

Humans of the House Episode 1: You Wanna Run?

Episode Transcript

[dark string music swells]

Sabreena Delhon: These days we hear a lot about the state of democracy in Canada and around the world. How fragile it is, how it's under threat and regressing.

SOUND CLIPS: Protestors shouting "Lock him up! Lock him up! Lock him up!", "Freedom, freedom, freedom!", trucks honking

Sabreena Delhon: Democracy is in the headlines. Those sounds you just heard are from Bloomberg and the Ottawa Citizen.

Even though this concern is front and centre, it feels really hard to talk about it. So a lot of us are just avoiding the topic of politics altogether.

We're avoiding *that* uncle with *those* posts on Facebook. The news? You might be avoiding that too.

We made this show for you, *and* everyone you're keeping distance from. Because democracy works when we all participate,

When we recognize the humanity in each other, and in the people who represent us in government.

I'm Sabreena Delhon. Welcome to Humans of the House.

[THEME MUSIC]

Sabreena Delhon: This show isn't talking *about* Members of Parliament, we are talking *to* them – digging under the surface to learn what it's really like to represent your community in our nation's capital. We wanted to know everything: what happens behind the scenes, including all the drama and political intrigue. But at the heart of it, we wanted to explore MPs as human beings with their own stories to tell.

And you know what? They were into it.

Sabreena Delhon, in interview: Could you please tell us your name, the riding you served in and the years you were in office?

Matt DeCoursey: Happy to, and thanks very much Sabreena. Uh, Matt DeCoursey...

Kennedy Stewart: Kennedy Stewart.

Catherine McKenna: I'm Catherine McKenna.

Adam Vaughan: Adam Vaughan.

Scott Brison: Scott Brison.

Lisa Raitt: My name is Lisa Raitt.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: Celina Caesar-Chavannes.

James Cumming: James Cumming.

Cheryl Hardcastle: Cheryl Hardcastle.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I represented the wonderful riding of the town of Whitby...

James Cumming: Edmonton Centre...

Cheryl Hardcastle: Windsor-Tecumseh, in the NDP caucus...

Lisa Raitt: ...the Conservative minority government.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: My name is, uh, Robert-Falcon Ouellette. I am not in a political party, but I was a Liberal.

Peter Kent: My name is Peter Kent. Member of Parliament for Thornhill. And it was a terrific honor to serve in the House of Commons.

Romeo Saganash: My name is Romeo Saganash. I served, uh, for the huge riding of, uh, Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, so you'll be speaking to half of the province of Quebec right here, right now. [chuckles]

Sabreena Delhon: We spoke to a dozen former MPs. And they've got stories.

[upbeat music plays]

Sabreena Delhon: They also have solid advice on how to improve the experience of *being* an MP, for the person behind the title, but also for us. You and me. The public they serve.

We're talking to former MPs who served at some point in the last two parliaments, so people who left office between 2015 and 2021.

But just before we get to the MPs, our producer Elena hit the street to ask:

Elena: Would you ever run for political office?

Passerby 1: I'm gonna have to say no.

Passerby 2: I don't think so.

Passerby 3: No.

Passerby 4: Nah, never.

Passerby 5: No. *[laughs]*

Passerby 6: I feel like I'm definitely not smart enough for that.

Passerby 1: I don't think I'm educated enough.

Passerby 7: You have to be so well-versed and well-read, and...

Passerby 1: It's a lot of pressure, and that's not really what I'm looking for in a job.

Passerby 3: No, because they're not forthcoming. They tell you nice things, but when they go in they sing a different song.

Passerby 2: People just say things and promise things just to get elected, and then they never fulfill those promises, so it's just very corrupt.

Passerby 8: I feel like I would want to make a difference, but how much of a capacity would I have to actually make a difference?

Passerby 9: I think I would, if I, if I really believed something, I think it would be important to run for it.

[upbeat music ends]

Sabreena Delhon: Okay, so, people are saying a politician is smart and well-read but also maybe corrupt and breaks promises. And...no one wanted to do this job. Except for one guy at the end who kind of said yeah.

