The Accidental Citizen?

The Samara Centre for Democracy

Introduction

Through the fall and winter of 2009-10, a series of exit interviews was conducted across Canada with a group of 65 former Members of the Canadian Parliament. This was the initiative of Michael MacMillan and Alison Loat, who created the charitable organization Samara to study citizen engagement with Canadian democracy.

Many organizations hold exit interviews with departing employees with an eye to gathering ideas on how best to improve the organization's performance and the experience of current and future employees. However, in our federal Parliament — one of the most important workplaces in the country — this information is not gathered with any frequency. In fact, we believe this series of MP exit interviews to be the first large-scale, systematic effort to do so in Canada.

We interviewed those who left public life during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments, which sat from 2004 to 2008. These "Parliamentary graduates" served, on average, for 10.3 years. Many came to public life at a particular point in our political history: when the Bloc Québécois, the Reform Party and later the merged Conservative Party of Canada rose as important players on the national stage. Each MP served in at least one minority Parliament. This report should be read with this context in mind.

These interviews also allowed for personal reflection, which provides different and often

more detailed information than that received from polls, surveys or from daily media. It is important to recognize that this report is not a commentary on how one becomes a cabinet minister or a prime minister. This is a reflection of how 65 Canadians became Members of Parliament.

With introductions from the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, we were able to conduct most of these interviews in person. The MPs welcomed us into their communities and often into their homes. They allowed us to record each interview and granted us permission to use the information gathered to advance public understanding of their roles.

In these interviews, we asked the former Parliamentarians to describe what brought them to public life. We also asked about the essential role of the MP and how they spent their time, including: how they interacted with civil society, with their constituents and through the media; what they viewed as their accomplishments; what frustrated them; what advice they had for future MPs and their opinions on how to strengthen our democracy.

We approached this project as documentarians, reporting how the MPs described their feelings and what they believed. We assume that, like all of our memories, theirs may be coloured by the passage of time and affected by how they chose to interpret their own lives and experiences.

This report will focus on the first part of those interviews, where the former Parliamentarians discussed their motivations and paths to politics. It sets the stage for a larger series of reports based on the MP exit interviews. Our purpose is neither to applaud nor embarrass MPs, but to understand political leadership and the role of Parliamentarians in our system. We hope these reports will become a catalyst for a knowledgeable discussion of Canadian public life, and a provocation for greater engagement with it.

One benefit of speaking to such a large number of former Parliamentarians is that our report is based on the analysis of dozens of different perspectives. It is also notable that our main observations were largely consistent between genders, among regions and across party lines.

"These MPs did not consider themselves to be political insiders, even though they were generally highly involved in their communities. Rather, most portrayed themselves as outsiders, and indicated they came to the job with that mindset."

The central finding, and the one that frames this report, is how accidentally these MPs indicated they came to politics in Canada. This is not what we expected, and was revealed in several ways.

First, Parliamentarians' backgrounds, experiences, pre-political careers and expressed motivations for running were far more varied and much less predictable than we'd assumed. Most spent a generation pursuing other careers and interests before becoming an MP. Few self-identified as political candidates. Most say they sought a nomination only after they were asked, and some accepted it with only weeks or mere

days before the nomination vote took place.

Further, these MPs did not consider themselves to be political insiders, even though they were generally highly involved in their communities. Rather, most portrayed themselves as outsiders, and indicated they came to the job with that mindset.

Finally, even the nomination process for a candidate's political party seemed subject to chance. The nomination is an essential element of anyone's path to politics. It was thus surprising that, for so many MPs, their gateway into politics was so unpredictable. Few MPs described the nomination process consistently; the confusing rules and their varied application made it difficult to understand the terms on which the nomination contests were fought. Perhaps as a result, most MPs were critical of some aspect of the nomination process, even though they had navigated it successfully. One can only imagine what interviews with less successful candidates might reveal.

It is these narratives that led to the title of our first report: *The Accidental Citizen?*.

We chose the word "accidental" because it encapsulates the way so many former Parliamentarians described their own journeys. Few said they set out intending on a career in public life, and even many who served in local or provincial office indicated that politics was something they fell into unexpectedly. Furthermore, the road to politics is subject to chance. There was no obvious "farm team" in Canadian politics: the MPs we interviewed came to Ottawa with a wide variety of backgrounds and motivations. The ways people were approached to run, and accepted, were equally varied. The nomination process was also described as inconsistent and often confusing. This report contains many examples of how such experiences turned these MPs into "accidental" citizens.

We chose the word "citizen" because we believe elected office to be an intense expression of citizenship. Ultimately, it gets to the heart of representative democracy: the concept that citizens govern themselves by electing members of their communities to represent them. Members of Parliament are the citizens who we choose to represent our interests, to gather and debate, and to make decisions regarding the ongoing building of our country and Canada's way forward in the world.

We chose the interrogative form in our title — indicated by the question mark — to make clear that the MPs' description of arriving in politics largely by accident may require further reflection. It seems unlikely that they hadn't thought about politics before. Indeed, many were active for years in their communities. Perhaps they believe that politics is something for which one cannot admit ambition, even after the fact. If that is so, it is quite a comment on the state of political leadership in Canada.

