

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Members of Parliament Exit Interviews



About the MP Exit Interviews

Starting in 2009, staff from the charitable organization Samara began interviewing Members of Parliament after they'd left office. By the end, nearly 80 MPs had been interviewed—including 21 cabinet ministers, two party leaders and one former prime minister—from all parties and all regions of the country.

MPs' experiences can offer tremendous insight into the successes and failings of Canadian democracy and yet they're rarely consulted about what should be done to improve the political process. In the interviews, these men and women discussed what made them become politicians, what concerned them when they were in Ottawa and what they accomplished while they were in office.

From these interviews emerged four reports:

- 1 "The Accidental Citizen" details the MPs' backgrounds and paths to politics
- 2 "Welcome to Parliament" describes the MPs' initial orientation and the varied ways they defined their role
- 3 "It's My Party" summarizes how MPs spent their time in Parliament and their relationship with their political parties
- 4 "The Outsiders' Manifesto" reveals the MPs' advice to future Parliamentarians and offers recommendations for change

Samara is among the foremost charitable organizations dedicated to improving political participation in Canada. Through research and educational programs, Samara is reconnecting citizens to politics. This Educator's Guide was made possible by a grant from the S.M. Blair Family Foundation.

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is meant to be used with the four MP Exit Interview reports, which can be read individually or as a collection. They can be downloaded, at no cost, from the webpage found on each report page.

The reports and this guide can be used

- To illustrate the lives of Canadian leaders
- As background to a visit from an MP or other elected leader
- To bring university, college or high school curriculum to life
- In ESL classes to help newcomers learn about Canada's political culture

For each report, we offer a link to the main webpage, a link to download the report in English, a brief description as well as some questions and activities that can be assigned, used in tests or discussed in class.



An Educator's Guide to

The Accidental Citizen

Webpage

Download the Full Report

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 the country. When did these individuals 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? The answers are not what you'd expect. In fact, there are as many paths to Parliament as there are MPs. "The Accidental Citizen" tells the stories of what the MPs did before running for office and how they came to be federal representatives, including their concerns about the nomination process.

On deciding to run

"I was approached by someone [from the riding association] 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."

On getting the nomination

"So bingo, I'm the candidate. I still wasn't sure I wanted to do it."

On motivation

"You get chances in public life that you really don't get in private life."

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- 1 Many of the interviewed MPs denied that they planned to become political leaders. Why do you think this theme is so consistent across the MPs' recollections? Do you believe them?
- 2 What would be an ideal background for an MP?
- 3 The MPs described various motivations for running. What would trigger you to become a political leader?
- 4 Were you surprised by the MPs' description of the nomination process? Did you guess it would be so upsetting to participants?
- 5 Would you like to become an MP? Why or why not?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Debate the issue: Nominations should be decided by the local riding association vs. Nominations should be decided by the national party.



An Educator's Guide to

Welcome to Parliament: A Job with No Description

Webpage

Download the Full Report

For nearly all new MPs, federal politics represented a career change as well as a city change—most had worked in fields outside politics, and in cities or towns far from Ottawa. They arrived in Ottawa in awe of their surroundings and aware of the responsibility placed on their shoulders. “Welcome to Parliament” outlines the MPs’ concerns over the lack of preparation for their new role—for most there was no orientation, mentorship or goal-setting. The report also shows how the MPs held conflicting ideas regarding the role and purpose of a Member of Parliament: They didn’t agree on what they were elected to accomplish or even the essential purpose of the role.

On arriving in Ottawa

“I have to say, I knew very little about [how] Ottawa worked. I had never been there. The very first time I walked up to the doors of the House of Commons was after I was elected.”

On the lack of formal training

“You get there, they take you in the House, they give you a book [on] constituency rights and responsibilities, the former Speaker talks about being in the House and that’s it. There’s no orientation. There is no training. There is nothing on how to be effective.”