So I have to ask, who would put their hand up to enter a life of politics and public service? And how does it begin?

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Politics actually wasn't a part of growing up. Generally my family was too concerned about surviving.

Sabreena Delhon: That's Robert-Falcon Ouellette. He represented Winnipeg Centre. I started all our MP exit interviews by asking former MPs about their path to politics.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I was homeless as a child, and we'd have our own financial issues. My mom would have her mental health challenges as well related to that, and making sure that we didn't end up in the care of the state...

Sabreena Delhon: Robert's mother managed to get a loan to send him to private school, which is where he got his first taste of politics.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: My mom, she sent me to Strathcona-Tweedsmuir, in Calgary, Alberta, which is, you know, a pretty good, uh, private school.

They had a program where you had to kind of contribute to a political party in some way during an election. And the one that was across from my apartment, it was the NDP.

I went over there 'cause it was the easiest to get to, it involved the least amount of work for my mother who was working constantly.

Sabreena Delhon: For the record, Robert was a Liberal MP. But we're still at the very beginning of his story.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: You know, I learned how to knock on doors and I was only, I think, around 14 years old. It was a lot of fun. Uh, I really enjoyed myself. And I kind of put that in the back of my mind and off I went in my life, and I joined the military. I shipped off to Quebec, learned how to speak French...

Sabreena Delhon: Robert was in the military for over 25 years during which time he was also pursuing an academic career.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I was a prof actually in, at the University of Manitoba, program director for the Aboriginal focus programs.

I was writing, uh, research as an anthropologist about the city, analyzing the interaction between the different social groups and how politics interacts and, you know, I was complaining to one of my friends about it.

And he said, well, quit complaining and do something, run for office. And I was like, oh, run for office. Well, you know, I'm, let's run for mayor and see what happens.

[lively music]

Sabreena Delhon: Robert-Falcon Ouellette did not become mayor of Winnipeg. He had an unsuccessful run again in 2022. But back in 2014, after losing his first mayoral campaign, he ran for the Liberals federally, the very next year – and won.

He went to Ottawa with a mission. It was sparked by a very specific experience in his riding of Winnipeg Centre.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: The riding is a very interesting riding. We have a very large Indigenous population, newcomer population. We also have French speaking people in the riding. It is one of the poorest ridings that you can find with some of the highest rates of child poverty. We, uh, have a lot of homelessness. We also have a lot of the institutions. Like the seat of government is there, all the major arts organizations.

So it's kind of this juxtaposition of Canadian society where you have the elites side by side with the, you know, the, the person living on the street, uh, with addictions, uh, child prostitution, you have everything in Winnipeg Centre. It is a microcosm of everything that is right and wrong in Canadian society.

Sabreena Delhon: Was there a moment? A spark?

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: The reason I was running is I had done something called the CEO Sleep Out, where the CEOs of Winnipeg sleep out for a night in the streets. And so I did the Sleep Out and I met a young guy. He was about 19 years old. He had been in 77 different foster families throughout his life. He was living on the streets. He wasn't doing very well. He didn't really feel anyone really cared for him...and he's probably right. Government hasn't really found a way of addressing how to look after individuals who are most vulnerable, which were children. And I knew a lot of people said, "Well, it's not federal jurisdiction, child and family services," but it is because he was Indigenous.

And, you know, because the federal government created the Indian Act in 1876, they have federal responsibility under the Canadian constitution. They have a responsibility to fix the problems that they created, and let's see what we can do.

Sabreena Delhon: Robert is Cree and Metis from his dad's side.

In 2015, he was sworn in as a Member for Parliament with a wave of new Liberals. While his party brought him to Ottawa, his focus was on the people of his riding.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Our goal, I think as MPs, is not to just simply be the voice of Ottawa back to the constituents, reading our talking points, which a lot of MPs do. And it actually kind of makes me sick, to be honest, when, when I hear them, on the Conservatives, NDP or the Liberals, uh, my colleagues that, you know, who have thoughts, who are intelligent, but sometimes refuse to use their own thoughts, and use their own decision making, their own value system and allow someone else to make that for them, they just read those talking points. I think it's important to be the voice of the citizens back to Ottawa and to fight for what they need.