This series of exit interviews imparts the stories and advice of those who had dedicated significant portions of their lives to serving Canada. We hope it will lend insight into how we live together and suggest ways to strengthen our democracy.

Who becomes an MP, and how? It wasn't quite what we expected.

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.

22% are female.

11% are immigrants.

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

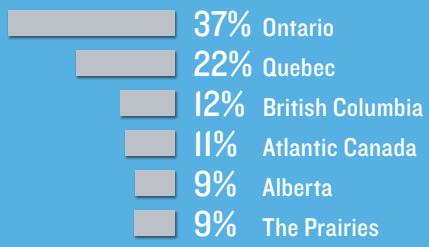
82% indicated English as their preferred language. 18% indicated French.

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.

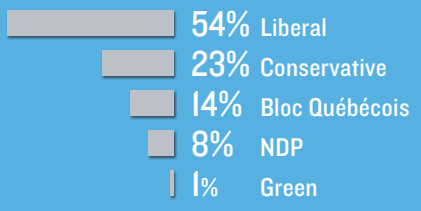
The MPs held a variety of legislative roles, and many held more than one. One served as Prime Minister. 31% were Cabinet Ministers and 35% were Parliamentary Secretaries. 65% held a critic portfolio. 58% chaired at least one committee.

REGIONS REPRESENTED BY THOSE INTERVIEWED



This mirrors almost perfectly the distribution of the Canadian population.

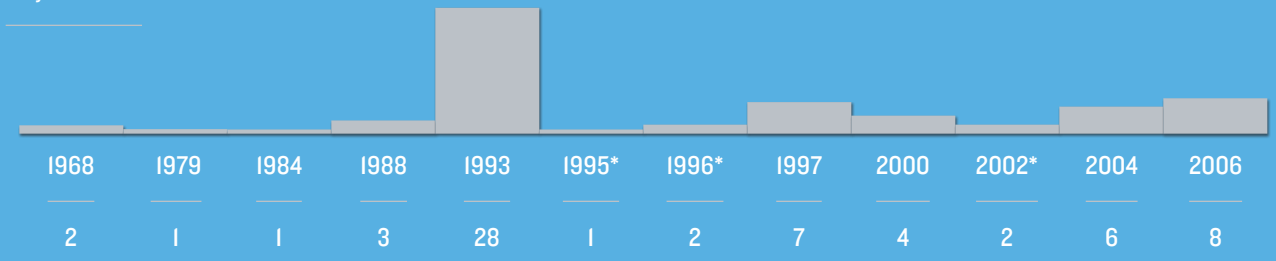
MPS' PARTY AFFILIATION AT THE TIME THEY LEFT OFFICE



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



B

Life Before Parliament

In every federal election, Canadians select a new group of MPs to serve in one of the most important jobs in Canada. They arrive in Parliament with the responsibility and latitude to govern our country. When did they first become interested or engaged in politics? How did they come to vie for the job? Was their ascent to Parliament the result of years of planning and a focused ambition? How did their experience compare to the general way a citizen might view politicians?

The answers are not what we expected, and contain few discernable patterns. While many MPs had at least one experience we might equate with a politician — such as parents who encouraged political debate at the dinner table, a degree in law or political science, a volunteer role with the local political party association, a stint as a municipal or provincial elected official or as an aide to a politician — only a few had most or all of these experiences.

Few of those we interviewed fit the mould we might commonly associate with a politician. Their backgrounds were varied. Few said they set out to be politicians. While some volunteered with a political party, sometimes actively, most did not participate in partisan activity for much of their lives. Most said they had not planned to enter politics, and that they chose a political career quite by accident.

Most of the MPs we interviewed were not raised on politics, with a couple of high-profile exceptions. MPs grew up in a wide variety of households, usually hundreds or thousands of kilometres from Ottawa. Over ten percent were not born in Canada, and many more were the children of immigrants. Most didn't spend their young adulthood as members of the youth wings of a political party. And while the majority had university degrees, most studied subjects other than political science or law.

Those we interviewed pursued a range of jobs, professions and community interests. While some spent portions of their careers in roles we'd assume typical of a federal politician — lawyer, school board trustee, political staffer or a municipal or provincial politician — most spent approximately twenty years pursuing interests outside federal politics.

Perhaps surprisingly, over a quarter of those interviewed were involved in education as teachers, coaches, principals or academics. An even larger number were active in a host of business pursuits, working as proprietors, managers, salespeople and senior executives. Others came from professions such as journalism, accounting, engineering, nursing and social work. Ten percent had some military experience, and many more worked in the public sector in a variety of roles, from a civil service manager to a police officer to an air traffic controller. Several ran non-profit organizations. Two were clergymen. One was a Grand Chief. Their careers reflected the diversity of the country and the economy, although most enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle.

THE LATENT SPARK?

