them away from constructive politics, is it any wonder that so many Canadians also turn away?

If what the MPs told us is true, and our political parties do play a role in the dysfunction of Canadian politics, then it follows that they also have a role to play in helping to overcome it.

Political parties serve at least four critical functions in our democracy: engaging citizens in politics, selecting candidates for elected office, aggregating policy perspectives and contesting elections. It may well be time to discuss ways to revitalize our political parties, recognizing the integral role they play in Canadian democracy. ↗

## BACKGROUND TO THE INTERVIEWS

During the fall and winter of 2009-10, Samara—a charitable organization that studies citizen engagement with Canada's democracy—undertook the first-ever series of exit interviews with former MPs to seek their reflections on their experience and to provide advice on what can be improved for future Parliamentarians and in the service of all Canadians.

This project began when Samara's co-founders, Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, learned that exit interviews, common in many organizations, had never been undertaken systematically in one of the most important workplaces in our country—the Parliament of Canada.

This report is the shared narrative of the 65 former Members of Parliament we interviewed. The MPs come from all regions of the country, and all political parties represented in Parliament. Many served during a transformative time in our political history: when the Bloc Québécois, the Reform Party and the merged Conservative Party of Canada rose as important players on the national stage. Each MP served in at least one minority Parliament, and during a time when changes in media and

communications technology had begun to take hold. This report should be read with this context in mind.

The personal reflections of these MPs contributed different and often more detailed information than that provided by polls, surveys or media commentary. We were able to conduct these interviews almost entirely in person, and often in the homes or communities of participating MPs, thanks to introductions from the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians. The former Parliamentarians generously gave their time, allowed us to record the interviews and granted us permission to use the information to advance public understanding of Canadian politics and political culture.

We approach this work as documentarians, reporting on how the MPs described their feelings and beliefs. Memories are often coloured by the passage of time and personal interpretations of events and experiences; we assume that the testimonies of the participating MPs are no different. In many ways, these subjective reflections on the experiences of these MPs provide some of the most illuminating insights into Canadian politics.

# 65



FORMER PARLIAMENTARIANS WERE INTERVIEWED FOR THIS PROJECT. THEY LEFT PUBLIC LIFE DURING OR JUST AFTER THE 38TH AND 39TH PARLIAMENTS, WHICH SAT FROM 2004 TO 2008.

The average age at which the MPs entered federal office was 46.8 years. The median age was 48 years.

The MPs' average tenure was 10.3 years. Their median tenure was 12.3 years.

11% are immigrants.

41% represented urban ridings, 23% suburban and 36% rural or remote.

82% indicated English as their preferred language. 18% indicated French.

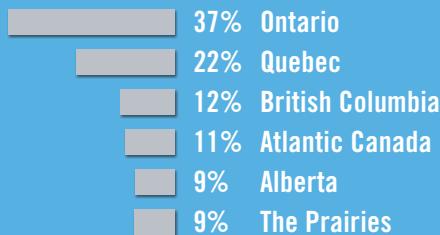
86% of the MPs have at least one college or university degree. Nearly half have more than one degree.

57% of the MPs left politics due to retirement and 43% left as the result of electoral defeat.

The MPs held a variety of legislative roles, and many held more than one. One served as Prime Minister. 31% were Cabinet Ministers and 35% were Parliamentary Secretaries. 65% held a critic portfolio. 58% chaired at least one committee.

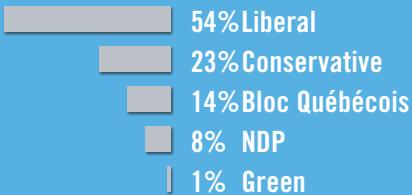
22% are female.

## REGIONS REPRESENTED BY THOSE INTERVIEWED



This mirrors almost perfectly the distribution of the Canadian population.

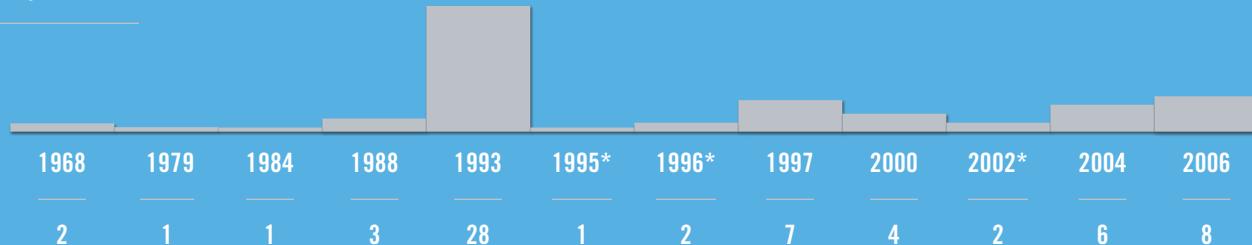
## MPS' PARTY AFFILIATION AT THE TIME THEY LEFT OFFICE



This group is more heavily weighted to the Liberals than the current Parliament due to the outcome of the 2008 and 2006 elections.

## YEARS THE MPS WERE FIRST ELECTED

\* By-elections



# Chapter 1:

# The Practice of Politics

The floor of the House of Commons is the most public, and most publicized, space in Parliament, and the focal point of Canadian democracy. It is where citizens can see their elected representatives on television, and where the direction of our country is supposed to be debated and decided.

Yet most MPs recalled feeling frustrated with the work they were made to perform in the House. Question Period, in particular, bore a great deal of the MPs' criticisms. They viewed it as a partisan game, and said they were embarrassed by how it misrepresented Parliament and MPs to Canadians. Furthermore, as we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2, it was often the demands placed on them by their own political parties that had much to do with the frustration they described.

---

"I think that Question Period has become the greatest embarrassment and one of the reasons politicians are frowned upon."

---

When the MPs discussed their work in Ottawa, they said it was only as they moved away from public scrutiny—and the dictates of their party—that they were able to pursue constructive politics. It was in the less publicized venue of committees and the private space of caucus that they said they were able to transcend the partisanship on display on TV, engage in vigorous debates, advance policy issues, work within and across parties to improve legislation, and influence their party leadership.

While it is encouraging to hear of such constructive and collaborative work taking place in Ottawa, it is also troubling that such work appears confined to private and semi-private spaces. While public demands for openness and transparency in decision-making processes are on the rise, our elected representatives appear to carry out their duties in spaces that don't invite public scrutiny.

And it is disturbing that, even while the MPs recognized that their own collective behaviour in public was problematic, they persisted in it.

## LIGHTS, CAMERA...QUESTION PERIOD!

Tuning into political news in Canada often means watching, listening to, or reading about Question Period. Question Period is intended as a forum for the opposition to hold the government to account by asking questions of its representatives. It is the most publicized aspect of Parliament. And why not? With all the heckling and carrying on, Question Period makes for great TV.

But according to our MPs, what we see on TV bears little relationship to the actual work underway on Parliament Hill.

Even as they acknowledged Question Period's shortcomings, many MPs also recognized its role in holding the government to account. "Of course it produces acting and grandstanding, but it also produces accountability. It's important to democracy," said one MP.

---

When the MPs discussed their work in Ottawa, they said it was only as they moved away from public scrutiny—and the dictates of their party—that they were able to pursue constructive politics.

---

Despite this important function, however, most MPs claimed to be embarrassed by their colleagues' behaviour during Question Period. They insisted repeatedly that it misrepresented the daily work of a Parliamentarian, and recognized that, as the primary window into Parliament for most Canadians, Question Period stained the public's perception of politics and those who practice it.

