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

The last in a series of reports exploring political leadership in Canada
Introduction

If one thing unites the 65 former Parliamentarians who participated in Samara’s series of exit interviews, it’s that they know that politics matters. Whatever the colour of their team sweater—red, blue, orange or green—and whether they favour big or small government, a centralized or decentralized federation, every Member of Parliament believes that getting government right is critical to the way Canadians live together.

Members of Parliament are the citizens Canadians choose to represent their interests and contend with the important issues facing Canada. From the economy to the environment, healthcare to foreign policy, Canadians expect their Parliamentarians to listen to their concerns while making tough decisions about how the country is run.

Or at least they used to. A worrying trend facing all western democracies, including Canada, is the declining interest in politics and a lack of faith in its ability to lead on the issues that are important to citizens. Opinion polls suggest Canadians view what happens in Ottawa as increasingly irrelevant, inconsequential and disconnected from their lives. Canadians don’t see themselves reflected in the way their democracy functions, they don’t believe they’re being heard or represented and they feel that politicians’ promises are largely meaningless.

As a consequence, they turn away from federal politics, cynical and frustrated.

But Canadians cannot turn away. The world is changing daily; Europe and America face economic crises, and how Canada chooses to respond to these crises will be critical. While banks, corporations and NGOs play important roles in our society, at the end of the day, solving our public challenges and creating opportunity for the country’s future will always be the business of citizens and those who we choose to lead us.
Yet Canadians know very little about those men and women—leaders like our Members of Parliament—and what they’ve learned serving on the front lines of our democracy. MPs’ experiences can offer tremendous insight into the successes and failings of our democracy, and yet they’re rarely consulted about what should be done to improve our democratic process, so in 2009–10, we at Samara travelled across Canada and conducted a series of exit interviews with 65 former MPs from all regions and political parties (see Background to the Interviews box).

To our knowledge, this project is the first of its kind in the world. These former Parliamentarians took the time to reflect on their time in office to help Canadians better understand their politics and to begin a constructive discussion about what can be done to improve how Canada’s democracy functions.

**BACKGROUND TO THE INTERVIEWS**

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

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

The reports are the shared narratives of the 65 former Members of Parliament we interviewed. These MPs served in both government and opposition, in cabinet and on the backbenches, and they come from all regions of the country, and all political parties represented in Parliament. The overriding themes highlighted in the reports were—surprisingly—largely consistent, despite these differences.

Many served during a transformative time in our political history: when the Bloc Québécois, the Reform Party and the merged Conservative Party of Canada rose as important players on the national stage. Each MP served in at least one minority Parliament, and during a time when changes in media and communications technology were just beginning to take hold. This report should be read with this context in mind.

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

We approach this work as documentarians, reporting on how the MPs described their feelings and beliefs. Memories are often coloured by the passage of time and personal interpretations of events and experiences; we assume that the testimonies of the participating MPs are no different. In many ways, these subjective reflections on the experiences of these MPs provide some of the most illuminating insights into Canadian politics.
From those interviews emerged four reports. The first, *The Accidental Citizen?*, detailed the MPs’ backgrounds and paths to politics. The second, *Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description*, described the MPs’ initial orientation to Ottawa and the varied ways in which they viewed their roles as an MP. The third, *It’s My Party*: Parliamentary Dysfunction Reconsidered, explored how the MPs described their time in Ottawa, and their complicated relationship with their political parties.

This fourth and final report reflects on the most important area of questioning in the exit interviews: the MPs’ advice to new MPs; their recommendations for how the practice of politics can be improved, both for those who work in it, and for the citizens they serve; and the stories they shared of their proudest moments.

MPs’ experiences can offer tremendous insight into the successes and failings of our democracy, and yet they’re rarely consulted about what should be done to improve our democratic process.

**REPORT SUMMARY**

In earlier reports, we summarized the numerous, and often conflicting, ways MPs described the essential purpose of a Member of Parliament. This report shows that their advice and recommendations were similarly varied. With a couple of small exceptions, such as better MP orientation and training, improving civics education, implementing electronic voting or eliminating Friday proceedings in the House of Commons, no one recommendation was mentioned by more than three or four MPs. Perhaps this suggests that, despite the dominance of party politics and the rules of Parliament, political life is something those living it experience very individually.

The MPs’ recommendations focused largely on improving the culture and practice of politics and building opportunities for citizens to become better engaged. In short, the MPs argued that politics has a “people problem.”

Furthermore, the MPs’ ideas bore little resemblance to those frequently debated in the media or in academic circles. For example, only a few MPs recommended institutional changes, such as Senate or party financing reform, and save for two former NDP MPs, no one recommended electoral reforms or proportional representation.

Instead, the MPs’ recommendations focused largely on improving the culture and practice of politics and building opportunities for citizens to become better engaged. In short, the MPs argued that politics has a “people problem,” and in chapter one, we describe the three broad areas of concern into which their recommendations fell.

The first two are a variety of suggestions to enable more professional management of Parliamentarians and the work they do, and more sophisticated means by which citizens can engage with their democratic institutions, including better civics education. The third area is one where the MPs provided more general advice to future MPs on how to survive some of the personal travails that politics presents to those who live it every day.

In reviewing these interviews, however, we found that some of the MPs’ best advice was not delivered as such, but was instead illustrated in their recollections of the moments
about which they felt most proud. These stories indicate that, for many MPs, their most fulfilling times as Parliamentarians came when they worked outside what several termed the “Ottawa bubble” and stayed true to what brought them to public life in the first place: a stated desire to do politics differently, and to bring to Ottawa a different voice and way of working.

In chapter two, we summarize some of these stories. Although the MPs described much of their daily work as dominated by their political party, their most salient moments were remembered as those spent working outside Parliament’s agenda or that of their own party. Rather than toeing the party line, the MPs described themselves more as entrepreneurs, leveraging their own pre-Parliamentary experiences, relationships and understanding of constituent issues to push for change, both at the legislative level and in the lives of individual citizens.

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accidental politicians who, even when they’re in government, prefer to work on the margins to accomplish their goals. Although this “outsider” narrative may suggest Canadian politics are open to a more diverse set of people than citizens commonly realize, it also serves to undermine the occupation and engenders cynicism toward it. We’d encourage politicians to rethink this idea, bring themselves back into the system and therefore take responsibility for both its successes and failures.

Second, we open a much-needed discussion of the role of the MP and what citizens should expect from them. As the role is currently described by the MPs themselves, it’s far too multi-faceted for any one person to do all parts well, and the corresponding confusion over the essential purpose can frustrate and confuse citizens, and lead to a misallocation of important public resources.

Third, we suggest a more systematic method for gathering citizens’ thoughts and recommendations—helping to strengthen constituents’ relationships with their MP. At the moment, MPs have no regular way of gathering citizens’ views or encouraging their participation, and their efforts to do so creatively are rarely rewarded or shared with other MPs. With time, attention to this area may help to slow and hopefully reverse the increasing disengagement between citizens and their politics.

Finally, in response to the variability among the MPs recommendations, we suggest regular and ongoing efforts to bring the MPs suggestions and ideas together with those of the wider public to improve our democracy.