Equally as varied were the triggers that ignited the would-be MPs interests in politics. Often these were the result of chance rather than personal focus or ambition. A few MPs cited their early upbringing, but most did not. "I happened to be reading [a local magazine] and there was an ad on how you might consider supporting the Reform Party," one MP said. "I submitted my application, my fee, and became a member, still not intending to run for politics."

Many cited pivotal points when their lives intersected with a political leader. Some had an interaction with a particular politician and were captivated, or dismayed, by their remarks. One MP recalled feeling inspired upon meeting Tommy Douglas while he was the leader of the New Democratic Party. A few from the Reform Party spoke of meeting Preston Manning, or hearing him give a speech. Others slowly grew to resent the leadership style of a particular Prime Minister, and wished for something better.

Other MPs found a connection to politics when a particular local, regional or global event evoked a response in them. Constitutional debates, the Charlottetown Accord and the Quebec referendums of 1980 and 1995 were lightning rods for many, particularly those from Quebec and the West. "I was very disgusted with some of the things taking place at the federal level, particularly with the idea of bringing [home] the Constitution and the Charter of Rights [in 1982]," one former MP said. Another remarked, "Definitely the 1980 referendum was the platform to launch my political career.... They can package it up any way they want to, but the fact is that [the separatists] want to divide the country. The country would not be the same, no matter how you slice it."

Several MPs recalled coming of age during the 1960s, when the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King made them realize that politics matters. Those who'd grown up or spent time abroad saw potential in Canada, and when they returned viewed politics as a way to affect change. "I worked on the War on Poverty in Dallas and I could never have conceived of such a vast spread between those who have wealth and those who have nothing," said one MP. "Spending that year in Dallas put a lot of things in stark relief for me, and I came back to Canada feeling really energized politically."

Some attributed their involvement to encouragement by friends or colleagues. One lawyer, contemplating a move to the judiciary, was encouraged by a mentor to consider politics instead. "It would suit your personality better," the future MP was told. Another MP, a financial executive, had a party pamphlet tossed across the table at him during a work negotiation. "You should join this," his colleague said. He read the pamphlet, and was intrigued. He later joined the party.

For others, friends' political involvement had an influence, although less directly. "I had some friends [involved in the party]. The party had this convention, and CPAC was covering it. I was flipping channels and thought, 'Oh, this is interesting. I'll watch.' I began to listen to what the people at the microphone were talking about. This began to resonate with me.... I decided 'I'm going to look [the party] up in the phone book.' I phoned somebody and they sent me some literature. I read all of this stuff and joined."

Several MPs recalled coming of age during the 1960s, when the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King made them realize that politics matters.

In fact, there were no easily discernable patterns in the pre-Ottawa lives and careers of these MPs. Apart from their "outsider" self-definition and their community experiences — two themes we'll discuss in the next section — their personal histories lacked a common narrative. This diverse range of experiences caused us to observe that, at least for these MPs, there was no "political class" in Canada.

It would take many years, but all of these disparate lives converged when they decided to run for office.

CAREERS BEFORE PARLIAMENT

THE MPS WE INTERVIEWED PURSUED A RANGE OF JOBS AND PROFESSIONS BEFORE ENTERING FEDERAL POLITICS. BELOW IS A SAMPLE OF THESE PARLIAMENTARIANS' PREVIOUS CAREERS.

- Newspaper editor
- Priest
- Municipal councillor
- Teacher
- Political assistant
- Consultant
- Small business manager
- Public servant
- CFO
- Professor
- Canadian Air Force member
- Provincial cabinet minister
- Mayor
- NGO executive
- Journalist
- Social worker
- High school principal
- Academic
- Accountant
- Engineer
- Sales manager
- United Church minister
- CEO
- Union leader
- Farmer
- Lab technician
- Subarctic research lab director
- Cook
- Probation officer
- Air traffic controller
- University president
- Radio station manager
- Historian
- Electrician
- U.S. Army member
- Police officer
- Law school dean
- Grand Chief
- Nurse
- Bank manager
- Community activist
- Lawyer
- Insurance broker
- Quality assurance engineer
- Director of child and family services
- School board trustee
- University vice president
- Community college administrator

C

Deciding to Run

Federal politics, as it turns out, is not a young person's game. The average age at which MPs in our group entered public life was 47. Most came to politics after a generation of building a career and often raising a family. They were well-established, and, on the whole, most felt that life was good.

Then, a moment arrived that many described as unexpected — they were approached to stand for federal office. In this group, only a handful sought the nomination on their own. All the others were asked.

Just as there was little in common in their backgrounds, there was no singular pattern to the MPs' expressed reasons for running. Yet notwithstanding this great range of motivations, there is a strong collective narrative expressed by the majority of the MPs we interviewed: the paradox between their self-described feeling of being an "outsider" on one hand, and their significant experience within their communities on the other.

GETTING TO YES

The way MPs described being asked to run had an element of mystery to it. Most said "the ask" was unexpected or accidental. A variety of people did the asking, usually in one of three ways.