"The unfortunate thing is that Question Period is used as the barometer of what goes on in Ottawa. And unfortunately it is really a zoo. It's theatre," said one MP. "I think that Question Period has become the greatest embarrassment and one of the reasons politicians are frowned upon," admitted another.

One MP recalled giving a disclaimer to tour groups, especially children, visiting from his constituency in British Columbia. “They come to Question Period and I would say the same speech every time. ‘What you are about to see is not what I do on a daily basis. This is not what goes on. These are kids in a sandbox. I am embarrassed by it,’” he said.

Most stressed that partisanship was overplayed, and several attributed it to an exaggeration of small differences. “The debate between Liberals and Conservatives on income tax is not whether there should be no income taxes or 100 percent income taxes, it’s whether the rate should be 29 percent versus 25. The debate is not very big, so it’s disingenuous to characterize the other side as being evil,” said one MP.

---

“Outside of Question Period, it was dead in the House. There were 20 to 30 people there. They’re on their computer, catching up on correspondence.”

---

How party leadership “staged” Question Period also rubbed many MPs the wrong way. Some MPs expressed chagrin at how MPs were required to fill empty seats around the televised speakers. One MP recalled a conversation with a constituent who had been watching him on TV and was confused as to where the MP sat. “I felt like a total idiot in telling him ‘That’s required by the party,’” the MP said. He later characterized MPs in Question Period as “potted plants,” moved around for decoration.

Others characterized the role as akin to a “trained seal.” “If all you do is show up at Question Period and clap when it’s necessary, you can get pretty frustrated,” one MP said. Another echoed the same complaint: “How much time did I need to stand there and clap like a trained seal?”

## **HOST TOWN: HOUSE DUTY**

The MPs thought little better of the rest of their work carried out on the floor of the House. Outside of Question Period, most MPs sit in the Commons only when they’re on “house duty”—a period of time assigned by their party whip when they are required to represent their party in the House. Most MPs we spoke to viewed house duty as monotonous and a general waste of time.

“Outside of Question Period, it was dead in the House. There were 20 to 30 people there. They’re on their computer, catching up on correspondence. They’re there because they have to be. There are very few members who are there because they want to be,” said one MP, capturing the sentiment of many of his colleagues.

One important aspect of house duty is Parliamentary debate. However, MPs felt that these debates held little significance given their poor attendance, and the fact that the parties and the media focused nearly all of their attention on Question Period.

“You don’t attend the House except for your [assigned] duty day. So a speech is made to a House of 20, maybe 40, people. The media do not report them, or if they report anything, they report from the written records,” said another MP.

---

“How much time did I need to stand there and clap like a trained seal?”

---

Several MPs said they were told to make speeches on subjects they knew nothing about. One newly-elected MP from Québec recalled receiving 20 minutes notice before having to debate the mountain pine beetle in British Columbia. “Okay, but what’s the deal with the mountain pine beetle? I have no idea. I’ve got to improvise for 20 minutes. And when you’re new, it’s not so funny,” he said.

A handful of MPs, however, still enjoyed making speeches. “I was the pinch hitter. If [my party] needed someone to make a speech at the last minute, I was always ready. I loved it because I’m someone who’s able to very quickly synthesize a problem,” said one MP. More frequent, however, was the observation that the talent for oration was fast disappearing from the House.

### THE NAYS HAVE IT: VOTING

In addition to Question Period and policy debates, the House of Commons is also where Members of Parliament come together to vote on the laws that govern the country. Many MPs, however, criticized the voting process in the House of Commons, often because their positions on decisions were largely formulated by their party’s leadership. Sometimes these positions were determined in consultation with MPs during caucus meetings, but not always. Voting procedures were also viewed by many as confusing and overly time-consuming.

---

“Virtually all MPs don’t have a damned clue of what the amendments say.”

---

The Canadian parliamentary system has a tradition of strict party discipline, meaning that for the majority of votes in the House of Commons, MPs vote with their political party. Party leaders enforce this discipline so they can be as certain as possible about whether legislation will pass a vote. It also helps the public hold parties to account at election time: if all members of a party vote in a particular way, then the party’s positions are ostensibly clearer to the electorate.

Voting records indicate that most MPs vote with their party nearly all of the time, so it was a surprise how many MPs emphasized the times

they didn’t agree with their party. Frequently, these disagreements were over questions of morality, such as same sex marriage.

---

“I remember that there were bills that I was thinking ‘Why the heck am I standing up on that?’”

---

One MP recalled how difficult a particular vote was for him, and other members of his party. “There was a pounding in caucus. We had to vote for this. And I did. I shouldn’t have. But I saw people who were much more committed to [the issue] than I, getting up to vote and crying because they had to vote for it,” he said.

Most MPs described not really understanding how a party’s position on most issues was determined. “Virtually all MPs, with the exception of maybe the whips, go into the House of Commons with a bill and 18 to 20 amendments, and don’t have a damned clue of what the amendments say,” said one MP.

Furthermore, many said it was impossible to keep track of the bills on which they were called to vote. “I hate to tell you how many bills I had very little idea what I was voting on. That’s not necessarily my weakness, that’s just the reality,” one MP said.

Even those closer to the centre of power, such as cabinet ministers, described discomfort at the voting procedure, even while recognizing the compromises required. “I remember that there were bills that I was thinking ‘Why the heck am I standing up on that?’ because I didn’t necessarily believe [in the party’s position]. But you’re in the government, and you vote with your government,” one former cabinet minister said.

While some recognized the importance of the traditional voting procedure, whereby each MP

must stand and signal their vote, many Parliamentarians said they'd happily abandon this tradition for a more efficient approach.

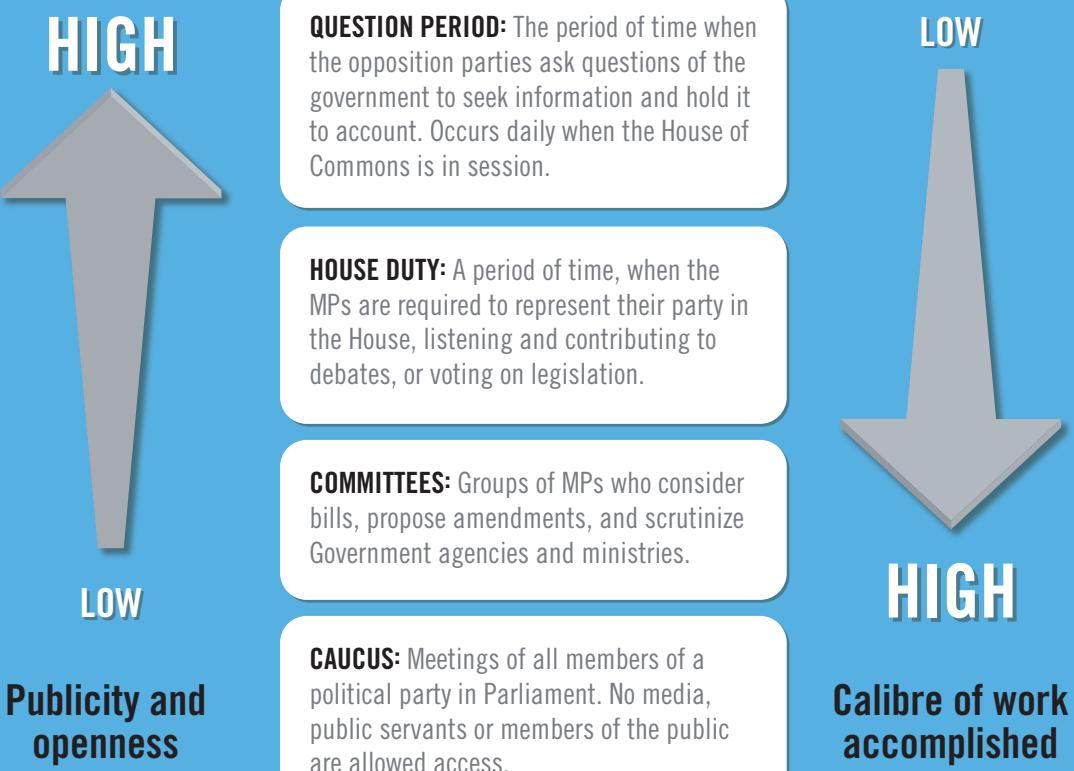
Some went so far as to argue that the voting process interfered with more important work. One MP recalled having to cancel committee consultations in Montreal to return to Ottawa for a possible vote. "We were holding hearings across the country, and had witnesses scheduled. Suddenly we have to get people back to Ottawa. We don't know if there is or isn't going to be a vote, but there might be, so we [had to] interrupt work for an important cultural and economic institution, and it may be all for nothing," she said.