To conclude the final chapter of this report, we will also outline the ways in which Samara will carry forward this work, and we’ll ask for your involvement in helping us do so.
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.

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.

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 are female.

11% of the MPs 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.

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

Regions represented by those interviewed:
- 37% Ontario
- 22% Quebec
- 12% British Columbia
- 11% Atlantic Canada
- 9% Alberta
- 9% The Prairies

This mirrors almost perfectly the distribution of the Canadian population.

Years the MPs were first elected:
- 1968: 2
- 1979: 1
- 1984: 1
- 1988: 3
- 1993: 28
- 1995*: 1
- 1996*: 2
- 1997: 7
- 2000: 4
- 2002*: 2
- 2004: 6
- 2006: 8

* By-elections

54% Liberal
23% Conservative
14% Bloc Québécois
8% NDP
1% Green

This group is more heavily weighted to the Liberals than the current Parliament due to the outcome of the 2008 and 2006 elections.
Throughout their interviews, the MPs articulated many of the same concerns—the opaque ways political parties operated, both in local ridings as well as in Parliament, the lack of training or orientation, the obscure processes for naming committee members, the fact that Question Period lacks real substance—so it was surprising that only a few of their recommendations focused specifically on these issues.
Instead, the MPs’ recommendations were more general, falling into three areas that largely focus on improving the culture and practice of politics and opportunities for citizens to engage with it.

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The first two areas centred on professionalizing the management of MPs, and improving the ways citizens are involved in federal politics, yet within these categories was a tremendous variety of recommendations on how the institutions could be better run, and how Canadian political culture can be improved.

Despite this variety in precise recommendations, we found much greater consistency in the third area: the more general “advice for life” the MPs gave to those in elected office today, or to those considering politics as a career. Despite near unanimous consent among MPs that elected office was something they considered worthwhile, their stories leave little doubt that it came with more than its fair share of challenges. Perhaps as a result, many of the MPs’ descriptions were tinged with tales of survival. “I’ve lived quite a lot of situations, behind the scenes, that I don’t think a lot of people have seen. Yet I survived. I survived for 13 years just the same,” said one MP, summing up his career.

**HR TO THE RESCUE**

On average, MPs are elected in their mid-to-late 40s, often having spent most of their adult lives pursuing a career outside of politics, and living in a city or town far from Ottawa. Perhaps as a result, they arrived with little knowledge of the workings of Parliament or their political parties. Rules and procedures were described as opaque, processes inefficient and human resource decisions baffling. As such, MPs suggested numerous ways to professionalize the management of politics and foster greater engagement with the system, which we grouped into five broad categories.

**The pick of the litter:** The first area in which MPs focused their recommendations was the nomination process, the point at which a political party, in each of Canada’s electoral ridings, chooses its candidate for the federal election. Many of the MPs to whom we spoke, despite winning their nominations, expressed discomfort or outright disgust with the way these decisions were made and the lack of transparency and local engagement in the process.

“One recommendation, made in particular by MPs in the Conservative and Liberal parties, was to restore the role of the local constituency associations in selecting candidates. “The local constituency associations have to be empowered. The party should not be able to deny somebody’s nomination with the exception of an extreme circumstance,” said one Liberal MP.

Several MPs went further, claiming that a more neutral body, such as Elections Canada, should be involved in providing guidance over nominations. “There’s a lack of understanding of the process. It would be worthwhile to have
an organization that instructs nominations, and instructs candidates after you’ve become nominated for an election,” said a Conservative MP.

More common, however, was the argument that it was time for political parties to clean up the process, rather than look to an outside body to impose regulations. “It’s up to those of us involved in the party to make those changes, quite frankly. The nominations process needs to be badly revised. We need to clean our own houses,” said one Liberal MP. “Some of the processes within parties ought to be changed,” said a Conservative MP. “But it shouldn’t be Elections Canada that takes over.”

“Don’t drink too much”: A second area in which MPs recommended changes was in the improvement of orientation, training and mentorship. As we outlined in detail in the report Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description, the MPs recalled feeling overwhelmed and confused in their initial weeks and months in Ottawa, and few said they received adequate orientation or ongoing training.

“Rookie MPS are, for all intents and purposes, abandoned the day after they’re elected.”

Many said they were left to their own devices to determine how to go about their job, how to navigate the intricacies of parliamentary procedure, and even how to hire appropriate staff. As one MP put it, “Rookie MPs are, for all intents and purposes, abandoned the day after they’re elected. Unless you’ve established the right contacts and you’ve got the ability to find your own way and ask questions, it can be a pretty overpowering situation.”

Another MP echoed this widespread sentiment: “One of the major flaws is the orientation. We sat in the house, had a speech from two former MPs saying, ‘Don’t drink too much.’ That was about it.”

As a result, many MPs recommended better training in the legislative and procedural aspects of their job, as well as what their role as an MP entails. “When new MPs arrive [they should] have a much broader orientation about their roles in terms of oversight of the government... Here’s how you can get involved in the estimates process... and introduction to tools such as private members’ business and motions, how to work in committees and things like that,” one MP suggested.

Receiving ongoing guidance was also something most MPs found was left to chance. Several MPs who actively sought out mentors recommended establishing official mentorship programs. “In spite of the fact that I’ve had some good mentors, I think they need to formalize mentorship,” said one MP. “A better mentoring process [is needed],” said another. “I did it informally. Another good friend of mine was an MP and we would befriend new people. I recommend new MPs hire experienced staff in Ottawa—somebody who knows the Hill. That can save you a lot of hassle. But a more effective mentoring program is up to the parties, really.”

Several also suggested more formalized systems to help MPs get to work more quickly. For example, one MP acknowledged knowing nothing about the specifics of setting up and running offices in both Ottawa and the riding, “I didn’t have a clear idea of what type of person I should hire to run my office and their day-to-day tasks. Is there a database of staff?” he recalled asking.
Stop shouting!: A third area for improvement was the way in which political parties manage their behaviour in Parliament, specifically during Question Period.

In the report "It’s My Party": Parliamentary Dysfunction Reconsidered, we summarized the frustration many MPs expressed about this Parliamentary tradition, where many MPs felt forced into political gamesmanship, even when they weren’t particularly critical of their opponents’ positions.

Several MPs looked to the British Parliament for a cure to what ails Canada’s Question Period. “Take a look at what the Brits do, where the first question is written and you get it ahead of time, so you are expected to give an intelligent answer,” suggested one MP.

Another MP recommended importing the British approach of assigning cabinet ministers and the prime minister particular days on which they are responsible for answering questions, in hopes this would produce a more substantive exchange. “In Canada, we monopolize the whole government every day. You have thirty minutes, with thirty ministers held hostage five days a week. It’s ridiculous,” he said.

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Getting on with it: A fourth area for improvement encompassed suggestions on how to make the work of Parliament more efficient. Perhaps reflecting their views that little of value is accomplished on the floor of the House of Commons, most of these comments had to do with minimizing the time MPs were required to spend there.