The most common was to be approached by a friend or acquaintance. One Parliamentarian recounted a visit from a critical care nurse, active in the community, who encouraged her to run. "I would not have run for political office if this woman had not shown up at my door and said, 'We'd like you to try and do this,'" the MP said. Another, who'd served in both local and provincial politics, said, "I think what got me to run federally was somebody saying, 'Here is the challenge, are you up for it?' Because that had never been part of my thinking at all."

Often those asking were people involved in their political party's riding association. One MP recalled: "I was approached by someone heading up the search. They said, 'We are looking for someone to run for the nomination for Member of Parliament. We think we can win the seat.' I said, 'Oh, let me think, who could we get?' and he said, 'No I mean you.' I hadn't really thought about it."

Another had a similar story. "One of my friends, who was on the board of the constituency association and knew me personally, came to my door and said, 'We want you to run as our candidate.' I said, "You've got to be kidding. That is not really in the cards.' I laughed him off. Every three or four days he would be at my door.... He persisted."

Other times, the MP was close to or involved with a group designated to identify a candidate, and found themselves as the chosen one. One recounted a story: "I said, 'I'll join our local riding association, and try to contribute rather than just go to [Tim] Horton's, [complain] and not get much done.' For a year we'd have a monthly meeting where we did nothing... and I decided, 'I'll move on.' But before I had a chance to resign, the executive search committee asked me to be president. So we got things going. We had to heighten the profile of the party and get a new candidate. We approached the former candidate, who had lost three times, and asked him if he would announce that he wasn't seeking [the nomination] again. He refused, waited, saw the field, thought he could beat them and announced his candidacy. This was three weeks before our nomination meeting. I realized he was going to get it, which meant the work we'd done would've gone down the drain. That's when I decided, 'I'll take a shot at it, to see if we can get this'." The MP signed up 1,200 members and won on the first ballot. "So bingo, I'm the candidate. I still wasn't sure I wanted to do it," the MP said.

Only a few were nurtured and supported by the national political party, or chosen as

the candidate directly by the party leader. "I got a call from [the party leader], and he said, 'You're going to be nominated tomorrow. I want you as my candidate, so we're actually nominating you,'" recounted one MP. The next day the nomination was announced in the paper. "Then we had to put a team together and win," the MP said.

Every candidate had different motivations for saying yes, and the reasons they gave for why they accepted were as varied as their lives and careers.

Some considered politics as a way to solve complex problems they believed couldn't be adequately addressed by business or private philanthropy alone. "I saw the potential that if you did get elected, there's a lot you could do," said one MP. Another remarked, "You get chances in public life that you really don't get in private life. Say I'd retired as a head of the biggest company in Canada and been given the golden handshake. I could say, 'Let me now do my big gesture.' It's pretty rare that you get that chance. But in public life, you get chances like that."

Pursuing public office was also seen as a way to learn and grow as professionals and as citizens. "I needed a bigger challenge [than I was getting in my current job and] was concerned that if you got bored you could become [professionally] negligent," one MP said. "[As an immigrant], it was my payback to Canada," said another. Several members of the Bloc viewed the experience as good training for the day when Quebec would achieve sovereignty.

Others had a general belief that the system was moving in the wrong direction: several believed that the link between government and citizens was broken, and that Prime Ministers, red or blue, acted "more like dictators." Others had aspirations for more specific and sometimes radical reform, including changes to our electoral system, to our Senate, or in the case of the Bloc, to the very structure of our federation.

Some were more obvious contenders. A number had already entered the political arena, serving in municipal or provincial governments, and wanted to challenge themselves at the next level. "I am up for a challenge, I love when people wave a [matador's] big red cape in front of me because, of course, I want to charge at it," said one former MP. Others took the plunge into federal politics out of a sense of service. One MP, who had retired from a provincial seat several years earlier, said, "It wasn't that I was craving to get back [into public life] at all. It was more or less a duty, an obligation, a favour."

"I saw the potential that if you did get elected, there's a lot you could do," said one MP. Another remarked, "You get chances in public life that you really don't get in private life."

Some were intrigued by the opportunity that a run for office represented. "I just wanted to see some change, to see people not just take [things] for granted," said one. A few others were more light-hearted. "My mother dropped me on my head as a baby," one joked. "I was a 46-year-old child who still thought they could save the world," said another.

THE OUTSIDER PARADOX

Perhaps more powerful than their stated motivations was the way so many of the MPs described himself or herself as an outsider. This was not an explicit question in our interview, but nevertheless emerged as a proactively-volunteered self-description the MPs expressed in a variety of ways. Sometimes it played out in their decision to pursue politics, and sometimes it was made as part of a broader point.

This is the opposite of what a traditional public perception of politicians as consummate insiders would have suggested.

There were many variations of this outsider sentiment. Sometimes it was a matter of personal identity. Most women were aware that, despite their advancement in some fields, politics remained, and remains, a male-dominated profession. "I had no role models. There was no black woman who was in the Parliament of Canada, and no black woman was at Queen's Park or any other place I could look at," said one. One Aboriginal MP was conscious of discrimination, including recalling the days when members of the First Nations did not have the same freedoms as other Canadians, including the right to vote and to travel freely. "My mom, she's 75 and she remembers when she wasn't allowed to leave the reserve. She needed a pass. So you are battling that history."