One MP recalled being part of a delegation to Mongolia studying the effectiveness of their electronic voting system. "They were still in the chamber. But their electronic capacity allowed much more voting on sub-clauses. With capacity to break up legislation into minor parts, we could vote on all the sub-clauses," he said. Many other MPs recommended electronic or remote voting, which would free them up from attendance in the House altogether.

### THE REAL WORK BEGINS: COMMITTEES

Most MPs said the problems they described on the floor of the House decreased as their work moved into places with less media scrutiny, and

## THE MPs SAID MOST OF THEIR “REAL WORK” TOOK PLACE IN PRIVATE, AWAY FROM THE FLOOR OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS



where party intervention in their work was less direct—though still significant, as we'll address in Chapter 2. Most notably, it was in committees where the MPs overwhelmingly said the “real work” of Parliament is done.

Although committee proceedings are most often public, they are rarely covered by the media. Perhaps as a result, and in contrast to the theatrics of the House, the MPs said committees were a place marked by collegiality and constructive debate. “You are fighting all the time, but it’s a sparring that’s at a level where you want to get a good report,” one MP said.

In committees, the MPs said they could immerse themselves in the details of proposed legislation, call witnesses to give testimony regarding potential ramifications, and make informed decisions. Committees also enabled MPs to travel, giving them a more comprehensive understanding of the country and its public challenges.

---

“You are fighting all the time, but it’s a sparring that’s at a level where you want to get a good report.”

---

The MPs attributed the productivity in committees in part to the largely non-partisan environment. “Committees are where most relationships get established. You sit there for at least four or five hours a week with the same individuals. You find out who they are through their questions, their ideas and you develop respect for them,” said one MP. Another noted that committees require MPs to “take off their partisan hats and say, ‘Okay, we are going to work on something here to get the best possible thing we can for the country, recognizing we have different political attitudes.’”

The MPs also recalled committees as a place where diverse perspectives were gathered, and, through witness testimony, expert knowledge was brought to the deliberations. “We bring in the best experts in the world, we deliberate over the important issues of the day. It’s quite something. If you were to come and watch, I think you would go away thinking, ‘Wow, this is good. My country is in good hands,’” said one MP.

---

“If you were to come and watch, I think you would go away thinking, ‘Wow, this is good. My country is in good hands.’”

---

Witnesses also connected the committee to the Canadian public at large. “We were always meeting with groups, which was tremendously helpful in terms of getting to understand the issues that people were concerned about around the country,” one MP said.

According to the MPs, committee travel was another excellent way to gain input into legislation, and it helped them craft legislation that better reflected citizens’ needs. One MP who chaired the agriculture committee recalled the importance of visiting farmers directly. “We toured the country, bringing forward a series of recommendations and offering help to provinces who were in difficulty with agriculture. We met with people, and saw how agriculture changed,” he said.

Others said committee work helped bring Canadians more directly into policy decision-making. One MP recalled travelling with the finance committee to seek input for the budget: “We held public meetings. But we didn’t meet with the business community alone, or meet with First Nations alone, or meet with the educators alone. You have them all come to the table.

The business community says you have to cut taxes and social programs and the unions say you have to increase taxes and social programs. People saw those tradeoffs they were forced to make,” he said.

---

“The route to change is through the internal caucus system.”

---

Even with so many MPs expressing such enthusiasm for the work they performed on committees, not all believed committees ultimately affected policy and legislation. One MP put it bluntly: “People will tell you ‘I’ve done great work on a committee.’ But you really have to say, ‘You did good work. You travelled. You studied this and that. But what did you accomplish? Show us where the legislation changed and what you did.’”

And while committees appeared to bring together all the necessary policy-making ingredients—debate, expert knowledge, cross-party alliances, and well-researched reports—some MPs noted that the process wasn’t adequately integrated into government decision-making. One former whip said that few committees produce budget estimates, making implementation more difficult. Others noted that the governing party is only required to respond to a report within 60 days and is not required to act on a committee’s advice in any real way. As one MP put it, committees could do far more to push the adoption of their recommendations: “The committees should take the government’s response, critique it and then publicize those views,” she said.

### **NO OUTSIDERS ALLOWED: CAUCUS**

If the House of Commons is the most public space in Parliament, then the parties’ caucus meetings

are the most private. Only MPs, Senators and senior political staff attend caucus meetings; the public service, media, and the general public are forbidden entry. Caucus is in many ways the “belly of the beast”—the space where MPs are closest to their party.

But if the party directed the MPs’ actions on the floor of the House, then it was in caucus that MPs said they had a chance to direct their party.

In caucus meetings, the MPs told us they were able to engage and debate with their party colleagues and leaders, raise constituents’ concerns and, through coalition building with their fellow MPs, push local issues onto the national stage.

---

“Your voice was counted, and we would spend exhaustive times with individual members at the microphone to argue and debate. There was a great variance of opinion.”

---

One MP, who chaired a caucus committee while his party was in government, explained how cabinet ministers presented potential legislation to caucus before it went to cabinet. “A Minister [would] appear before our committee and talk the idea through. If it had merit, then I would sign off that [the MPs] were comfortable with the legislation,” he said.

Several Liberal MPs described how they used caucus to advance local policy concerns in Ottawa. Their caucus structure included sub-caucuses representing regions, demographics and industry sectors. MPs used the sub-caucuses to build coalitions, pushing issues up through the party’s hierarchy. As one MP put it, “the route to change is through the internal caucus system.”

Another MP explained how the process worked. “I was in the Central Ontario caucus. We had more areas in common, so we would meet and report to the Ontario caucus. Then Ontario would report to national caucus. Along the way you’re trying to pick allies so that when the Ontario chair was speaking to the PM, he could say, ‘Ontario feels that this little issue in my riding that I was worried about is an issue.’”

---

“Citizens...have the impression that politicians are clowns. So they are disaffected, and they lack confidence in their representatives.”

---

MPs also created sub-caucuses to deal with emerging issues. One MP, concerned with cuts to post-secondary education in the 1990s, initiated a group comprised of MPs with universities in their ridings that helped secure greater federal support for these institutions. “There were upwards of 30 of us in it, either because of interest or because of their ridings, particularly the Maritime ridings where the people locally see universities as economic drivers. We [advised] the higher education and research community on how to cope with the cuts, and how to take advantage of the changes. Some terrific changes came through,” he said.