Several MPs recommended adopting electronic voting in the House to speed up the current process. “You don’t need to sit and vote for three hours, when it should take you three times pressing a button. You could do other things, such as representing your constituents, returning phone calls, and do all those other things MPs are called upon to do,” one MP said.

“I [support] electronic voting. The idea of having to be in the house until five in the morning and getting up three hundred times because one guy refuses to collapse votes together ... lots of childish things like that really make your life miserable,” said one former cabinet minister.

“Electronic voting in the house would show a more modern parliamentary democracy where the television could switch at voting time to the scoreboard and you should see the voting, as
opposed to seeing MPs go up and down the aisle like in the nineteenth century,” suggested another.

Another MP recommended reducing the time spent on Question Period, whose preparation often took up much of the morning. “It takes up so much time. And for the government, especially, it takes up a lot of time because all members of cabinet have to be ready to go on any issue that might come up,” said one MP.

Several MPs recommended eliminating House activity on Fridays to allow more time for their long commutes back to their ridings or to work on other areas of the job. “The House sits Monday to Friday, but make it Monday to Thursday and make it the same hours of work. I would have rather worked more hours when I was there, but been there one day less. That’s one day more where I have a chance to go home, be in my riding, and be with my family,” said one MP. “I would do away with the Friday sittings all together. Usually the leaders and ministers aren’t there anyway; Fridays are pretty much a loss,” said another.

The power of the committee: Many MPs claimed committees were where some of Parliament’s best work took place, where MPs could transcend the inflated partisanship of Question Period and make policy recommendations that best reflected the interests of the country as a whole. As such, their recommendations centred on reducing political party influence over the committee process, and putting in place guidance to ensure committee work was better reflected in the legislative process.

Specifically, a number of MPs, including two party leaders, suggested reforming committee regulations to weaken the ability of political party leaders to replace MPs on committees mid-way through their mandate, a tactic used to delay work from moving forward, or to stop it all together. “Do not send substitute Members who are on the committee to simply get your vote through. It’s almost better that you just cancel the bloody committee. Respect that you’re on a committee because you have developed an expertise, and let the committee function,” one former party leader argued. A cabinet minister, who regretted that his committee appointments had little to do with his pre-Parliamentary expertise, made a similar recommendation. “Continuity on committees is needed to build up a level of expertise.... I think that would improve the Canadian system if we built up expertise,” he said.

Several MPs were concerned that committee work didn’t have enough influence over the legislative process, and that committee reports were often shelved without proper consideration. “Where committees have more power, a lot more things are going to get done there,” one MP said. Another recommended that committee reports should be brought forward as Parliamentary motions, to ensure greater profile and debate of the work. “You spend all this time on committees. Surely there should be some way to have motions on your recommendations. But there isn’t. There’s just a minister who takes it and says, ‘Thanks very much, we’ll veto that. Goodbye,’” he said.

A third MP advised that committees put more resources towards developing budgetary implications of their analysis, rather than simply making recommendations. “The most important public policy document of any government is its budget, and so what you should be doing is saying, ‘Okay, what are they doing about these issues? How is the money moving?’” she argued.

On a similar note, another MP argued that committees should be given greater administrative support to increase their ability to
Most recommendations focused on fixing the culture and practice of politics, both for MPs and citizens

Professionalizing the management of MPs and the work of Parliament
- Increase the transparency of the nominations process and the opportunity for citizens to participate in it
- Improve orientation and provide more formalized training and mentorship programs
- Professionalize Question Period
- Improve the efficiency of Parliament, e.g., through electronic voting
- Reduce political party interference in committee work, and put in place guidance to ensure committee research is better reflected in the legislative process

Improving citizens’ engagement with politics
- Improve civics education, and provide more meaningful opportunities for young Canadians to experience democracy first-hand
- Create more effective means for citizens to be involved in the legislative process
- Share best practices for how to regularly and proactively gather constituents’ ideas and input at the local level

Scrutinize their areas of focus. “Committees should be charged with examining the delivery of services, and the committee administrative support should be about four or five times the size so that we can honestly provide the information necessary to see if service delivery is on track,” he said.

Mobilizing the Millions
A second area that dominated the MPs’ recommendations was to make it easier for citizens to engage with their politics. Most MPs made at least one suggestion in this area, although the precise ideas spanned from the general ways in which young Canadians are taught about politics in schools through to specific comments on the tactics citizens use to communicate with their MPs.

That so many of their suggestions focused on citizen engagement likely reflects the MPs’ awareness of the growing disconnect between Canadians and politics, and an apparent desire to reverse this trend. We’ve grouped their recommendations into three categories.

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The ABCs of politics: For many MPs, the lack of comprehensive civics education and opportunities for young people to meaningfully experience Canada’s democracy made it difficult for MPs to engage citizens in their work.

“If people have a shared sense of the country and a common reference point, then, when it comes to politics, they’d have something to build
on when it comes time to think issues through and get engaged,” one MP said. “There is very little taught about our Canadian democratic system. So often, our kids haven’t got a good clue as to what is going on, what an election means, or how people get elected,” said another.

“A third expressed even deeper frustration. “We have these never-ending discussions about Canadian culture and how to get people involved in their country, so we’ll do things like mandate Canadian content. But I think a far more effective way to make people interested in their country is to educate them when they’re in school when they’re much more open to it, about the politics and the history of this country far more deeply than we do today,” he said.

**Citizen lobbyists:** Other MPs focused on the lack of effective institutional means for citizens to get involved in the legislative process.

Several MPs argued that the petition system, the process by which official petitions are received by the Speaker, needs to be reformed. “People in this country run around like chickens with their heads cut off to get a petition signed. It goes into the House of Commons, with fifteen seconds to read it.”

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Keep in touch: Many MPs said they compensated for the lack of clearly defined ways to gather citizen input by experimenting with different approaches of keeping in touch with their constituents, tactics that were shared among MPs only informally.

For many, this involved long hours commuting around the riding. “In the summertime, it wasn’t unusual for my wife and me to drive thirty thousand kilometres,” said one MP from a rural riding, adding that there was no other way for him to accurately take the pulse of his constituents.

Several MPs employed town halls or committees of concerned citizens to gauge the public mood. “We did town halls. They were televised, well attended with a very high level of discussion. The key to the whole exercise was that we had groups of experts that we insisted come, which created an environment of engagement, even for those who weren’t initially engaged,” explained one MP.

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Two MPs also described forming advisory groups as a means of staying on top of constituents’ issues and providing a way for citizens to actively participate in federal issues. “When I was first elected, I formed eight different non-partisan advisory committees.
Anybody in the riding who was interested could sign up. I’d say, “When there are issues in the riding that you think the MP should be dealing with, come in and see me. Similarly, when I have something in Ottawa that I want input on, I’ll bring it forward,”” he said.

Others experimented with more informal focus groups. “I had a few tricks,” said one MP. “Say that I passed the bank, and there were fifteen people in line. I’d pull over and chat. On my Saturday morning shopping trip I’d start out with my buggy, and take two hours in the grocery store. These are old tricks, but they work.”