For immigrants, moving to a new country is often such an integral part of their life experience that it becomes an important motivator for action. "The majority can't [appreciate] the struggle that a minority feels," one MP said. Another recalled, "I remember walking up the steps to go into the Centre Block and thinking, 'Okay Daddy, so what's the daughter of a lousy immigrant tailor doing here?' My Dad had just died about six months before and you know, he would have loved to see this."

The size and regional makeup of Canada meant that the MPs from many parts of the country — Quebec, Alberta, Newfoundland, the northern communities — expressed feeling a world apart from the capital, as well as dissatisfaction with the way in which their constituency was represented. "I wanted Ottawa to know where [my remote riding] was," said one MP. "It was about as far away from Ottawa as you can get."

"I remember walking up the steps to go into the Centre Block and thinking, 'Okay Daddy, so what's the daughter of a lousy immigrant tailor doing here?'"

For those from the Reform Party, this sentiment was expressed with particular passion. "People were upset with the Liberals, the Conservatives — everybody was mad at them — and the NDP. They just weren't satisfying Canadians. So we said, 'Let's get a candidate and we'll go [to Ottawa] and make sure the best candidate [speaks for] our ideals,'" said one MP. Another described it this way: "[Politics] all seemed to me a very inside club. Here was an outside group saying, 'The system isn't working for Western Canada.' But instead of saying, 'We're opting out,' we're going to opt in. We're going to opt in to change the system itself."

Others articulated this outsider sentiment by describing how their political philosophy, outlook on life or perspective on a policy issue wasn't adequately reflected in the system.

"I was acutely aware of what the damage was to our next generation of our deficits accumulating at $40 billion per year," said one former MP. "I have some [strong] views on the future of the country, national unity and the role of the government in Canada," said another, defiantly.

Sometimes it was a reflection of their education, socio-economic background or career choice. "It couldn't have happened to a guy who fit the role less. Since when is the busboy supposed to become an MP?" asked one. Another remembered receiving a call from a national newspaper reporter. "They actually said, 'What is a cook going to bring to Ottawa? How do you think you're qualified for this position?'" The MP answered, "Well, maybe what we need is some more diversity. It's called the House of Commons for a reason. It's for Canadians of all walks of life, having a say and their views represented. I don't think only lawyers and accountants have the ability to do that."

Even those with prior political experience expressed this outsider sentiment. "I've always been driven by trying to represent the people who elect me. That's what motivated me: to represent them as best I could in Ottawa and be the voice for the small guy. I always put my riding and my province first, sometimes to my own peril," said one former provincial politician.

This outsider sentiment is particularly striking when it is contrasted with each MP's involvement in his or her own community. Notwithstanding their professed outsider status, most future Parliamentarians had in common the fact that they had each spent years taking an active interest in the proverbial "public square." Whether through their profession, their volunteer commitments or a combination of both, they had opportunities to interact, often extensively, with a cross-section of their community. It was often these experiences — both positive and negative — that ultimately let them to channel their energies into public life.

Some had this experience as a result of jobs in the broader public sphere, such as journalists, teachers or social workers. Others served as provincial politicians, or supplemented their day jobs with positions on school boards or on municipal councils. Many volunteered in community or professional associations and some were active in their unions.

"It's called the House of Commons for a reason. It's for Canadians of all walks of life, having a say and their views represented. I don't think only lawyers and accountants have the ability to do that."

These experiences led many to discover that they had the power to successfully create change, however modest or grand its form. They liked the taste of those accomplishments.

One MP recalled serving as the president of the local Chamber of Commerce when the major employer in the region announced widespread cuts. "It was a really difficult time for the community," the MP said. "You had young men who were mostly hard-rock miners in their 20s and 30s [whose well-paying jobs] just disappeared overnight." The future MP became heavily involved with the community's response to the job crisis and realized that this involvement could influence change. It was also a lesson in

how government mattered. "The policy the provincial and federal governments were going to pursue in response was going to make a difference in individual people's lives. That rekindled an earlier interest and my involvement in politics has been pretty consistent since then."

For others, they became sensitive to a system that excluded people or a community that was struggling. One MP worked for a retailer, and the job involved visiting women in rural communities who wanted to work for the company. This provided a unique insight into the poverty affecting those living on the Prairies. "I don't know how many women I saw there that were trying to get enough money just to survive," the MP said. "The social infrastructure [in agricultural communities]... is still a problem."

Occasionally, the MPs' community work exposed them to what government could do, and motivated them to action when they learned that it wasn't up to the task. One MP, who worked with abused children, recalled receiving the news that a child, for whom they couldn't secure adequate support, had committed a murder. "The child was really abused. We tried to get him out of the area he was in. Government wouldn't listen and we couldn't get anything done for this child. When he went into the school system he became very aggressive. His mother, when he was six, said, 'Is he going to have to kill somebody to get help?' Well, at the age of 21 he did. So [my spouse said], 'You have to go to Ottawa. Somebody's got to go. They've got to understand.'"