Unlike the scripted, often empty rhetoric on display in the House, many MPs said that inside caucus meetings, differences of opinion were valued.

“[Caucus] was probably the most stimulating part of my career,” one Liberal MP reflected. “When I got to Ottawa, I went to my first caucus meeting and the debate was so intense I turned to a colleague and said, ‘Is it always like this?’”

A Conservative MP expressed a similar sentiment. “There was an emphasis on the fact that

your membership in the caucus really made a difference. Your voice was counted, and we would spend exhaustive times with individual members at the microphone to argue and debate. There was a great variance of opinion,” he said.

Despite many examples of constructive caucus work, some MPs acknowledged that much depended on their leader’s management style. One MP spoke of how a leadership change altered his caucus. “For a long time, I was part of a party that encouraged that kind of [inclusive] approach. Collectively we would come to a consensus, and the leader would take guidance. I don’t think in our caucus [now] there is quite that emphasis anymore. It’s more top-down,” he said.

Notwithstanding the MPs’ recognition that caucus could serve as a place to pursue constructive goals, the fact that so many MPs told us that they were uncomfortable speaking to or voting for legislation suggests that many issues were not properly raised or debated in caucus. This may be partially the result of time pressures.

“You discuss, and discuss and discuss, but there’s no consensus. But the leader has to leave for the media scrum...and so he would say, ‘We’re going to make a consensus on this, this and this. All agreed?’ We didn’t have time to discuss it. And that’s consensus,” one MP said.

However, the unease that many MPs expressed in following their political party’s direction may also suggest deeper underlying problems with the processes of Parliamentary decision making, and MPs’ role in it.

**I**n placing such emphasis on the work they accomplished in the more private areas of Parliament, and distancing themselves from their behaviour on display during Question Period, the MPs expressed deep concern for how the public perceives political leadership in Canada.

In fact, most MPs were acutely aware that the public behaviour of politicians can have negative consequences for citizen engagement. “Citizens... have the impression that politicians are clowns. So they are disaffected, and they lack confidence in their representatives,” said one MP.

---

“That man has kids. He has a wife that loves him. When I was in politics, I told myself that I would never stoop so low as to attack him. But I did. I hated him! But today I say, ‘My God, his service to this country cost him so much.’”

---

Another acknowledged that the behaviour of MPs makes it more difficult to attract good people to public life. “You see it in surveys—the people with the worst reputation are politicians, along with used car salesmen. What motivation would [anyone] have to go [into politics]? The women and men who would be up to the challenge, they don’t want to go,” he said.

However, this portrait also raises a more important question: if the MPs so deplore their own public behaviour, even fearing that it would turn people away from politics, why would they not act to change it? After all, their descriptions run counter to the way most people choose to act, which is to behave themselves in public, and keep private the less savoury aspects of their personalities.

There are no doubt many reasons why this behaviour persists, but trends in the interviews suggest that there are at least two worthy of greater reflection.

First, it appears as though most of the MPs didn’t see themselves as the problem, and instead chose to distance themselves from their colleagues and their profession. This may indicate that the MPs held the same negative view of politicians as the general public.

In *The Accidental Citizen?*, we noted that most MPs claimed not to have considered a career in politics before they were asked to run. We wondered if these descriptions of coming to politics by accident betrayed a fear that politics is something for which one cannot admit ambition, even after the fact. Instead, the MPs chose to portray themselves as “outsiders,” and indicated they came to the job with that mindset.

Perhaps the MPs are illustrating a similar point here: they would prefer to describe themselves in ways that emphasize an image different from the public’s view of a typical politician, shaking his fist and heckling his opponents.

In fact, only a couple of MPs didn’t attempt to explain away their aggressive behaviour. In discussing personal attacks he made against one party leader, one MP told us, “That man has kids. He has a wife that loves him. When I was in politics, I told myself that I would never stoop so low as to attack him. But I did. I hated him! But today I say, ‘My God, his service to this country cost him so much.’”

The second reason why the MPs did so little to change a political culture they so routinely criticized is that there were few incentives to do so. The animosity on display during Question Period is so entrenched in party behaviour that it persists, despite the damage it does to individuals and to the wider public good.

It turns out that when the MPs described the incentives and challenges that complicated their lives in Ottawa, it was not the Parliamentary staff, the public service or the media that they blamed. Rather, when the MPs reflected on their frustrations with the way politics is practiced in Canada, they consistently pointed to one obstacle: their own political parties. ↗

# Chapter 2: “You Call This a Party?”

**D**uring the exit interviews, we asked former MPs to reflect on their time spent as a Member of Parliament; however, much of what they told us was really about being a Member of a Party.

Virtually every single Member of Parliament in Canada arrives under the banner of a political party; rarely are “independent” MPs elected. The Parliamentarians we interviewed came to Ottawa from a wide variety of backgrounds and brought a diverse set of experiences and perspectives, usually shaped by a long history of active involvement in their communities.

Once they decided to run, however, their identity became closely tied to the brand and leader of their chosen political party. While clearly there are differences between selling coffee and representing constituents, the daily life of an MP involves many of the same struggles that confront the local owner of a national franchise.

Franchisees are successful, in part, because they know their community and serve it well. In return, they’re granted a monopoly over that particular geography and have latitude to make significant daily decisions.

But their success is also due to the fact that they operate under a wider brand with standards and rules to which they must adhere, and with obligations they must carry out. If the wider brand is not well-regarded, the local franchisee is unlikely to stay in business for long. And he or she knows this.

Such is the life of an MP. As sole proprietor in his or her riding, an MP is largely free to hire staff, determine an area of focus, establish their travel and meeting schedules, and advance causes or support constituents as they see fit.

---

The daily life of an MP involves many of the same struggles that confront the local owner of a national franchise.

---

But once the MPs left their riding to work in the House of Commons, they were subsumed under the “national brand” of the party. The MPs

## PARTY PRIMER

What exactly did the MPs mean when they spoke of “the party,” a vague, overarching and, at times, ominous term frequently used in our interviews? Sometimes “the party” referred to a specific person, usually the leader, but other times it meant a prominent Parliamentarian, a hired political staffer, or the party whip (the MP that ensures MPs vote with the party and who also oversees appointments and the allocation of other perks, such as travel).

More often than not, however, “the party” simply meant those closer to central power. MPs did not seem to be referring to the party executive—the organization outside of Parliament in charge of fundraising, organizing leadership conventions, and other more administrative functions—or to their local riding association, both of which are also components of the party.

But what they meant by party matters less than the fact that, for the MPs, “the party” was always there, front and centre in their lives.

quickly began to rub up against the demands of modern party politics that dominated their lives in Ottawa: the need to work with party members to advance policy, vote with party priorities and support the party leader in sometimes controversial situations.

Politics can be a very competitive game, so it’s to be expected that tension will exist between a party’s leadership and an individual MP. What we didn’t expect to hear from the MPs, however, was how little effort they felt their parties put into mitigating this tension, at times even aggravating it.

The MPs routinely expressed frustration with what, in other workplaces, one might term management processes. As outlined in Chapter 1, MPs said their political parties routinely encouraged overly partisan behaviour in Question Period, effectively authorizing and encouraging MPs to behave badly.

---

The MPs routinely expressed frustration with what, in other workplaces, one might term management processes.