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A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

For the vast majority of MPs, however, their recommendations were less about changes to the rules that governed the House of Commons or the processes by which their work was advanced and more about how to simply survive as a Member of Parliament.

As one MP put it, “I went through a seven week period that almost did me in as a human being,” Another described Ottawa as “a very lonely scene ... a fellow can hardly survive.” Said another: “Those early days were a very steep learning curve, and I could see some MPs be more successful than others in rising to what was required: to organize their social life, family life, and just logistically get it all together ... to keep track of everything and [to] survive. Some, I don’t think, ever made it.”

While some of this advice referred to how to live with a job where, despite hard work, an election can leave one unemployed, it more often involved general tips on weathering what the MPs felt was the tendency of life in Ottawa to erode one’s personal identity and sense of well-being.

Some MPs said they relied heavily on their pre-Parliamentary experiences to advance the work of the country. One MP described how he used his expertise managing costs in the automotive industry when he was asked to lead a spending review: “I had some very good experience [in managing supplier costs] when I was plant manager.

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I got many projects done that other plant managers did not because they really hadn’t thought things all the way through. So having learned that in younger years at General Motors, I was able to put that experience to work.”

“Don’t lose sight of why you got into politics: public service, and not just that you were at the right place at the right time.”

Others cited the support they received from family and friends as critical to staying true to their original motivations. They expressed a great deal of gratitude to their spouses for the support they received, and some argued that family had to be a central part of anyone’s political life. “Bring your family with you, and I don’t mean physically. Make them part of your decision about doing it and how you’re doing it and negotiate terms and conditions,” advised one MP.

“Don’t get Ottawa-ized. Stay true to what you believe in.”

The most common piece of advice was for incoming MPs to “stay true” to their initial motivations, and not fall victim to the many small ways Ottawa can threaten their identities or force them to sacrifice their values or beliefs.

This imperative came through in a variety of ways. MPs articulated it as a matter of keeping in mind what first drew them to public life. “Don’t lose sight of why you got into politics: public service, and not just that you were at the right place at the right time. Don’t get caught up in the Ottawa bubble, in the partisanship and the rhetoric,” said one Liberal MP. Said another Liberal:

“Don’t sacrifice your principles in chasing after what [the party] can give you. Be true to yourself.”

Many Conservative MPs gave similar advice. “Sometimes you get Ottawa-ized, and the next thing you’re bringing your community the reasons why things can’t be done as opposed to the reasons why things must be done.... Don’t get Ottawa-ized. Stay true to what you believe in,” said one.

One rural MP brought up a particularly moving example of the importance of staying grounded, especially in a caucus dominated by MPs from urban areas. “When you’re sitting in the meetings up there, they don’t know that part of life ... of someone struggling to have enough food or keep their house warm. I remember going into one home and the lady was there with a skidoo suit on. The only heat she had was her oven. Then you get up to caucus and you hear the nonsense that goes on. It’s important enough to them. But for someone like me, it’s like, ‘What the hell are you wasting our time for? I’ve got somebody down there that doesn’t know how they’re going to stay warm this winter. Or have enough food this winter.’ It’s such a contrast,” he said.

MPs also advised future Parliamentarians to maintain personal ethical guidelines. “Always have a line in the sand, and know where your line in the sand is.”

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MPs also advised future Parliamentarians to maintain personal ethical guidelines. “Always have a line in the sand, and know where your line in the sand is,” said an NDP MP. A Bloc MP echoed a similar point: “Just because it’s allowed doesn’t mean you’re obliged to do it. There’s a personal ethic you have to establish.”
Chapter Two: Change from Without

In both the mainstream media and the academy, much has been made of the gradual concentration of power in the Prime Minister’s Office. Newspaper and magazine articles and a number of books have brought this to the attention of the Canadian public. One can be forgiven for thinking that the only way MPs can get anything done is through the Prime Minister and his inner circle.
However, when they describe their greatest successes, few MPs, including those in cabinet or close to the corridors of power, described their successes as coming about because they held power or controlled the agenda of Government. In fact, according to the MPs, effecting positive change at both the legislative level and in the lives of their local constituents was rarely the result of a committee or cabinet appointment, and much more frequently the result of working entrepreneurially, outside the traditional lines of power. Often their most important successes came about when they stumbled upon an unplanned opportunity, and seized it.

These tales of individualized successes were not what we expected. Given the importance of the party to an MP’s political life—very few candidates are ever elected as independents and most MPs mentioned the strong influence parties had on their experiences—it’s notable that the achievements the MPs chose to highlight rarely concerned carrying out the agendas of their parties. Even when they did refer to their party, each MP described working alone, or in small groups, to advance the change he or she wanted to see.

The MPs’ success stories tended to have at least one of three characteristics. They involved times where an MP brought his or her constituency’s concerns to the federal level, where they worked well with fellow MPs or more often with political opponents, and times where they helped an individual constituent navigate bureaucracies.

In describing their best work as that done around the edges of political life, the MPs echoed the same “outsider” theme that dominated their descriptions of the reasons why they entered politics in the first place.

According to the MPs, effecting positive change at both the legislative level and in the lives of their local constituents was rarely the result of a committee or cabinet appointment, and much more frequently the result of working entrepreneurially, outside the traditional lines of power.

FROM THE GRASSROOTS TO OTTAWA

Nearly all the MPs who participated in this project were highly engaged in their local communities before coming to Ottawa. 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. As a result, they knew the issues their constituency faced, or were quick to understand them when they came up.

So it’s perhaps unsurprising that many MPs opted to build their Parliamentary careers from the concerns facing their constituency. “In my riding we have seven prisons. There’s lots of
crime there. It seemed like every third, fourth, or fifth person came through my door with a terrible story about being a victim. So the more I worked on that, the more I got involved in it," he said. “I’ve been in most prisons in Canada. Anywhere that victims needed help, normally I would show up, if I could.”

Many MPs opted to build their Parliamentary careers from the concerns facing their constituency.

Another MP, who ultimately served in the House for 17 years, including as a cabinet minister, was instrumental in the formation of the first environment committee in Ottawa when he was initially elected in the 1960s. His British Columbia riding had been an early convert to environmentalism, and as a backbencher, he brought national focus to the issue for the first time. “I founded the House of Commons Special Committee on Environmental Pollution. The first witnesses who came, I had to pay their way out of my own pocket…. I only could count on three members coming. The government didn’t want the committee. The opposition House leaders didn’t want the committee. But through a better knowledge of House rules, and luck, I was able to get the committee established,” he said.

Many MPs described bringing issues to Ottawa that reflected the specific problems their constituents faced. “A lot of things [MPs do] are sparked by individual constituent problems,” one Ontario MP said. “For example, my interest in same-sex marriage was out of a constituent who worked for me in my first campaign and later died of AIDS.”

One Quebec MP worked to change the labour regulations for foreign students after an African student in his constituency was unable to pay for his studies, and subsequently left the country. “In Canada, international students were confined to campus. They study there and they could maybe work at the cafeteria. But not off-campus. And in my riding, the Chamber of Commerce was calling for better access to a more specialized workforce, and foreign graduate students fit the bill. But they couldn’t hire them,” he said. Through the MP’s work with the Minister of Immigration, he had the law changed such that foreign students are able to legally work off-campus while pursuing their studies.