Despite a limited interaction with federal politics and their feeling of being outside national civic life, almost all Parliamentarians demonstrated a willingness to take the step, however tentatively, toward becoming an Ottawa insider. In some cases, it was in opposition: taking aim at the perceived inside. In others, it was a strong sense of identification elsewhere, such as a geographic, ethnic or cultural community they felt was ill-represented in national life. Whatever their reasons, each MP found the status quo lacking, but had enough experience and respect for the public sphere to see serving in Parliament as a worthwhile endeavour.

In essence, from this narrative a clear paradox emerges. It is ironic that those who consistently describe themselves as outsiders have, in fact, been intimately involved in the lives of their communities. More than anything, this is perhaps best viewed as an observation on our political culture. Perhaps our politics attract the underdogs or people from outside the mainstream, or maybe it's more that we, as citizens, feel more comfortable defining ourselves that way.

This paradox may also highlight the fact that politics has become something for which it's inappropriate and even uncouth to acknowledge interest or ambition, even after the fact. If that is, in fact, the case, it's no wonder that people don't consider public life, or claim to stumble into it so accidentally.

So notwithstanding their wide variety of backgrounds, interests and perspectives, these future MPs all answered yes, and agreed to stand for the nomination.

D

The Nomination: A Black Box

Once a citizen decides to run for office there is a key hurdle to clear before the election: securing the nomination of one's political party. It is extremely rare in Canada for candidates running as independents to win a seat, so this means that to secure a place in Parliament, a contender must first win the support of their political party.

This process is usually (although not always, as we'll see) coordinated by the local riding association, which is both the local representation of a political party and the organization charged with identifying, selecting and supporting candidates. This is a crucial step in our electoral process, particularly for candidates representing a "safe seat" — a riding that is consistently represented by MPs from the same political party — where the nomination process is akin to the general election.

NOT A TRANSPARENT PROCESS

At first glance, the nomination procedure seems straightforward: the candidate with the most votes wins the nomination. While this may appear simple enough, it often isn't. It is perhaps best described as a black box — a system whose purpose is known, but whose inner workings cannot be easily seen or understood. A candidate must earn the support of as many members of the political party's local riding association as possible. Often the easiest way to do this is to get new people to join the party, usually by selling memberships to family, friends and colleagues. If others are also seeking the nomination (which is often, but not always, the case), sometimes fierce competitions ensue. Generally the rules provide that, on the day of the vote, the candidate must ensure that friends, family and other supporters not only show up at the convention, but also remain on-site throughout what can be numerous consecutive rounds of voting until the result of the final ballot is declared.

Even within this group of MPs — all of whom were their party's nominees — most found the process to be perplexing and uncomfortable. Many struggled at times to articulate how it functioned, citing a lack of clarity in timelines, sources of decision making, and the application of the rules. Descriptions varied widely from riding to riding and the process appeared subject to a host of idiosyncrasies.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Based on our interviews, it wasn't always clear who was in charge of the nomination process and how one candidate was to interact with the others. Few received formal instruction or guidance from their association. Sometimes the association lacked neutrality, working against some candidates in favour of others. "There's too much power in the hands of the central committee," one MP said of riding associations. "They try to interfere, get their person nominated, and then they wonder… why people don't care." Another remarked, "It's a legitimate concern that you can stack the deck against one candidate or another."

In other cases, there appeared to be no governance or oversight at all. In the absence of any local party structures, one candidate set up their own riding association, sold memberships, organized the nomination vote — and won.

It wasn't just the riding association that could influence a candidate's fate. In some cases, the leader of the national party intervened, declaring candidates outright or bestowing support on a favoured individual. Sometimes, this was the result of a perceived need to increase ethnic, cultural or gender diversity in the party. While recipients of this appointment were happy, sometimes such decisions appeared arbitrary and caused bitterness among opponents at the local level. "I don't think I would have been here today if not for that appointment. I've never been a person of means," admitted one MP who

was leader-anointed. "[Yet], that appointment marred a lot of debates and discussions that I was involved in, whether with the media or in community all-candidate debates. The whole business of 'you were appointed' came in."

In other cases, individuals opted to disregard direct orders from federal party headquarters. In one situation, a candidate was told to hold off the nomination bid in a particular riding until further instructed by party leadership. The candidate decided to forge ahead without the party's consent. "I was pretty desperate... we started setting up memberships while the party was still exploring possible candidates," said the MP. "I sold enough memberships to scare anyone else off. I didn't ask permission of [the party leader]. I just did it."

WHAT ARE THE RULES?

Beyond questions of meddling by party leadership or riding associations, the nomination process was thought to have unfolded inconsistently and often with pliable rules. Confusion was a common complaint. Sometimes, candidates were officially selected by their riding association with very little time to spare, leaving only a matter of weeks or days to mobilize for the national campaign. "There were a lot of rumours about who was going to be nominated," said one MP whose nomination was confirmed only four days before the start of the national election campaign. This left only a few days to assemble a team and strategy. "It was a very messy situation."