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: Robert's path to being an MP emerged from a combination of his very difficult start in life, and exposure to politics in school. Same goes for former NDP MP, Kennedy Stewart, who also found the political spark as a student.

Kennedy Stewart: Our poli-sci professor said, oh, you can write a paper or you can go out and work on a provincial election campaign.

Sabreena Delhon: That was at Acadia University in Nova Scotia. Kennedy was an MP in British Columbia, but he's from the east coast.

Kennedy Stewart: I grew up, I would say fairly middle class in rural Nova Scotia, you know, my dad had a good job, and we had a nice house and everything. And then, in the late 1970s, we had a recession, my dad lost his job and, uh, we lost our home, went bankrupt. And that kind of slide from a very comfortable middle class life with tennis lessons and vacations to living in, uh, essentially rural poverty, in one of the poorest areas of Canada at that point was a big introduction to inequality and that has forever shaped me. It really was very, very hard on my family, it essentially, you know, blew my family apart. And I don't think I had a really stable housing situation until my thirties. So that one event really shaped my understanding of power, from not realizing I had some, to having none. And, uh, it also drives my commitment to, as a politician as to who I wanna help.

Sabreena Delhon: Well before someone runs, they have to get through the nominations process. Um, could you tell us your nomination story?

Kennedy Stewart: Yeah. So, uh, the first time I ran was 2004. Jack Layton was a new Leader, and a friend of mine said, "Hey, there's a seat open for the NDP in Vancouver Centre. We've never won that before, but, uh, it might be a good experience for you." So I decided to go for it.

And there was a nomination race, where I was not the favorite candidate. But I ended up winning. But the nomination process is pretty difficult.

Sabreena Delhon: Okay – wait. I just wanna check in with you. Do you know what it takes to *become* a nominee? What does Kennedy mean by a nomination race? I want to explain this but I'm going to need some back-up here. I'm going to turn it over to our producer Elena with Beatrice, our research manager.

[music]

Elena: Hey Beatrice!

Beatrice: Hey!

Elena: Okay, so here's what I *do* know. If you wanna become an MP, you need to run. But before you can run a campaign in an election, which is what all of us see, there's another process. You first need to become a nominee for a party. You know, the Liberals, the Conservatives, the NDP, the Green Party.

Can we start there, Beatrice? How important is it to be picked up by a political party?

Beatrice: That's a great question. It's super rare to win a seat as an independent. Over the last 30 years, 99% of members of Parliament were elected as representatives of a party.

Elena: Wow!

Beatrice: Yeah. The way parties choose candidates ultimately controls the pool of who's in Parliament.

Elena: So how do they choose those candidates?

Beatrice: It's interesting. Each party has an EDA, which is an electoral district association, and it's run by party volunteers, and they run the contests. But these associations, particularly recently, they've become much more under the influence of the central party.

So sometimes a party just appoints a candidate and there's no contest at all. That's just the person who represents that riding in the elections. But even when there is a contest, 70% of nomination contests only have one person running! So...is that really a competitive contest?
[laughs]

Elena: Yeah. Is that really a race? Wow. Is there a reason that so many nomination contests only have one person running?

Beatrice: So the thing is, it's really, really hard to say. It would be great to know when and why parties reject people who wanna run. So like, if more people are running than we realize and parties are telling them no.

Elena: Right.

Beatrice: But the problem is that there's really little information because parties aren't required to report this information. So we don't know how many people have been disallowed. We don't even get to know how many votes were cast in the nomination process.

Elena: Ah, that's annoying.

Beatrice: I wanna know, I'm a researcher! I need the data!

Elena: *[laughs]*
How much money does it take to run for a nomination?