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For another Ontario MP, the death of a teenager in her riding brought her to work to change the labelling requirements for restaurant food. “He always went to [one restaurant] with his friends and he always ate the apple turnovers because they were safe. One day his friend [suggested another restaurant], and the apple turnover had hazelnut flavouring. He was always so careful. [But] there was no information on the label about nut flavouring. So I said restaurants had to be able to tell us what we were eating,” she said.

One MP used his experience and contacts as a Grand Chief of a First Nations Grand Council to advance issues that were important to all First Nations communities, including tabling
the Residential Schools Apology motion: “Raising some of the Aboriginal issues in the House, whether it was Kelowna or residential schools or being aggressive in committees—not nasty but truthful, factual and assertive—[through that] I was able to raise some of those Aboriginal profiles hopefully a little higher.”

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While many MPs discussed the importance of helping individual constituents navigate bureaucratic paperwork, one MP shared a particular case that pushed him to successfully change the wider unemployment insurance regulations, despite being in opposition. “We had a furniture factory in [my riding] that went bankrupt. The workers thought, ‘All of a sudden we’re out of a job and all we’ll have is EI,’” he said. “Then they discovered they were ineligible because the rules said that if you were entitled to severance pay, then you don’t get EI until you’ve used up the severance. The problem is they’re bankrupt; there is no severance pay. But the regulation was about being entitled to severance; it was irrelevant whether you received it or not. [So] I sat down with the minister. We got them their EI, and we got the rule changed.”

**KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE, AND YOUR ENEMIES CLOSER**

For a number of MPs, success came when they were able to develop and maintain good relationships with those in their own political parties, with political opponents and with officials from other jurisdictions, and use those relationships to advance policy change.

So perhaps unsurprisingly, many stressed the importance of relationships to 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. Understand their motivations, and understand what they can offer you,” advised one MP.

In fact, several MPs’ greatest successes were the results of such collaborative relationships. According to one: “The best committee work I was ever involved in was when I was first in Parliament, in opposition, on the Environment Committee. It was wonderful committee because it had some of the brightest and most dedicated people in Parliament, and every single one of our reports was by consensus.”

Another MP cited several examples of successful cross-party collaborations. Discussing one partnership with an MP from another party, she said, “He and I still email each other even though he was [a member of another party] because we’d worked on [an] excise tax together.” She spoke about working across party lines, including with separatist MPs. “I was able to work on some issues with the Bloc, despite the fact that I have my differences with them. A lot of times we were on the same line on social issues,” she said.

Many Liberal MPs talked about the ways they worked through caucus committees to cham-
pion common causes with other MPs. One MP discussed how the National Liberal’s Women’s Caucus was instrumental in influencing foreign policy decisions while that party was in government: “Not going into Iraq was influenced by what Women’s Caucus had to say about it. I think our support for the gun registry was also influenced by [this group],” she said.

Another Liberal, whose riding was home to two universities, recalled forming a party committee with other MPs who also had post-secondary institutions in their constituencies. Together with other MPs with academic backgrounds, they were able to bring post-secondary education investment to the national stage. “There wasn’t a mention of post-secondary institutions or research and development in the first throne speech, so I worked with [two colleagues] to make sure that didn’t happen again. We said we would put higher education right in front and centre. So we ended up making it almost the most successful—probably the most successful caucus in the party,” the MP said.

“He doesn’t make every decision on the basis of whether this is a Liberal idea or a Conservative idea. I think that was part of my success.”

Some MPs shared stories of successfully elevating their policy priorities to the government’s agenda, even if they were in opposition at the time. One Reform-turned-Conservative MP discussed the important role that his party played in making deficit reduction a priority in the 1990s.

“When we ran in 1993 we said the deficit was this huge problem, and we have to take it on and start reducing the size of government. We were roundly pilloried for that, but in the West it was a common perception that it was true. Although Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien should get a lot of credit, I don’t think they would question that we were the ones who put it on the table, pushed it really hard and made it easier for them to actually implement some of the measures. In fact, we met privately and gave them a very specific list of things that could be reduced, and ultimately they did it,” he said.

While less common, a few MPs spoke about working with a broad coalition of people to advance national policy priorities. One Liberal MP, who served as the Minister of Natural Resources, highlighted developing a “declaration of opportunity,” which involved adjusted tax and royalty regimes in Alberta’s oil sands to encourage sustainable investment. This process required close work with federal and provincial ministers, First Nations, labour groups and private businesses in an economically important and politically contentious area.

The MP attributed the successful process to a collaborative, non-partisan approach: “I don’t make every decision on the basis of whether this is a Liberal idea or a Conservative idea. I think that was part of my success in Alberta. People, early on, understood that they could come and talk to me, and that I would work with anyone who was willing to work in the public interest. That’s why we signed the Declaration of Opportunity, we got the new tax regime, we got the new royalty regime in Alberta, and the rest is history.”

LEND A HELPING HAND

About one-quarter of MPs described their proudest moments as those where they were directly able to help an individual constituent. Often these examples involved helping people who were having difficulty navigating the bureaucracy and who came to the MP as a last resort.
Often this required the MP, or his or her office staff, to intervene in an immigration process or to fight to secure government benefits for a constituent.

One MP related a story where he was able to make a difference in the lives of the family members of a young man dying of cancer. “I’d had him as a student in school, and he was about thirty-five years old with a wife and three kids. He was being denied his Canadian pension disability and I had to call the doctor, get statements from the doctor, who was very busy but took the time to do it. A month before he died, he got the pension disability, which meant that his kids have this until they come of age and his wife as long as she needs it. So you know, as a Member of Parliament, you have people in need who call you, and who can benefit from a bit of effort you put into it,” the MP said.

Numerous MPs recalled helping constituents with immigration issues. For one MP, his greatest memory was helping an African refugee bring his family to Canada. “He got to Canada and tried to establish himself. Then he wanted to bring his wife and his kids because they were separated as a result of the war. After all of that, the government said, ‘No, you don’t have a wife. You are just committing a fraud. These kids aren’t really your kids because you can’t provide the documentary evidence.’ Well, in the villages, they didn’t have nice marriage certificates et cetera.... I got involved in his case because he was one of my constituents, and he came to me and began to show his papers and the track record he had. I worked with him for two-and-a-half years at the end, and that was quite a proud moment being able to help him deal with the bureaucracy.”

One MP recalled an important issue that his office dealt with daily: “Your office is always facing calls where somebody is frustrated with trying to approach the government. When you think of somebody having trouble with his income tax or EI or trying to access an old age pension, and [they are sent to a 1-800 number], they wind up calling your office.” He expressed some frustration at the amount of resources spent dealing with issues that are meant to be handled by the federal bureaucracy: “[We had] about two-and-a-half people full-time dealing with these situations. Over a period of time we exceeded one hundred thousand calls from people either coming to the office, or looking for help with government.” 