The practice of selling party memberships to garner more votes was also a point of contention with many MPs. There were questions surrounding the financing of new memberships. "Who do you think pays for these memberships? I mean give me a break. People raise money and buy memberships for other people," observed one MP.

There were also discrepancies between federal election rules and party nomination rules. In federal elections one must be 18 years of age to vote, but in some nomination races, younger teenagers had memberships and were eligible to cast ballots. "Memberships were free [in my riding] and just about everybody over 14 years of age was signed up. So, about 4,000 attended. Probably about 3,600 voted on the first ballot. Over a period of time, and by keeping our people there, we were able, on the fourth ballot, to get enough votes to win," explained one MP.

There were also questions surrounding the importance and exploitation of identity and category politics, including the power wielded by religious institutions, ethnic groups and single issue lobbies. Several felt citizens were subject to manipulation by figures of influence within the party association. In some cases there were stories of groups of people being bused in from other ridings on the day of the convention, solely to vote for a specific candidate.

HOW DID IT FEEL?

While no one enters politics expecting it to be easy, the nomination process can be particularly challenging. Many MPs we spoke to found the entire exercise exasperating and even absurd. "Terrible. Just horrendous, the worst political experience of my life," said one MP.

Citizens were often simply corralled for the event and asked only to sign up for a party membership, show up and vote for their candidate. They were not asked to contribute to the party's discussions in any meaningful way. And yet they were all official party members.

"People who weren't [from the party] bought memberships and voted for me, for that one night. The part I found troubling was creating instant supporters," remarked another MP.

There was also damage inflicted during the contest. Wounds from nomination battles run particularly deep and few MPs who'd been involved in contested nominations reflected positively on the nomination process. "I ended up winning by, I think, two votes on the third ballot. It was unbelievable. I'd never been through anything like it.... Nominations seemed to be more personal than an election campaign. A general election is about platforms and leaders. Nominations are all about encouraging people to get out and vote. Because it tends to be more personal, there tends to be harder feelings after, and that's not pleasant," explained one MP. The contest is reduced to details of character, communication skills, and personal charm. Another MP concluded: "It can be nasty."

Many MPs described the process as random, and were often unclear what was required to win. "Some 7,000 people bought membership cards. There were six of us running and they all ganged up against me on the second ballot. It was four o'clock in the morning or so by the time I won, with a 74 vote majority," one MP recalled. Another described their long experience in navigating the nomination process: "Eventually, it came down to a number of meetings, and finally it was narrowed down to three candidates. There were around 400 people casting ballots at the [local] recreation centre. Those in the room had the right to vote, and whomever came out on top would be the candidate. I wound up winning that nomination by one vote. And that one vote margin changed my life."

Despite the predominance of confusion and criticism, a few MPs mentioned two positive aspects of the nomination process: first, it was a practice round for the actual election, and second, it helped challenge and polish the contenders' views. One MP described on it as a chance for candidates to debate issues, refine their strategies and gain greater confidence in their role as a public figure. "It was good practice for the general election," said the MP.

A few others pointed out that, because the nomination race was usually among people with similar values, it allowed candidates to explore finer details of community issues and policies, exchanging ideas with each other and with the local party members.

At its best, the nomination process offered a chance to closely explore and debate issues that were important to the community the candidates hoped to serve in Ottawa.

At its worst, it was a manifestation of all the shallowest perceptions people have of politics — an opaque, manipulative and even cruel game — turning both citizens and candidates away from the political process altogether.

Most of the Parliamentarians we interviewed made the transition from a private to a public citizen incredibly quickly and felt deeply honoured to have the chance to serve the public. Whatever their successes in their previous careers, they were now sent to Ottawa to serve their communities, and the nation, in a job for which they had very little preparation, and for which there was no official job description.

As one MP remarked: "All of a sudden I said, 'I'm going to Ottawa.' I had never planned to do that. It was just one of those things that happened."

Conclusion

Anyone can run for political office in Canada. To our surprise, the majority of the MPs we interviewed did not grow up in political families, and few had long-standing political party involvement. Most weren't lawyers and hadn't studied political science. The backgrounds, family histories, cultures, levels of education and careers represented by this group of MPs were amazingly varied, and did not always point to a career in politics. Most chose to spend a large portion of their lives working outside of the political sphere. They were not the consummate insiders we expected.

In fact, these MPs considered themselves outsiders, even though they didn't directly use that word. Whether because of personal identity, experience, region or particular political views, the MPs who participated in this project strongly felt that their communities were not being adequately represented in Parliament. They measured the status quo and found it lacking. This outsider sentiment stood in stark contrast to the MPs' strong community connections and experiences.

Another surprise was the series of apparently random occurrences that surrounded the transition from individual citizen to political leader. No matter the political ambition, a person was usually asked to run by an acquaintance or community group. This is an interesting feature inherent in the system, ensuring that the representative of a political party normally cannot entirely self-select for public office. It also means that our democratic system has the capacity to be as vibrant, as varied, and as accessible as the citizens of any given community — as long as those citizens know how it works. Anyone can be asked to run, and anyone can do the asking.