Beatrice: So for one thing, there's the application fee, um, and the Greens and NDP don't have any, so you don't have to spend any money to apply in that sense. Um, the Conservative party asks for a thousand dollar deposit, um, and the Liberals charge a \$1,500 non-refundable fee. But that's just the application fee. The real costs are those associated with trying to gather the needed votes to win the nomination.

The NDP has a limit of \$6,500. And election candidate does set a cap for nomination contests.

Elena: Hmm.

Beatrice: And they vary by district, and they're high, over 20 grand in most places. So it can cost big bucks, if you got 'em, to become a candidate.

Elena: And that's not even getting into the, if you win the nomination, then you have to run a campaign and that's so expensive, right?

Beatrice: Definitely. This is just the very, very, very first step. It seems like it would be a really big barrier. The problem is that we just don't know how much of a barrier it is because there's just very little transparency.

Elena: Well, cool. Thank you so much for providing me with, uh, the information that we do have about this process.

Beatrice: Thank you, Elena!

Sabreena Delhon: Thanks team! So that's the nomination process. And there's a lot to digest there. As Beatrice mentioned, you have to be affiliated with a party. That's been the case for 99% of candidates over the last 30 years. It's a must.

Let's get back to Kennedy Stewart and his nomination story. Was he invited to run?

Kennedy Stewart: No, no, I wasn't invited to do this. In fact, when I won my nomination in 2011, the entire executive resigned that night 'cause they wanted the other person to win so much. So, um, anyway. Yeah. So...

Sabreena Delhon: Wow.

Kennedy Stewart:...that wasn't a great experience. I've talked to lots of other MPS and they kind of have similar experiences and nominations.

Sabreena Delhon: Having the whole executive walk makes for a pretty rocky nomination process. It's why he critiques the lack of standardization for nominations. After all, nominations are the key entry point for an aspiring MP.

Not only that, Kennedy Stewart didn't have anyone ask him to run.

Other MPs, however, are hand-picked, with personal invites to run.

Like who? Well, that's next.

[AD BREAK]

Sabreena Delhon: Before the break, we heard from multiple MPs who put their own hands up and might've even surprised *themselves* by running for office.

Now, let's hear from someone who was personally approached.

Romeo Saganash: The late, uh, Jack Layton approached me in 2005 or 2006.

Sabreena Delhon: That's Romeo Saganash and he's talking about Jack Layton who led the NDPs to an influx of new MPs with the Orange Wave, back in 2011. Five or six years before that, Romeo was giving a speech in St. Jerome, Quebec:

Romeo Saganash: They invited me to speak on Indigenous peoples and the constitution and international law.

Jack Layton was in the back of the room. After I did my speech, uh, he came over, and said, “Would you eventually consider the possibility...” *[laughs]* It was a long winded question of that sort. “...the possibility, uh, one day, to run for, for my party, uh, federally.”

I said, well, Jack, my, my kids are still growing up. When I’m ready I’ll give you a call.

Sabreena Delhon: Romeo had spent decades working in legal and policy Leadership roles for the Grand Council of the Crees. But this was his invitation to join federal politics and he took his time with his decision. But once he decided he was in, things happened fast.

Romeo Saganash: Uh, 2011, he was in Toronto and I said, uh, I think, um, I’m ready to go for it. And he asked me, uh, what are you doing tomorrow?

So, I traveled the next day from Quebec city to Toronto, sat down with him for three hours.

Sabreena Delhon: They talked about where Romeo should run.

Romeo Saganash: I wanted to run Quebec City because everybody knew me in Quebec City. Jack never said no, but he said let me put it this way, Romeo. If you look at all of the global challenges that we have on this planet, the climate emergency crisis, resource development, protection of the environment, water, Indigenous peoples, and the future of our relations with indigenous peoples, take all these global challenges, there is one riding in this country that has all of those challenges and it’s northern Quebec. And he said, “Buddy, I think you should go home.” So I did.

Sabreena Delhon: Romeo won in 2011 with the Orange Wave, and won again in 2015. He promised Mr. Layton two mandates, maximum, and he stuck to that, deciding not to run again.