About one-quarter of MPs described their proudest moments as those where they were directly able to help an individual constituent. Often these examples involved helping people who were having difficulty navigating the bureaucracy and who came to the MP as a last resort.
Chapter Three: Conclusions and Critical Questions

This report is the last in a four-part series of reports that share the reflections, advice and recommendations of the 65 people who participated in Canada’s first-ever systematic series of exit interviews with former Members of Parliament. In addition to the 65 MPs, the project involved the work of over 50 other people, including a team from our partners, the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians. Together, our goal is to understand political leadership and the role of Parliamentarians in Canadian democracy. Above all, we hope this work will be a catalyst for a knowledgeable discussion of Canadian public life and a provocation for greater citizen engagement with it.
As readers of our previous reports will know, it is this desire for greater engagement that drove the majority of the MPs who participated in this project to public life in the first place. They said they were motivated to run out of a deep desire to change the way politics was practiced in Ottawa. They wanted to see their communities better represented in Ottawa and contribute to a political culture that was more respectful and open to public engagement.

Throughout these interviews, the MPs share the ways in which they confronted numerous obstacles in their pursuit of this goal. Their relationship with their political parties caused a great deal of frustration, and forced many to do their most important work away from the House of Commons and the public scrutiny it entails.

But for all its lows, politics also offers tremendous highs. Each MP, even those who served only briefly, had at least one story of raising important issues to a federal level, working with others on complicated public problems or helping individual Canadians.

These descriptions of the MPs’ greatest moments are often inspiring, and can leave one with the sense that for an enterprising, creative and persistent person, politics truly can be a great way to make a difference. The centrality of the constituency in the MPs’ recollections suggests that, despite accusations to the contrary, federal politics can be more responsive to local concerns than is often realized. These are positive messages, and should be celebrated.

There is also good news in the MPs’ advice and recommendations. Implicit in them is the belief that Canada’s democratic system is largely sound, and that with increased attention to managing people and facilitating work, and with more modern approaches to citizen engagement, our democracy can evolve to serve its citizens more constructively. The variety of the MPs’ responses show that the answer to a healthier public life is not a single, “silver bullet,” institutional change, but rather more regular and careful attention to the way Parliamentarians work together, and with the citizens they serve, to advance public policy.

While this is encouraging news, after writing the four reports, a few areas of concern persist that we believe demand focused attention from all Canadians who care about their democracy, and in particular from Parliamentarians, Parliamentary staff and officials, political journalists and those active in political parties.

The variety of the MPs’ responses show that the answer to a healthier public life is not a single, “silver bullet,” institutional change, but rather more regular and careful attention to the way Parliamentarians work together, and with the citizens they serve, to advance public policy.

OUTSIDERS TO POWER

The first has to do with the language political leaders use to discuss politics in Canada, and the ways in which it can act to substantially
undermine a healthy public life. As readers of previous exit interview reports will know, the MPs—whether in cabinet or on the backbenches—described themselves as “outsiders” to the world of Ottawa and their experiences and successes were often described as outside the agenda of Parliament or their political parties.

Few MPs accepted responsibility for this state of affairs, and when asked for recommendations for change, few articulated concrete attempts to work on politics from the inside. Instead, the MPs blamed their political parties and the incentives of daily politics, as if they were forces and institutions separate from the MPs themselves.

This “outsider” narrative was revealed in many ways. Nearly every MP highlighted something in his or her background that made them an unlikely politician. From the country of their birth, the region they represented, their gender or cultural identity, their socio-economic status or their contrarian view on an issue, nearly every MP stressed how he or she was different from what one might consider a typical politician. Most MPs described politics as something for which they had not planned, and they often claimed they’d never considered running for office prior to being asked, despite being active in their communities or political parties.

This theme persisted in the ways the MPs described their time in office. At some point in nearly every single exit interview, MPs distanced themselves from the politics on display in the House of Commons, citing it as unproductive and misrepresentative of what they really did. MPs repeatedly claimed they did their “real work” away from Parliament, either in their party caucuses or in committees, or in their constituencies or in other venues outside of Ottawa.

Yet, few MPs accepted responsibility for this state of affairs, and when asked for recommendations for change, few articulated concrete attempts to work on politics from the inside. Instead, the MPs blamed their political parties and the incentives of daily politics, as if they were forces and institutions separate from the MPs themselves.

Perhaps that is why the advice the MPs delivered most consistently had less to do with adjusting a particular Parliamentary rule or convention, and more with general tips encouraging future MPs to “stay true to themselves,” and to whatever it was that brought them to politics in the first place.

The MPs’ reflections do provoke questions as to whether Parliament, as it currently operates, is appropriately positioned to tackle and advance tough public policy problems in a way that best advances Canada’s national interest.

In this way, the MPs agree with many Canadians that the way politics is practiced is not seen as particularly constructive or engaging. Even if there are aspects of the political game these MPs enjoy—which is more likely, or else the games presumably wouldn’t persist—the MPs also know that the game turns citizens off. As a result, the MPs interpret their experiences to reflect that reality.

In these characterizations, however, lie more troubling points. Their stories say a lot about how hard it is to work within the system, and suggest that MPs, rather than changing the system so that it’s workable, instead opt to find their own way, and advance the issues they can in the time they have. While this is perhaps a reason-
able response to a complicated job, where the vagaries of electoral politics mean one could be out of a job after the next election, the MPs’ reflections do provoke questions as to whether Parliament, as it currently operates, is appropriately positioned to tackle and advance tough public policy problems in a way that best advances Canada’s national interest.

Furthermore, although there is beauty to be found in the MPs stories of entrepreneurial outsider success, it’s shocking to think that most of these 65 MPs—who worked in Parliament for, on average, over a decade, one third of whom served in cabinet posts—still describe themselves powerless and outside the system. Why aren’t these representatives of Canadians working within the system to make change? Or if they are, why aren’t they willing to admit it?

And more importantly, how must this language make those citizens who are truly marginalized and outside traditional power structures feel? Perhaps they have good reason to feel cynical toward, and removed from, the politics that is supposed to represent them.

It is time to confront this “outsider” narrative that dominates the MPs’ reflections. At a time when Canada is facing some very serious public challenges, having our leaders repeatedly explain that they never wanted to be our leaders is extremely disconcerting. Implicit in this rejection of ambition is the sense that one shouldn’t be proud of being a public leader, and that there’s little value to politics.

We suspect that, in their interviews, many MPs were trying to illuminate the positive aspects of Ottawa and paint a picture that is different from the one Canadians see on TV. Yet we must ask ourselves, when the very people who serve in Parliament degrade the role and the way the work is conducted, without a concentrated effort to improve it, is it any wonder citizens are cynical? Should we be surprised that few young people consider politics a worthwhile place to spend time?

Implicit in this rejection of ambition is the sense that one shouldn’t be proud of being a public leader, and that there’s little value to politics.

It may be time for each and every politician to declare greater allegiance to their job, be proud of why it matters, and articulate this accordingly.