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- 1 Who is the MP’s “boss”? The party leader? The nominating committee? The constituents? Canadians in general? How might such a confusing reporting structure hamper the MPs’ abilities to do their jobs?
- 2 Describe the tension between the “trustee” definition of an MP and the “delegate” definition.
- 3 Many MPs describe spending a large proportion of their time providing services to their constituents. Others felt that time spent in the constituency was “a kind of substitute for real input and activity.” What is the appropriate balance for an MP?
- 4 Who should be responsible for training Members of Parliament when they enter office and why do you think the training and orientation from parties is lacking?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Create a job description for an MP. What are the key responsibilities for the job? What are the skills and life history required to do the job? How does your job description compare to the traditional definition, as defined on page 14 of the report?

An Educator's Guide to

“It’s My Party”: Parliamentary Dysfunction Reconsidered

Webpage

Download the Full Report

“It’s My Party” explores the MPs’ relationship with their political party, an all-encompassing word that came to mean, at various times, cabinet, the party leader, the whip or even un-elected party insiders and staff. The MPs explain how many of the elements of political leadership that alienate Canadians from public life—such as the vitriol in Question Period and the ineffectiveness of committees—are the direct result of incentives, discipline and advancement chosen by the party leadership. The MPs said that decisions from party leadership were opaque, arbitrary and even unprofessional and often ran counter to MPs’ stated motivations for entering public life in the first place: the desire to practice politics differently.

On being arbitrarily assigned to the justice ministry

“I said, ‘Tell the prime minister to call me back, I didn’t finish law school.’”

On forced voting

“I hate to tell you how many bills I had very little idea what I was voting on. That’s not necessarily my weakness, that’s just the reality.”

On having to vote against his conscience because of his party

“There was a pounding in caucus. We had to vote for this. And I did. I shouldn’t have. But I saw people who were much more committed to [the issue] than I, getting up to vote and crying because they had to vote for it.”

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the critical functions that political parties should serve? Which are the most important?
- 2 How would you suggest political parties could change to renew Canadians’ interest in and trust of democracy?
- 3 “I think that Question Period has become the greatest embarrassment and one the reasons politicians are frowned upon,” said one MP. Do you think that Question Period should change? Why or why not? What do the MPs recommend? What can we learn from the workings of other Parliaments in other countries?
- 4 To what do the MPs attribute the on-going bad behaviour in the House? What do they recommend to make the atmosphere more positive? Other than their political parties, what other factors might cause poor behaviour in the House?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Debate the issue: MPs are the representatives of their constituents and should be able to vote freely vs. MPs were elected based on their party affiliation so they should vote with their party in all cases.

An Educator's Guide to

The Outsiders' Manifesto: Surviving and Thriving as a Member of Parliament

Webpage

Download the Full Report

Opinion polls suggest Canadians view what happens in Ottawa as increasingly irrelevant, inconsequential and disconnected from their lives. MPs are some of the country's most engaged citizens and they are at the centre of solving our public challenges. "The Outsiders' Manifesto" explores the MPs' suggestions for how to improve Parliament, and offers their advice to anyone elected to office today or those considering politics for a career. They also tell the stories of their biggest successes of which they are most proud. As well, this final report in the MP Exit Interviews series lays out four of Samara's ideas for improving politics.

On committee work being ignored

"There's just a minister who takes [your report] and says, 'Thanks very much, we'll veto that. Goodbye.'"

On lobbying an MP through mass emails

"I thought it was a waste of valuable time and resources."

On advice for a successful experience in parliament

"Value the people you serve with and really build those relationships. Try to build friendships with colleagues across party lines."

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- 1 What did you think of the MPs' recommendations for change? Do you think they go far enough? What do you think they missed?
- 2 Which of the three proposed ways to improve citizen engagement with politics do you think would be most effective and why?
- 3 Given the growth in online petitions recently, what did you think of the MP's comment on page 13 that "all the people out there who felt they genuinely had a say had none whatsoever"?
- 4 What are some of the ways MPs describe achieving their goals, even when they were not in government or in cabinet?
- 5 Of the recommendations for change suggested at the end of the report, which is your favourite? What other recommendations would you add?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Rate your local MP's website on a scale of 1 to 10 based on these questions: Is it a good tool for him/her to understand people's concerns? (Are there polls, surveys, discussion forums, contact forms or social media links available?) Does it give you a sense of what he/she is doing for your community? Does it tell you how he/she voted on issues? Is it easy to get in touch with your MP through the website?

Then send your MP an email suggesting three changes to improve their website for users like yourself.