Romeo Saganash: My community has always been very proud of me. Throughout my career, whatever I chose to do, they supported me.

But also I must say that Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou is perhaps one of the most difficult ridings to represent in House of Commons, because, there are three different Indigenous nations in the riding, the two Algonquin communities, nine Cree communities, 14 Inuit communities and all of the non-Indigenous communities in the riding depend on resource development.

So you can easily imagine how difficult sometimes issues were where the Indigenous were opposed to a certain development project that was, uh, supported by the non-Indigenous in community. So when you have a legal background, it’s easier, of course, because you can explain the rights that are involved.

Sabreena Delhon: Romeo benefited from his training as a lawyer while in the House of Commons. This training also served Lisa Raitt. She was courted by several parties.

Sabreena Delhon: Can you tell me about your life before you moved into politics? What were you doing?

Lisa Raitt: I was the CEO of the Toronto Port Authority, and my job by its nature was political.

It always had that element to it where I'd find myself at, at opposition with the government or with the board the time. At first it was a Liberal government under Jean Chretien and Paul Martin. And I was asked and invited to go up and have lunch with a Senator.

And I think the assumption was that I was Liberal and that I would eventually run for them one day. And I remember, uh, it was just after an election where they won every seat in Ontario pretty much, but they really didn't win anything in Nova Scotia, in the place that I was born.

So I said to him, look, uh, I understand you have a majority government. That's great, but you know, what's the plan for getting the votes back in Atlantic Canada. And his response was we don't care about them. If I can win 99 ridings in Ontario, what do I need the east coast for? And that really stuck with me.

I didn't like it. It really bugged me.

Uh, but I had always thought politics was gonna be somewhere in my life. You know, my family would say "She'll be prime minister one day."

And the more times people say that to you, the more times it becomes manifested in you and maybe you develop your career on that path. And certainly it appears that's what I did.

The Conservatives, however, were a different ball of wax. They came in in 2006, assumed I was a Liberal skill, and did a forensic audit of the Port Authority to see whether or not I had abused expenses or did something untoward. And the conclusion at the end of the day was there's nothing to see here, that it was actually quite squeaky clean. So when a gentleman by the name of Garth Turner, who was the Conservative holding the Halton seat in 2007, got thrown out of the Conservative caucus, they were looking for somebody to run against him, and my name came up as a possible candidate. So I was pursued by the Conservative party.

Sabreena Delhon: Just to jump in, this isn't your typical audit story.

Lisa Raitt: Um, they liked what I had done at the Port Authority. They certainly had gone through and vetted everything that they could vet when it came to me. I chose to run for the party in 2008, we were two weeks into the election before I even started campaigning.

Sabreena Delhon: Wow.

Lisa Raitt: And I won by 7,000 votes. And uh, I'm grateful and went right into cabinet.

Sabreena Delhon: Lisa's career in politics started when she was identified as a good candidate by a party and then courted to be one.

But what about when there's almost no start to politics because it's just always been there?

Sabreena Delhon: You grew up in a political household. Did you talk about politics at the dinner table? What was your impression of political life?

Adam Vaughan: The dinner table, in the garden. *[laughs]* On the bicycle, wherever you were, you talked politics.

Sabreena Delhon: This is Adam Vaughan, former Member of Parliament for Spadina-Fort York in downtown Toronto.

Adam Vaughan: Fortunately in my family, um, bedtime was when you fell asleep, not when the clock turned to a certain hour. And if you were interested, as I was, you could sit up all night and watch grown ups talk about politics and just learn what you learn.

Sabreena Delhon: Any specific early political memories?

Adam Vaughan: I think the first overtly political memory I have is at the age of, uh, six. Um, my parents were at the convention that elected Pierre Trudeau...

SOUND CLIP: *announcer announces "Pierre E. Trudeau, 1203." Crowd roars.*

Sabreena Delhon: You're hearing just a taste of that convention Adam was talking about, from CBC in 1968.

Adam Vaughan: And I remember when my parents came back from that convention, um, what I got to keep were all the buttons.