---

From what the MPs told us, parties also made seemingly arbitrary decisions about advancement and discipline within their ranks, making it unclear what performance was valued—and what actions would be punished. Parties provided little or no guidelines on how to dissent, leaving

MPs to guess how to voice their opinions when they differed from those of their party. Finally, many MPs complained that their parties directly interfered with their Parliamentary work by disrupting committees and enforcing party discipline even on private members' bills.

### YOU'RE HIRED, YOU'RE FIRED!: ADVANCEMENT AND DISCIPLINE

In our last report, *Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description*, we discussed how little agreement existed among the MPs as to their essential role. There is no job description for an MP, so it perhaps should come as no surprise that there is no systematic way that party leadership evaluates MPs' work. With the exception of their occasional—albeit important—report card from the voter, there are few goals set and little feedback delivered.



*While clearly there are differences between selling coffee and representing constituents, the daily life of an MP involves many of the same struggles that confront the local owner of a national franchise.*

As a result, the only guidelines for performance came in the form of ad hoc and seemingly arbitrary decisions about their advancement and punishment. The MPs to whom we spoke expressed confusion as to how they were evaluated by their party leadership, and how promotions or discipline were allocated. Advancing within the party signalled they were doing something right and being punished meant they were doing something wrong, with reasons for these decisions seldom given.

---

More often than not, however, "the party" simply meant those closer to central power.

---

Apparently, the Bloc Québécois was the only party with any form of performance evaluation: an annual tabulation of the total time each member raised questions during Question Period. Clearly this is inadequate, as the Bloc MPs themselves admitted. "We only had the rankings for Question Period. We had nothing for our participation on committees," one said.

Many MPs voiced disappointment when the criteria for promotions, particularly to cabinet posts, were not explained. Even though most MPs acknowledged the importance of balance in gender, region and ethnicity in promotion decisions, several said that too many appointments were undeserved.

"What was the most frustrating was to see people recognized and rewarded that you know are less competent than other people, because of political debts," one MP said. Another MP, when passed over for a promotion, accepted the decision but was discouraged that she was never told why. "You like to think that when you work hard and make an important contribution it's going to be recognized and appreciated, and that doesn't

always happen. That's one of the most disappointing things about politics," she said.

Even those who were promoted to cabinet expressed surprise at the decision, particularly when their appointments had little to do with their pre-Parliamentary knowledge or interests. "When I was appointed to cabinet, [the policy area] came as a complete surprise. I didn't see it coming," one MP said, adding that he had no background in the area. Another recounted receiving a call from the Prime Minister's Office, informing her that she'd received an appointment in the justice ministry: "I said, 'Tell the prime minister to call me back, I didn't finish law school.'"

The MPs told us that other rewards were also distributed in an equally confusing manner, and at the party's whim. For example, permission to travel for Parliamentary business—an important aspect of committee work—is granted by the party whip. But as one MP described it, if you weren't "playing the game," your travel request would be denied. "You can see who was going where. All you had to do was reflect on a six-month period and see who was rewarded and penalized," he said.

---

"What was the most frustrating was to see people recognized and rewarded that you know are less competent than other people, because of political debts."

---

MPs also spoke of seemingly juvenile punishments for actions—or even opinions—that they believed to be unacceptable.

One MP, a long-time opponent to the mission in Afghanistan, told his party's leader and whip of his intention to remain consistent in his position and vote against the extension of the mission

in the House. "I told them a dozen times. I stood up to vote against extending the mission. And the whip's crowd and the leader's crowd are looking at me thinking, 'What's wrong with him?'" he said. "Of course, in no time after that my seat was moved back as far as it can get, by the curtain," a punishment he, and other MPs, compared to something more appropriate for a kindergarten classroom.

---

"Of course, in no time after that my seat was moved back as far as it can get, by the curtain."

---

Another MP spoke of his punishment for supporting a losing candidate in a leadership race, and learned that grudges ran deep. "I was made parliamentary secretary [...] So all that was really good, very positive. But [my earlier support meant] the staff and the political people, particularly the minister, didn't trust me," he said.

### **HOW (NOT) TO DISAGREE WITH YOUR PARTY**

It's to be expected that MPs elected to the same party will not agree on every issue. Arguably, the push and pull of opinions is integral to healthy functioning of any organization, particularly a political party.

---

"What one MP considered appropriate dissent could be tantamount to party treason for another."

---

But we were surprised by how frequently MPs disagreed about the appropriate way to express opinions or voice dissent within their parties. Many MPs struggled to determine the appropriate ways to voice an opinion, particularly when it diverged from that of their party leadership.

Some MPs thought that abstention was built into Parliamentary procedure precisely to allow public dissent. Others felt justified that, when matters warranted, voting against their party in the House of Commons was entirely acceptable. But others disagreed, and felt strongly that caucus was the only appropriate place to express disagreement with a party's position. What one MP considered appropriate dissent could be tantamount to party treason for another.

Many of the MPs described the challenge of supporting a party position that differed from their constituents' interests. For some, abstaining from the vote was often the best way to deviate from the party line without being seen as disloyal.

---

"You're sent here to do a job. Do it. Don't hide in the washroom when it's time to take that stand."

---

One MP described how he handled a situation where a high profile economic announcement ran counter to the interests of his riding. "I was torn between the need to work for the well being of my constituents, and my personal values that led me to want to defend the position of my colleagues. I discussed my dilemma with [my party leader], who accepted that I could deviate from the party line by not taking part in the debate or the vote," he said, adding that he left the discussion satisfied that he could balance the values of his party without working against his constituents' interests.

While some MPs viewed abstention as appropriate, others labelled MPs who refrained from voting as cowards. One MP underscored this view. "You're sent here to do a job. Do it. Don't hide in the washroom when it's time to take that stand," he said.

Other MPs told us that occasionally voting against their own party in the House was an acceptable way to voice dissent. One MP claimed to have voted against his party often, “but I was able to explain the rationale and I was never castigated or hung out.”

However, some MPs expressed frustration with members who voted against their party. Quite a few MPs framed party discipline in terms of being a “team player.” Said one MP, “It annoyed me when people would vote against the party with no consequence. As a team player, that annoyed me. If I was only in it for myself, I’d be voting here and voting there.”

---

“Debates are much more reasonable in committees that aren’t televised. You telecast a committee and you get the same nonsense; you don’t get the usual members of the committee.”

---

### A PARTY WRENCH IN THE “REAL WORK”

As we discussed in Chapter 1, the majority of MPs described committees as where the “real work” took place, and where Parliamentarians were able to constructively advance policy. Yet even when apparently useful work was underway, MPs said that their party leadership would often disrupt the process, replacing committee members with no consultation or notice.

Committees are seldom subject to much media attention. Although MPs lamented the fact that Canadians didn’t often see constructive politics at play in Ottawa, they were also aware of the unfortunate consequences of shining the public spotlight on a committee.

“Debates are much more reasonable in committees that aren’t televised. You telecast a

committee and you get the same nonsense; you don’t get the usual members of the committee. Parties substitute their hitters to come into the committee when it’s a televised committee, as opposed to the people who are there normally, doing the work,” one MP explained.

According to our MPs, party interference was not limited to those committees in the media spotlight. Committee members suspected of not toeing the party line were often changed without notice.

One Conservative MP recounted an instance where the governing party replaced all of its members before an amendment vote. “We had members of the committee listening to witnesses and coming up with agreements on amendments. On the day of the vote, the whip substituted every member of the committee on the government side. They’re out and a new bunch of guys are in, whose only qualification is that they will vote the way they’re told,” he said.