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Secondly, we think the role of the MP needs to be reconsidered and better defined. Few MPs recalled adequate orientation or ongoing training on how to be an effective MP. There were no guidelines, and few supports, for them to rely on when determining just what their job as an MP entailed. As a result, even after, on average, over a decade of service, the MPs to whom we spoke had vastly different and often conflicting views on the essential purpose of their job, and what they were elected to do.

While efforts to improve orientation and training are underway, there still aren’t enough hours in the day for the MPs to complete all areas of the job as it’s collectively described. Without a clear job description, MPs don’t know where their priorities lie and their ability to do their jobs effectively is diminished.
Furthermore, this lack of agreement on what an MP is supposed to do confuses citizens and can leave them unclear on what to expect from their MP. As a result, Canadians are often frustrated when their MPs don’t deliver. This job confusion can also lead MPs into work that arguably is an undesirable, or even inappropriate, use of their time and resources.

The traditional definition of an MP in the Westminster system of government—to consider, refine, and pass legislation, and to hold the Government to account—doesn’t include any mention of the MPs’ representative function or role in their constituency. It was only in the 1970s that MPs began having offices in their ridings at all. But most Canadians, and many of the MPs to whom we spoke, view the MP primarily as a representative of constituents. In fact, many of the MPs’ favourite moments centred on helping constituents get over bureaucratic hurdles—receiving employment insurance, veterans’ benefits, or bringing family into the country—and several described committing significant office resources to these matters.

But is processing paperwork what Canadians expect their Members of Parliament to do? The MPs themselves diverge on this question. While many MPs related stories of how they helped constituents navigate their way through difficult bureaucratic processes, other MPs expressed dismay at their constituents’ expectations in this regard. As one MP put it, “That was the hard part, trying to explain to somebody, especially immigration cases, where we were limited in how far we could intervene.... That’s something that has to change. It should not be the MP’s office handling that.” The fact that each MP would have a different response to a constituent’s concerns—that they are all operating within their own rules—is troubling.

Furthermore, what does that say about our bureaucracy that it requires such continued intervention from elected officials? The frequency with which MPs intervened in immigration, employment insurance, veterans’ affairs, Canada pension and disability cases also raises difficult questions about political interference in a process that is meant to be handled by an objective bureaucracy. Does an MP’s intervention compromise this objectivity?

Of course many of the cases of which the MPs spoke involved people at their wits’ end, having been through bureaucratic processes which, for whatever reason, had been unresponsive or had not produced the desired effect. For many citizens, these can be matters of life or death, and they require attention.

The question, of course, is from whom. While these exit interviews did not probe specific details, they did make us question whether part of the MP’s role should be to act as an intermediary between individuals and the federal government, or whether the bureaucracy’s role
and decision-making processes need to be more transparent and accessible to citizens, so that the burden of this work can be taken out of the MPs’ office and placed in the bureaucrats’ hands.

**THE CITIZENS, PLEASE**

The third area requiring attention is the ways in which citizens engage with federal politics today, and how this can be improved.

Many of the MPs who participated in this project said that their most important successes were often the result of being well-connected to their constituency. The MPs had a variety of approaches to constituent relations, some more proactive and innovative than others, but with resources and time always in short supply, few MPs articulated systematic ways of engaging their constituents in the issues of the day. As a result, MPs are often forced to connect with and canvas their constituents in a haphazard manner, and many of the local issues that the MPs brought to Ottawa seemed to have come to their attention as if by chance or by accident.

The result is that often MPs hear from constituents only when they have an issue or a complaint. Developing regular, ongoing engagement is difficult, particularly given the travel demands on MPs, but the result is a loss in opportunities for citizen engagement and feedback.

We believe future and current MPs can learn a great deal about how to engage with constituents. There is likely room for technological innovation in this regard; few of the MPs we interviewed mentioned using the internet for engaging citizens. Since these Parliamentarians left office, the web and social media have become even more central to the way Canadians communicate. The development of web-based constituent relations management systems could provide an effective tool for an MPs’ constituent engagement strategies, allowing them to collect more regular feedback, more easily analyze and maintain records of communications, and provide citizens with more regular reporting of citizens’ attitudes and feedback on the work of Parliament. If instituted in all Parliamentary offices, this could provide an invaluable communications loop between citizens and their elected officials.

**CAPTURING GOOD IDEAS**

Lastly, what are we to make of the high degree of variability in the MPs’ stories and recommendations? Of course, there are both positives and the negatives in this variety. On the one hand, it means a multitude of voices and ideas were heard. In a country as large and diverse of Canada, this wide variety of expression is critical.

On the other hand, there seemed to be a lot of good energy wasted and great ideas lost. For example, nowhere has there been a collection of the innovative ways in which MPs engage with their constituents and how those ideas can be put to use by other elected officials. At a time when citizens’ disengagement with politics is at a record high, this is a lost opportunity.

In fact, it’s disappointing how little is done in this country to regularly and routinely collect and analyze the experiences of our political leaders, and use these experiences and suggestions to create a better political structure in the service of Canadians. This exit interview project is a first attempt to do so, and with the continued support of the Canadian Association of Former
Parliamentarians, Samara has committed to conduct another series of exit interviews with those MPs who left public life after the 40th Parliament, which sat from 2008–2011.

For all its lows, politics also offers tremendous highs. Each MP, even those who served only briefly, had at least one story of raising important issues to a federal level, working with others on complicated public problems or helping individual Canadians.

It is worth asking, however, whether it wouldn’t be more valuable for the Canadian Parliament, after each federal election, to routinely collect the reflections and unvarnished advice of its MPs, or even of the senior staff who support them. In the context of the overall Parliamentary budget, it would be a modest expenditure, and could be undertaken by a small outside team of professional researchers.

Not only would this process capture good ideas, it would help institute a regular period of reflection into the Parliamentary calendar. This would focus the attention of current MPs, Parliamentary and political staff on areas of concern, suggest important areas of research for scholars of Parliament and, with time, create an invaluable historical record. As with these interviews that Samara has already conducted, the results of this proposed process could be made public in aggregated form and stored in the Parliamentary archives such that they’d be available for educational and historical purposes in the future.

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FOUR QUESTIONS FOR CANADIANS

1. **THE ANTI-POLITICIAN:** Why is the “outsider” narrative so persistent? Why do MPs so rarely describe working within the system to make change?

2. **A JOB DESCRIPTION:** What, really, is the job of an MP? For example, should they act as intermediaries between individuals and the federal government, or should bureaucracy’s processes be more transparent and accessible so citizens don’t require MPs’ intervention?

3. **CITIZENS, DISCONNECTED:** How can political parties and Parliament better use technology and social media to develop systematic, ongoing ways of gathering constituent feedback and keeping MPs engaged with Canadians?

4. **REGULAR EXIT INTERVIEWS:** Why aren’t there more regular and routine means to collect and analyze the experience of our political leaders?
At the close of their exit interviews, many of the MPs commented that they had, almost unexpectedly, enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on their time in public life, and were grateful for the opportunity to suggest recommendations. Several said it was a pleasure to be asked to give back to the system in which they’d spent so much time and energy.
On our side, Samara was pleased and proud to give the MPs a forum to start this important public conversation. With each exit interview report the media attention continued to grow, and we’ve been grateful to share the MPs’ stories with print, radio and television audiences across Canada, as well as through many online forums. These interviews and the reports they generated are just the beginning of the discussion and we hope every Canadian will join us in considering the larger questions they pose.