So I had all the Trudeau buttons from '68, to Winters, Turner, Kierans, the whole mob.

Sabreena Delhon: That's an incredible memory.

SOUND CLIP: *Pierre Trudeau speaking at the convention: "Canada must be unified. Canada must be one. Canada must be progressive, and Canada must be a just society." Crowd cheers.*

Adam Vaughan: Following the convention, there was the campaign of '68.

I remember, the rally that was held in Nathan Phillips Square for Pierre Trudeau when he came to town, came up Bay Street in white convertibles with, uh, Liberal, youth workers with orange hats and white miniskirts and bell bottoms. And we were actually part of a children's choir marching up the route, uh, sort of waving little Canadian flags, and swept up in the moment of Trudeaumania, which my father was helping to manufacture.

Sabreena Delhon: So that was Adam Vaughan's childhood. And people in Toronto may remember him as a TV news journalist, and then a city councillor, but it was art that got him interested in politics.

Adam Vaughan: Started to do art, and illustration, and living in a warehouse, when the city knocked on the door one day and said I wasn't allowed to live in a warehouse as an artist and create with my partner who was a painter. I was an illustrator and a cartoonist, and they tried to evict us. And then they tried to tax us as a business.

And we got involved with a number of people at that point in the early eighties who were trying to carve out space for the arts community in downtown Toronto, and out of that also came a much broader conversation about who was and who wasn't being housed.

And it became a conversation about local politics and about how we build a city that houses everybody.

Sabreena Delhon: Now if you remember, Adam Vaughan's father had also worked in federal politics...

Adam Vaughan: Trudeaumania, which my father was helping to manufacture.

Sabreena Delhon:...And it wasn't always rosy.

Adam Vaughan: My father had a big falling out with the elder Trudeau. And the fight he had with Pierre Trudeau was over cities, the need for a federal urban policy, and Pierre Trudeau basically kicked him out of the party at a major policy conference.

The phrase was, why would I wanna start a fight with 3000 mayors when I can't handle the 10 I have as premiers? And my father just said, well fine. If they're not interested, I'm

not interested. And walked away. And the first time I met Justin I sort of said, I gotta score to settle with you.

Sabreena Delhon: That would be Liberal Leader, and soon to be Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau.

Adam Vaughan: My father was right, and your father was wrong, and you still don't have a national urban strategy and you need to get one.

Sabreena Delhon: That's right. My dad versus your dad, and now I'm challenging *you*.

Adam Vaughan: And that was my first conversation with him. And I was walking down King Street and there was Justin walking down the street with Gerry Butts.

Sabreena Delhon: Gerry Butts was a close advisor to Justin Trudeau.

Adam Vaughan: And I said, listen, I got a proposition for you. I wanna talk to you about cities. I wanna show you where your policies are. You don't have a strategy. You don't have a policy. You're building your platform right now. Let us help you build it. Let me connect you to the people who'll help you get that done. And I was sort of, oh yeah, thanks very much. Thanks very much. And they went away and they went off to Vancouver. And, Gregor Robertson, the mayor of Vancouver had exactly the same conversation, 'cause we were working together on this.

Justin apparently said to the mayor of Vancouver, Why do I need to talk about cities? The only people who talk about cities are municipal politicians. And the chief of staff for Gregor basically said, that's because nobody in Toronto's talking about it. If you wanna have the conversation nationally, you have to have somebody leading that conversation in Toronto, 'cause that's where all the major media is. And, Justin said, so who do I get in Toronto? And they said, you should talk to a guy called Adam Vaughan.

And Justin said, isn't that, that guy that keeps stalking me on the street and giving me crap all the time? And Mike said, yeah, that sounds like Adam. And I got a call a week later saying, you wanna run?

Sabreena Delhon: So that's where Adam Vaughan's story of life in Ottawa starts, but as you can hear, politics was always there, in his family environment at home.

This is the case for others, too.

Matt DeCoursey: My grandmother had been the president of the women's association of the provincial Liberal association.