This meddling could damage the cross-party working relationships MPs had forged. “Once it’s perceived that the government is trying to jam something through, then the goodwill evaporates and any relationships that you have become secondary to advancing your party’s [interests],” said one Conservative MP.

---

“On the day of the vote, the whip substituted every member of the committee on the government side. They’re out and a new bunch of guys are in, whose only qualification is that they will vote the way they’re told.”

---

A Liberal member of the public accounts committee remembered a valuable fellow member being removed as punishment for voting against his party. “We had a chartered accoun-

tant, which gave the committee more expertise. When he voted against the gun registry, his punishment was to take him off the committee. That weakened the committee's [overall work]," he said.

There is a sad irony in the MPs' observations that when the party finally pays attention to the "real work," the results are rarely favourable.

---

"There are no real free votes. The political parties will say that it's a free vote to seem democratic, but if the leader has an opinion on it, he's going to put pressure on the membership so that you think like him."

---

### **"THERE ARE NO REAL FREE VOTES..."**

Private members' bills are traditionally free votes and are introduced into the House by individual backbench MPs from any party, rather than by the government. However, even in this ostensibly independent area, the MPs reported heavy party intervention.

One Bloc MP said his party still pressured MPs when facing a free vote. "There are no real free votes. The political parties will say that it's a free vote to seem democratic, but if the leader has an opinion on it, he's going to put pressure on the membership so that you think like him," he said.

A New Democrat MP expressed frustration that the governing parties rarely adhered to free votes once in power. "All these guys who said they were for free votes end up voting against private member's business because their government does not want it to happen," he said.

MPs also expressed anxiety over potential reprisals from their peers during free votes. As one MP described it, "There are consequences for however you vote. There are free votes where you know that, while you're not going to get kicked

out of the party, your name's now on somebody's hit list, or their 'do not promote' list."

Other MPs complained that political parties were increasingly limiting the abilities of MPs to introduce their own private member's bill, instead using them to test a potential piece of legislation. One MP, appointed as critic by her party, claimed that a great deal of the legislation she dealt with was, in fact, "private members' bills disguised as government feelers."

**T**here is an unavoidable friction in the relationship between an MP and his or her political party. For most MPs, this required a great deal of compromise—and left them with a feeling of anguish.

While a few MPs said they were aware of the sacrifices required by political parties before they ran, it was never a comfortable situation for them. "It was the challenge of deciding to become an MP. I've always been an independent thinker [but] the majority of life was governed by someone else and you had to adhere to the policy or [endure] the wrath of the whip," one MP said.

---

"I think our democracy would be better served if parties were very principled and stuck to their principles. But the pursuit of power takes over the adherence to principles."

---

But for others, this tension came into focus only once their service began, making their adjustment to public life even more difficult. Those first elected in the Reform Party felt this acutely, particularly as their party worked to expand its support nationally. "I think our democracy would be better served if parties were very principled and stuck to their principles. But the pursuit of power takes over the adherence to principles," said one Reform-turned-Conservative

MP. “[Party leaders would say,] ‘Well, we might make a majority, we might do this, or we might do that. We might not get re-elected if you speak out,’” said another.

---

What happens to politics—and the public’s perception of it—when Parliamentarians themselves aren’t clear about their roles and responsibilities?

---

However, some MPs pointed out that improved management practices could help alleviate party tensions. For example, two former party leaders said they supported continuity in committee membership through the duration of a Parliament to protect committee work from partisan interference. “I am a strong proponent of that reform. You are appointed to the committee and you’re there for the duration of the Parliament. That preserves the integrity of the committee system,” said one.

A couple of MPs did cite examples where their party leadership had clearly outlined their expectations. One Liberal MP mentioned being given guidelines for effective dissent. “[The leader] brought in three-tier voting. Tier one was like a confidence matter, such as a budget or throne speech [where MPs were expected to support the party.]. Tier two would be policy matters that are very important, and that MPs would be encouraged to support it. Tier three was free votes. And if we thought that [an issue] was a category one instead of a category two we could thrash that out beforehand,” the MP said.

Several MPs initially elected under the Reform Party also told us that they were given guidelines on how to prioritize the factors informing their decisions. “The policy was loud and clear. When it comes time to vote, you vote with the wishes

of the people. If you can’t determine what the wishes of the people are, then you support the position of the party. And if the party didn’t have a position on that, then and only then could you vote with your own will,” one explained.

However, such examples were few and far between. Guidance, if offered, was ad hoc, informal, and usually sought out independently by the MPs in an effort to do their job better. Perhaps they were really telling us that political parties need to make their human resources management a much higher priority.

In fact, most MPs said they were left with little direction on how to perform their roles effectively, and it was the random and often opaque leadership of the political parties in the House of Commons that perpetuated a political culture dominated by aggravation and resentment.

If what the MPs tell us is true, then what happens to politics—and the public’s perception of it—when Parliamentarians themselves aren’t clear about their roles and responsibilities? This lack of clarity can cause—and most certainly exacerbate—frustration, partisanship and a focus on small, short-term gains at the expense of tackling the longer-term public challenges facing Canada. These are, in short, the very qualities of contemporary Canadian politics that alienate so many citizens, and can lead them to disengage from politics altogether.

Furthermore, without clear, agreed-upon measures of performance in Parliament, MPs are forced to fall back on what is the simplest and most immediate indicator of all—getting re-elected.

And as most Canadians would surely agree, at a time when there is no shortage of challenges confronting our country and our world, this is hardly a satisfactory indicator of success. ↗

# The Consequences

Most MPs entered public life with the belief they could make an impact, and that their ideas mattered. The majority of MPs who participated in this project said they came to Ottawa determined to create a different politics from that which was on offer—one where their communities were better represented, and where the political culture encouraged more citizens to pay attention to their country’s politics. They described entering Parliament with a sense of awe for its majesty and history, reflecting their understanding of the importance of the institution and the work that lay ahead.

But for many, these initial feelings soon receded, replaced by confusion and frustration.

Upon their arrival on Parliament Hill, the MPs received very little training, making it difficult for them to navigate the complexity of Parliament. Their initial committee assignments and other appointments were allocated by their political parties in ways that seemed random, and often had little to do with their interests or pre-Parliamentary experience.

---

The MPs found that their parties' leadership did little to manage the tension inherent in the relationship between political parties and their MPs.

---

Even after they settled in, the MPs found that their parties' leadership did little to manage the tension inherent in the relationship between political parties and their MPs. Parties amplified this tension by providing little guidance, structure, or expectations, and by intervening arbitrarily—often without explanation—in the MPs' work.

In many ways, these descriptions pick up on a theme that runs through our two previous reports. In *The Accidental Citizen?*, we framed the nomination process that the MPs described as a “black box.” There was little consistency in the nomination process across ridings, and the national party took very little interest in local nomination races, except to occasionally overturn them.

*In Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description*, we discussed how little training or orientation MPs received, either from Parliament or their parties. MPs also could not agree on the purpose of their own job as a parliamentarian. All of these point to a problematic, and even negligent, attitude of the political party regarding its most important human resource—the MPs themselves.

**T**hat said, there is some good news in this story.

The first is that, despite the requirements of their respective political parties, the MPs told us that they accomplished good work in Parliament. They described finding the latitude to champion causes they cared about. Often these were constituent matters they brought to greater national attention. From post-secondary education to agricultural policy, this report has highlighted several, and there are many more.