Still, if the process by which a person makes the transition to federal politics can seem accidental, then the process by which they win the support of their local riding can be confusing, mysterious and inconsistent. Most MPs expressed frustration when discussing the

nomination. Because this process is not transparent, the inner workings are subject to manipulation by riding associations, the national leadership of the party, as well as local groups. Many complained or questioned this process, which is surprising considering these were the people who had navigated it successfully. When the winner of a race complains about the rules of the competition, it may bear closer scrutiny.

There are a number of observations to draw from this portrait of the accidental citizen. On the one hand, people who have little experience in politics or who weren't raised on politics as kids can become MPs. We have no established "political class." You don't need to be a millionaire or have attended certain schools. But on the other hand, people come to political leadership in ways that seem quite accidental and not as a result of long planning and preparation. Or if they did prepare, political ambition is something that they tended to explain away, as if it's somehow not acceptable to admit to it. Perhaps, in our political culture, it is desirable to be an outsider, or at least to be seen as one.

We hope that this report will be a basis for further discussion and will contribute to a greater understanding of political leadership in Canada. The exit interview project stems from the premise that the system is robust and elastic, but only to the extent that the wider citizenry understands how it works and is willing to engage with it. Maybe, with time, the project will draw attention to those things that function well in our public life, as well as contribute to a constructive discourse on what can be improved. For example, we hope this will create discussion on how one can get involved in politics, how one can become a Parliamentarian and how certain parts of the process, such as the nomination, can be made more transparent. We also hope that this discussion will be a stepping stone for our future exit interview reports, which will elaborate on further areas of our interviews beginning in the fall of 2010.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Our next publication will pick up with the MPs' arrival in Ottawa and focus on how these citizens navigated their new lives and roles as Members of Parliament. A Member of Parliament may be among the most important jobs in the country, and yet there is no official description of the role; it is a position that can be and is interpreted in a variety of ways.

We will release a series of reports that elaborate on the nature of political leadership in Canada, based on the reflections of the MPs to whom we spoke. These reports will discuss how the MPs conceived of their job, how they spent their time as Parliamentarians, including how they worked through caucus and committees. They will also describe how these MPs view our political culture and reflect on their experience serving in a minority Parliament. We will also explore the relationships between MPs and civil society, either directly through their interactions with their constituents, with citizens' associations and lobby groups, as well as indirectly, through the media. Finally, we will also share how the MPs describe their victories and frustrations, and the advice they have for strengthening our democracy.

For more stories and information on this project, please visit 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, Susan Simms and 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 gave generously of 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. Thank you equally to those MPs who also agreed to participate and to whom we have not yet spoken. We were warned that there would be reluctance among many to participate in this project, and we were delighted to learn that this wasn't the case.

We are also grateful to those who worked with us to organize and conduct the interviews. Marième Forest interviewed former MPs in Quebec 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. Each also reviewed and provided helpful comments on early drafts of this report.

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.

Joshua Knelman provided leadership in framing, drafting and editing the report. Sarah Blanchard, Grant Burns, Suzanne Gallant, Shila Honig and Myna Kota provided equally valuable help in analyzing the interview transcripts and selecting quotations. Along with Andreas Krebs, they also suggested many improvements to the text.

Peter McNelly 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, and to Paul Kim for designing this publication. We are also grateful to the team at Trioro for designing the web version of this report, and to Alison MacMillan for filming the online video. Thank you to Patrick Johnston for suggesting we get advice from former Parliamentarians in the first place.

A number of people reviewed earlier drafts and provided important suggestions for improvement, including Elly Alboim, Yaroslav Baran, Professor Sylvia Bashevkin, Professor William Cross, Professor David Docherty, Léo Duguay, Dr. Chaviva Hošek, Professor Luc Juillet, Francis LeBlanc, Professor Peter Loewen, Professor Jonathan Malloy, Velma McColl, Professor Matthew Mendelsohn, Jack Murta, Geoff Norquay, Susan Simms, Sinead Tuite and William Young. 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, Robert Prichard and Perry Spitznagel.

— Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan

Participating MPs

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

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

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, ensuring that these individuals came 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 experts in the development of this project. While the report is not intended as academic research, academics from across Canada including from the University of British Columbia, Wilfrid Laurier University, the University of Toronto, Queen's University, Carleton University,

the University of Ottawa and Memorial University all provided input into the interview process to ensure it was built on existing literature. Samara also consulted political journalists, current and former Parliamentarians and senior public servants.

INTERVIEW STYLE

The interview questions 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 the MPs' responses. We felt this approach would better capture the nuances of their 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 each 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 from the transcript statements that they did not want to appear on the public record, a request we honoured in the very 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, as we were 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 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: June 2010

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 or contact us at 416-960-7926.

The Samara Centre for Democracy

33 Prince Arthur Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5R 1B2
416-960-7926 | info@samaracanada.com

@SamaraCDA SamaraCanada @SamaraCDA