Sabreena Delhon: Matt DeCoursey, former MP for Fredericton, also had politics in his family.

Matt DeCoursey: My aunts had, uh, worked with, closely with Frank McKenna...

Sabreena Delhon: Frank McKenna was the former Premier of New Brunswick, in the late 80s and to late 90s, when Matt DeCoursey was still a kid. Coming out of university, Matt knew exactly what he wanted to do.

Matt DeCoursey: In 2005, I went to Ottawa and spent two years there working on the Hill as an assistant and really developing a keen flavor, for politics and for the life of a politician. And I think from that point on I kind of plotted a lot of things I did in that 10 to 15 year period with the view to one day, hoping to get into politics.

Sabreena Delhon: Politics wasn't just a far-off thing that happened in Ottawa. The DeCoursey family talked politics at home in New Brunswick.

Matt DeCoursey: April 2nd, 2014, uh, I went to my parents' place, the kitchen counter, which became a very important part of, uh, my time in politics. And on that day, my folks said to me, look, we've listened to you hum and haw about this long enough. If you wanna do it, now's the time to do it, but you gotta start today. We're all in, but if you jump, my dad said your first call is to Dan.

Sabreena Delhon: That would be Dan Leger, a campaign manager

Matt DeCoursey: So we sat down a few days later and I explained to him how I was ready to change the world. And the first thing he said to me is, uh, look, I don't care how you think you're gonna change the world. You need to win a nomination first.

Sabreena Delhon: *[laughs]*

Matt DeCoursey: So how many people can you get to a nomination? And that really set some of the expectations for me.

You can't make change if you can't be successful in winning. And winning, at its very base level, is a numbers game in politics. Can you get more people to come out and support you than the other person?

Sabreena Delhon: Matt did win the nomination.

Matt DeCoursey: It's still probably one of the, the most significant victories that I've had, like, in this sphere is winning a nomination because it's a very tough battle.

Sabreena Delhon: Matt's family knew who to call for a winning strategy, to get those numbers he needed.

Matt DeCoursey: It's never been lost on me the impact of family in this. I was probably able to pull out on the day of the nomination, maybe 50 to 60% of the people who were my friends, my peers, the people I had gone to sign up. My parents pulled like 99% of their people, right? Like people showed up for them.

Sabreena Delhon: Matt sees his family's political knowledge as one of several advantages for him.

Matt DeCoursey: I had the advantage of having experienced Parliament Hill before as a, as a young assistant. That place was established by the fathers of Confederation, right? You know, I was a guy, I'm white. I was still young, but approaching middle age. Not a lawyer, so, you know, like that, not exactly the same...

Sabreena Delhon: *[laughs]*

Matt DeCoursey:...not, you know, with the big gray beards and the gray hair, didn't come from an elite family but came from a very comfortable middle class family, right? With all the support in the world. And had been exposed to politics and encouraged towards it. I had every advantage going into that place. And I'm still proud of how I navigated it, but I know you're going to speak to a number of other former colleagues who had vastly different experiences.

Sabreena Delhon: We are, and we're very interested in your consciousness of your privilege.

Matt DeCoursey: Let me say, I think if you spoke to 2014, 2015, 2016, Matt DeCoursey, I might not have been as cognizant of all of those dynamics. You know, kind of understanding the privilege that I had in that place was a work in progress and continues to be a work in progress today.

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: Matt DeCoursey told us how important his family and friends were on his path to politics. Community also shaped an early political encounter for former Whitby, Ontario MP Celina Caesar-Chavannes.

Sabreena Delhon: I understand that your family campaigned for Jean Augustine.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: Yes! We were told because we came from Grenada that a Grenadian was running and we had to go to Toronto to help her.



Sabreena Delhon: Jean Augustine made history that year as the first Black woman to serve as an MP and in cabinet.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: At the time it was not really a civic engagement type thing. It was just helping someone from our community get elected. So there wasn't really this powerful sort of understanding of what that moment meant and what being part of that campaign actually meant for, not just for Grenada, but for Canada.