For example, a constituent concern made one MP realize that his community would benefit if foreign students studying at the local university were allowed to work off-campus, an initiative that was, through a change in the law, expanded nationally. Another MP first elected as a 29 year old backbencher in the 1960s, a few years after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, created the first Parliamentary environment committee and brought a national focus to these issues for the first time. A third, who came to Parliament from a riding with several federal prisons, became an advocate for victims' rights and developed legislation for more effective approaches to incarceration.

For an enterprising, energetic person, politics seems like a way to make a difference.

---

Despite the requirements of his or her political party, the MPs told us that they accomplished good work in Parliament.

---

Furthermore, since so many of the difficulties the MPs described were the direct result of political parties' management approaches, and since management approaches can evolve, improving this situation is actually possible.

While there are structural, legal and financial issues that affect how a party operates that

should be discussed, they do not preclude parties from starting to make necessary changes to their internal management approaches.

Like all cultural change it won't be easy and will require time, energy, and above all, the will to change. However, once problems are identified, small, incremental changes in parties' incentive structures can be made that will contribute to a more open, engaging political culture. With time, removing obstacles to how MPs do their jobs should also remove obstacles to citizen engagement.

### WHAT TO DO?

There are at least two sets of questions that emerge from the MPs' descriptions of their time in Parliament. They are questions we hope all concerned Canadians will discuss.

First, should we be troubled that the good work the MPs described was done almost entirely away from the public gaze, restricted to the more private spaces of committees and caucus?

On the one hand, maybe this is to be expected. In few other workplaces are most proceedings on the public record, with mistakes made on the job put on display for all to see. Therefore, in order to work productively, it may only be natural for MPs to seek out spaces where they are not required to constantly perform.

---

Removing obstacles to how MPs do their jobs should also remove obstacles to citizen engagement.

---

On the other hand, the work of the Parliament of Canada is critical to how we live together as a society since decisions made on the floor of the House influence issues as diverse as Canada's economic policies, its healthcare system, and

whether the country goes to war. Given its importance, the MPs' description of a Parliament that works only in private is cause for concern. If citizens are largely able to watch and scrutinize political gamesmanship, how are they to understand the work of their elected officials, to say nothing of their ability to hold these same officials to account during an election? How can high-level debates be brought out into the open for the public to see, evaluate, and even participate in?

---

Should we be troubled that the good work the MPs described was done almost entirely away from the public gaze, restricted to the more private spaces of committees and caucus?

---

Furthermore, as technology and evolving social attitudes lead to greater demands for transparency in society, should we be concerned that Parliamentarians claim they can't engage in critical debates or produce good results in public? What role does the party's own incentive structure play in this? Does this suggest we should look for ways to better organize Parliament's work? For example, if attendance in the House is so poor, should parties require more of their MPs to turn up? Or should we instead find other ways to hold political debates on the issues that matter?

Second, if, as the MPs suggest, the parties play a role in the current problems plaguing Canadian politics, shouldn't they also play a role in helping to solve these problems?

We know that Canadian citizens are certainly not engaged with political parties—less than two percent of Canadians are members, and voter turnout is at a record low. And if Parliamentarians are also frustrated, perhaps parties are not meeting their obligations to Canadian democracy.

Political parties play critical roles in the functioning of our democratic infrastructure. They are responsible for engaging citizens in politics, selecting candidates for elected office, aggregating diverse policy perspectives and contesting elections. They dominate the public's understanding of polities such that most people cast their vote for a party and rarely elect independent MPs.

---

If Parliamentarians are also frustrated, perhaps parties are not meeting their obligations to Canadian democracy.

---

Political parties are also granted special tax status: their operating costs are heavily subsidized by Canadians through public financing and generous tax incentives, and roughly half of their election expenses are reimbursed from the public purse.

So it should be no surprise that the MPs were so fixated on their party. And the integral role that parties play is all the more reason to address their shortcomings. Put simply, political parties need to be revitalized, recognizing that they are integral to the health of Canadian democracy.

---

If the parties play a role in the current problems plaguing Canadian politics, shouldn't they also play a role in helping to solve these problems?

---

Political parties are organizations made up of citizens. Reforming them, therefore, requires citizen participation. However, it would seem that we are currently in a vicious circle. Parties need to be renewed, but parties turn people off from politics. Disengaged citizens do not want to

join parties, and so parties are not being renewed or reformed in the direction the citizenry would like.

Perhaps the first step in breaking this circle is to openly discuss how exactly Canadians want political parties to work within our democratic institutions—essentially, how we want them to work for and with us.

## WHAT COMES NEXT?

This is the third in a series of reports that share what we heard from the 65 MPs who participated in our exit interview project. Our next publication will be the last from this series of interviews and will summarize how the MPs describe their highs and lows, and the advice they have for strengthening our democracy.

This final publication—effectively the MPs' collective report card on their time in public life—will also lead into Samara's next major project: a democracy index that will annually measure the health of Canadian democracy.

A report card of a different sort, the index aims to be inspirational, to give praise and point out deficiencies, but above all to encourage discussion and focus attention on how Canada's democracy can be improved in ways that go beyond elections and voter turnout.

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Samara is committed to encouraging a greater understanding of Canada's democracy by making our work widely available to all Canadians. There are a few ways you can help us in this goal.

You can share our MP Exit Interview reports with your friends, family and students, and discuss what they mean for the health of Canadian democracy. And you can continue the conversation by joining our Facebook page or following us on Twitter [@samaraCDA](#).

Samara also has a variety of other programs that seek to strengthen Canada's democracy. Visit our website to learn more about MPs' views on Canadian politics, watch videos of leading jour-

nalists discuss their work, contribute to a list of Canada's best political writing, download podcasts of our ideas and events, or add your name to a volunteer list.

---

For more information on the MP exit interview project, to learn more about Samara's work or make a charitable donation to our programs, please visit [www.samaracanada.com](http://www.samaracanada.com).

---

# Acknowledgements

**A** project of this size and scope is not possible without the hard work, helpful advice and encouragement of a wide variety of people. We are particularly indebted to the generous support of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, and in particular to Léo Duguay, Francis LeBlanc, Jack Murta, Jack Silverstone and Susan Simms, and to the late Honourable Douglas Frith, for supporting this project from its very early days.

Thank you also to the 65 former Members of Parliament who generously gave their time to be interviewed and willingly shared their experiences and perspectives with us. A list of all participating MPs is available in the appendix. We were warned that there would be reluctance among many to participate in this project, and we were delighted to learn that this was not the case.

We are also grateful to those who worked with us to organize and conduct the interviews. Mariève Forest interviewed former MPs in Québec and parts of eastern Ontario. Reva Seth interviewed some of the MPs in southern Ontario, and Morris Chochla interviewed those in northern Ontario. Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan interviewed everyone else. Ruth Ostrower coordinated the transportation and other logistics required to visit so many communities across Canada.

Simon Andrews, Donna Banham, Allison Buchan-Terrell, Andrew Dickson, Emilie Dionne, Suzanne Gallant, Myna Kota, Joseph McPhee, Charles Perrin, Bronwyn Schoner and Nick Van der Graff transcribed the interview tapes.

Andreas Krebs and Suzanne Gallant led in the drafting of this report, with help and support from Heather Bastedo. Sarah Blanchard, Grant Burns, Suzanne Gallant and Shira Honig provided valuable help in analyzing the interview transcripts.