Sabreena Delhon: How was politics discussed in your home? Was a job in politics a viable path growing up in your household?

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I'm not sure if it was a viable path, it just wasn't presented as an option. So we had, you know, the typical immigrant family, um, and I don't mean to type-cast all immigrant families, but, you know, doctor, lawyer, accountant. I don't know of anyone who came as, as, from an immigrant family who's ever said, "Yeah, and politician." What did that even mean as a job anyway?

Sabreena Delhon: Fast forward from the '90s, from Celina's childhood, to her adult life as a CEO. She was running a business, researching the social impact of neurological conditions such as Alzheimer's. She wasn't anywhere near the political world.

Sabreena Delhon: So what made you think next, I should run for office?

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: So in 2013, I decided to do my executive MBA. Part of it had a political science course and the professor said, you know, you could use your political capital to solve a business problem. At the time I was co-chairing Canada's first epidemiology study on neurological conditions.

And we were hearing from people who were caretakers for those who had Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or epilepsy, and the challenges that they were facing, either they had to move from province to province to get their drugs covered, or they were, some families were divorcing their spouse in order to be able to get their spouse eligible for services.

And at the time I thought "I have a really big business problem. I don't have any political capital."

Sabreena Delhon: Once she identified that lack of political power, things moved fast.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: Googled it over the Christmas holidays, became a member for the first time in February of 2014.

Sabreena Delhon: A member of the Liberal Party. Requirements? Well, as long as you are of age and a resident of Canada, you can just sign up.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: Then got an email on March 8th, International Women's Day 2014, so less than three months later that said, "Invite her to run. Do you know a woman who would be successful, who's interested in democracy," something like that. "Who's fantastic and amazing." And I was just like, yeah, I know that woman. It's, it's me.

Sabreena Delhon: That was the beginning of Celina Caesar-Chavannes' time in Ottawa – a journey that began by hitting reply on a mass email.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I was running with a government that said they were bold, transformative. Um, diversity is our strength, add women, change politics. This is going to be absolutely transformative for Canada. Right?

Sabreena Delhon: The journey would be transformative for her, but not in the way she expected. We'll hear more in future episodes.

[soft music]

So – let's recap the path to politics. Some of the MPs were courted. Others made their own way in.

Some had their sights set on federal politics at an early age and others approached it as a second, or third, or fourth, career.

There's a lot of variation in these stories but one thing that's consistent throughout is a devotion to the job. A dedication to public service, and self-awareness about the human element in this role.

It's a contrast to what we're used to in the political conversation with personal, dehumanizing attacks.

Let me take you back to Romeo Saganash, the Cree lawyer originally from northern Quebec. We heard that Jack Layton personally asked him to run. But for Romeo, the clarity in his mission in life, whatever way he was going to serve it, came much, much earlier.

Romeo Saganash: Uh, people say I'm from Waswanipi, but that's untrue. I'm from the land. I'm from the forest, where I spent the first seven years of my life with my other siblings, and my parents, hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering. Then as most of my generation, uh, got kidnapped by the federal government and sent to residential school for the following 10 years.

When you realize that, at seven years old, you're caught in a place that you cannot escape, that the only reason why you are there is because you are Indigenous.

So when you understand those kind things, uh, at seven years old, you grew up to be a politician *[laughs]* in some way.

I came out of residential school, and I promised myself two things: first, that I would go back to the land. And I went back. The other thing I promised myself was to try to reconcile with the people that put me away for 10 years.

I feel like I completed the circle from being born on the land, ending up as a Member of Parliament in 2011.

[THEME MUSIC]

Sabreena Delhon: Now that we know about their path to politics, what happens to MPs in their early days on the job? In our next episode we'll hear more stories about what it's like when you finally arrive, as a Member of Parliament.

Thank you for listening to Humans of the House.

Credits:

Big thanks to all the former MPs and thank you for listening to Humans of the House.

This podcast is produced by Media Girlfriends for the Samara Centre for Democracy.

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