The research of Professors Kenneth Carty, C.E.S. Franks and William Cross helped inform our understanding of the role of Parliament and political parties in Canada's democracy. Thank you also to Robb Chase, whose extensive first-hand experience working for franchise businesses informed our understanding of the management of these often far-flung enterprises.

Thank you to Peter McNelly, who provided interview training to ensure consistency in the interviewers' approach. We are also indebted to Professor Mary Ann McColl for her training on qualitative research methods, to Ryan Bloxsidge and Scott Snowden for designing this publication, Antony Hare for providing the illustration, and to Wayne Chu for filming the introduction to the report. Thank you to Patrick Johnston for suggesting we get advice from former Parliamentarians in the first place.

A number of people provided sage advice on structuring and releasing the wider series of reports, including Elly Alboim, Yaroslav Baran, Abigail Bueno, Jennifer Dolan, Matthew Hayles, Velma McColl, Geoff Norquay and William Young. Many professors also shared reflections on this research project in light of their own scholarship, including Sylvia Bashevkin, William Cross, David Docherty, Luc Juillet, Peter Loewen, Jonathan Malloy, Matthew Mendelsohn and Paul Saurette. Each provided excellent advice for which we are most grateful. Any errors, of course, are our own.

Samara's Advisory Board also contributed helpful suggestions from the outset of this project. Thank you to Sujit Choudhry, Heather Conway, Scott Gilmore, Rob Prichard and Perry Spitznagel.

# Names of Participating MPs

Thank you to the following former Members of Parliament who were interviewed for this project:

|   |                                |                                  |
|---|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| The Honourable Peter Adams              | The Honourable Roy Cullen      | The Honourable Paul Macklin      |
| The Honourable Reginald Alcock          | Odina Desrochers               | The Right Honourable Paul Martin |
| Omar Alghabra                           | The Honourable Paul DeVillers  | Bill Matthews                    |
| The Honourable David Anderson           | The Honourable Claude Drouin   | Alexa McDonough                  |
| The Honourable Jean Augustine           | The Honourable John Efford     | The Honourable Anne McLellan     |
| The Honourable Eleni Bakopanos          | Ken Epp                        | Gary Merasty                     |
| The Honourable Susan Barnes             | Brian Fitzpatrick              | The Honourable Andrew Mitchell   |
| Colleen Beaumier                        | Paul Forseth                   | Pat O'Brien                      |
| Catherine Bell                          | Sébastien Gagnon               | The Honourable Denis Paradis     |
| Stéphane Bergeron                       | The Honourable Roger Gallaway  | The Honourable Pierre Pettigrew  |
| The Honourable Reverend William Blaikie | The Honourable John Godfrey    | Russ Powers                      |
| Alain Boire                             | James Gouk                     | Penny Priddy                     |
| Ken Boshcoff                            | The Honourable Bill Graham     | Werner Schmidt                   |
| The Honourable Don Boudria              | Raymond Gravel                 | The Honourable Andy Scott        |
| The Honourable Claudette Bradshaw       | Art Hanger                     | The Honourable Carol Skelton     |
| The Honourable Edward Broadbent         | Jeremy Harrison                | The Honourable Monte Solberg     |
| Bonnie Brown                            | Luc Harvey                     | The Honourable Andrew Telegdi    |
| The Honourable Sarmite Bulte            | The Honourable Loyola Hearn    | Myron Thompson                   |
| Marlene Catterall                       | The Honourable Charles Hubbard | The Honourable Paddy Torsney     |
| Roger Clavet                            | Dale Johnston                  | Randy White                      |
| The Honourable Joseph Comuzzi           | The Honourable Walt Lastewka   | Blair Wilson                     |
| Guy Côté                                | Marcel Lussier                 |                                  |

# Research Methodology

Samara contacted Members of Parliament who left public office during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments (2004 to 2008). We chose to speak to former, rather than current, Members of Parliament because we felt they would be less constrained by the demands of office and, having stepped away, would have had time to reflect on their years in public life.

We chose to focus on those who left during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments for several reasons. The first is because they would have more recent experience with the current realities of Parliament, which includes two political parties that are relatively new: the Bloc Québécois and the Conservative Party of Canada. The second is because there was a change of government in that time, which enabled a larger number of MPs to serve in different legislative capacities. The third is because these were both minority parliaments. Many observers believe Canada will be governed by minority Parliaments more frequently in years to come, and we believed that MPs' first-hand experience would yield interesting insights.

There are 139 living former MPs in this group and we interviewed 65. These individuals come from all the major national political parties and from all regions of the country. The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians (CAFP) were our partners in this project, and provided the initial letter of introduction and invitation to the former MPs on our behalf.

Samara also consulted extensively with other key groups of experts in the development of this project, including academics at several Canadian universities. While the report is not intended as academic research, professors from the University of British Columbia, Carleton University, Memorial University, the University of Ottawa, Queen's University, the University of Toronto

and Wilfrid Laurier University all provided input into the interview process to ensure it was built on existing literature, and many helped review early drafts of our findings. Samara also consulted political journalists, current and former Parliamentarians and several senior public servants.

## INTERVIEW STYLE

The questions for these interviews were organized using a semi-structured interview methodology. We created a standard question-guide to ensure uniformity of process; however, follow-up questions varied depending on responses. We felt this approach would better capture the nuances of the MPs' experiences. All interviewees were provided with an overview of the interview objectives and process in advance.

All but two of the interviews were conducted in person, often in the home or office of the former Parliamentarian, in their preferred official language. The interviews were about two hours in length.

## QUESTIONS ASKED

The questions we asked the MPs focused on four main areas:

- Their motivations for entering and paths to politics;
- The nature of the job, including how they contemplated their role, how they spent their time, and what they viewed as their successes and frustrations;
- Their connection to civil society, either directly or through the media; and
- Their advice and recommendations for the future.

## ON THE RECORD

The MPs signed a release form and spoke on the record. As a courtesy, the MPs were given the option not to respond to any question if they so preferred, and were free to strike statements from the transcript that they did not want to appear on the public record, a request we honoured in the few cases in which we were asked.

## RECORDINGS AND TRANSCRIPTS

The interviews were recorded in mp3-quality audio, and all the audio records have been transcribed. Because our primary objective was to foster an honest and open discussion, we did not film these interviews, concerned that the equipment necessary for a broadcast-quality video would be distracting, or encourage more of a performance-style interview, rather than the open-style conversation we wanted to encourage.

## INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

All the interviews were coded and analyzed with the support of a widely-recognized qualitative research software program.

## PUBLIC EDUCATION

We are committed to ensuring that the results of this work are made widely available in order to advance public understanding of the role of political leadership and Parliament in Canada.

Samara has the consent of the interviewees to deposit the interviews in the National Archives once the MP exit interview project is complete, and will do so. This project is among the largest-ever inquiries into Members of Parliament in Canada, and we would like to ensure that its educational value is available to future generations. ↗

PUBLICATION DATE: April 18, 2011

© 2011 The Samara Centre for Democracy

The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada's democracy. Samara produces research aimed at making democracy more accessible, responsive and inclusive. We put that research into action with tools and resources that average Canadians, active citizens and public leaders can use to participate fully in our democracy.

To learn more about Samara's work or to make a charitable donation to support our research, please visit [www.samaracanada.com](http://www.samaracanada.com) or contact us at 416-960-7926.



33 Prince Arthur Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5R 1B2

416-960-7926 | [info@samaracanada.com](mailto:info@samaracanada.com)

 @SamaraCDA  SamaraCanada  @SamaraCDA