We are regularly asked how Samara will continue on from this project, and we are happy to announce that we will advance this work in three ways.

**EXIT INTERVIEWS, ROUND TWO**

The first is continuing to interview former MPs. This September we will begin interviewing MPs who left after the 40th Parliament, which sat from November 2008 until March 2011. These interviews will again gather the MPs’ overall reflections and advice, and will also ask the MPs to comment on the observations and suggestions made in the first interviews. Samara will continue to share the findings with the public in the hopes of increasing Canadians’ understanding of our democracy and continuing a constructive discussion on what works well, and what can be improved.

In the meantime, these reports and interviews are creating discussion and helping advance change. For example, after the second MP exit interview report, *Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description*, was released in the fall of 2010, the issue of MP training and orientation has become part of public discussion and has been used to assist those working to improve the orientation new MPs receive. As well, the MPs elected in May 2011 each received a copy of that report and more information on the project. We hope the reflections of former MPs might serve as useful resources as they get their feet under them in Ottawa.

**REPORTS IN THE CLASSROOM**

The reports and the interviews that created them are part of the public record and can be used for teaching and educational resources. Many teachers and professors have told us that the MPs’ personal stories help bring politics to life for students, and we have begun working to repurpose the reports for use in middle and high school, college and university classrooms across the country.

This September we will begin interviewing MPs who left after the 40th Parliament, which sat from November 2008 until March 2011.

In the immediate term, we have developed curriculum materials in partnership with the Historica-Dominion Institute’s Canadian Citizenship Challenge. If you’re a teacher or a student in Grade 7 through Grade 12, you can download the materials at [citizenshipchallenge.ca](http://citizenshipchallenge.ca). You can learn more about this project through Samara’s website [samaracanada.com](http://samaracanada.com), or through HDI’s website: [historica-dominion.ca](http://historica-dominion.ca).
If you’re a college or university teacher of Canadian politics, complete copies of the reports are available on Samara’s website. If you use them in a teaching environment, please let us know, and if you have feedback on how they can be adapted for use in the classroom, we’d be happy to work with you to accommodate this.

If you are a student of Canadian politics or Parliamentary government and interested in using our transcripts for research purposes, please contact us. To date, several graduate students have incorporated the transcripts into their research, and the MPs have kindly granted permission to make these interviews open to anyone interested in using them for educational purposes.

**TRACKING OUR DEMOCRACY**

The third area where Samara is building upon the MP interviews centres around the variety of recommendations that emerged from the MPs. We were struck by the lack of consensus for change among the MPs, despite their shared views on the challenges.

Much like the *Maclean’s* University Rankings, the Democracy Index will be produced annually to encourage attention on how our democracy works between elections, highlighting what works well and focusing critical attention on areas that need improvement.

Over the course of the exit interviews the idea for a more systematic examination of Canadian democracy emerged. Said one former MP: “I think that would be interesting to people. It would [help] policy makers, too, over a period of time, because you’ve got some cover to make changes. This is an old strategy in politics, of course, to have someone else stick their neck out and be the ones to suggest changes, and then you can use them to justify change.”

This has led us into our next project: The Canadian Democracy Index. This will be an annual report card that will measure the health of Canada’s democracy. It will examine three areas: citizen engagement, the media, and Parliament and political parties, and explore the role each plays in the functioning of Canadian democracy.

We are working with an academic advisory team of over 20 professors from universities across Canada and in the United States to develop this project. It will begin with a series of small studies, one in each of the above areas, to be released in the winter of 2012. These preliminary studies, coupled with a series of outreach activities, will begin to engage citizens in a conversation about what democracy means to them, how they engage with it, and why they do not.

This project will lead to a yearly report on the health of our democracy and will also provide citizens with tools—based on their own contributions—to identify ways they can contribute to the functioning of our democracy. Much like the *Maclean’s* University Rankings, this assessment will be produced annually to encourage attention on how our democracy works between elections, highlighting what works well and focusing critical attention on areas that need improvement.

This will require the involvement of thousands, if not millions, of Canadians and we want you to be among them. To learn more about the Canadian Democracy Index, please visit samaracanada.com/democracy_index, where you can also learn about how to participate, or make a donation to support the research costs or to enable the participation of others.

**HOW CAN YOU HELP?**

Samara is committed to encouraging a greater understanding of Canada’s democracy by making our work widely available to all Canadians. There are a few ways you can help us in this goal.
You can share our MP exit interview reports with your friends, family and students, and discuss what they mean for the health of Canadian democracy.

If you are a student or teacher of Canadian history or politics, we’d encourage you to use the reports in your classrooms or your research. More information on how you can do this is available in this report, or on Samara’s website.

If you are interested in contributing to the Democracy Index project, please visit the project webpage, samaracanada.com/democracy_index, to learn more, volunteer or sign up for more information.

Samara has several other programs that seek to strengthen Canada’s democracy. Visit our website to watch videos of leading journalists discuss their work, discover some of Canada’s best political books, download podcasts of our ideas and events, or add your name to our volunteer list.

Finally, we would also ask you to consider making a donation to support Samara’s work. Samara was founded as an experiment, with its initial work largely supported by a series of grants from the MacMillan Family Foundation, the family foundation of our co-founder Michael MacMillan. We agreed to commit our initial energies to producing original work that contributes positively to Canada’s development. We hoped that, if we were successful, others would join us in contributing to the success of Samara’s work.

Please consider contributing to Samara, and specifically to the Democracy Index, as a long-term investment in educating Canadians about their democracy and encouraging regular, ongoing attention to its performance. Donations can be made at samaracanada.com/donate or via canadahelps.org. As a charitable organization, Samara can issue tax receipts for donations of any size.

We also hope you’ll stay in touch and share your ideas or feedback at any time. You can reach us through our website, by email at info@samaracanada.com or by phone at 416.960.7926. You can also continue the conversation by joining our Facebook page, following ‘Samara Canada’ on Google+ or following us on Twitter @samaraCDA.

Thank you again for your interest in and support of Samara.

THE FIRST THREE MP EXIT INTERVIEW REPORTS ARE AVAILABLE ON SAMARA’S WEBSITE

The Accidental Citizen? Details the MPs’ backgrounds and paths to politics

Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description Describes the MPs’ initial orientation and the varied way they defined their role

“It’s My Party”: Parliamentary Dysfunction Reconsidered Summarizes how MPs spent their time in parliament and their relationship with their political parties
Acknowledgements

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

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

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

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Thank you also to Peter McNelly, who provided interview training to ensure consistency in the interviewers’ approach. We are also indebted to Professor Mary Ann McColl for her training on qualitative research methods, and to Paul Kim, Ryan Bloxsidge and Scott Snowden for designing this publication. Thank you to Patrick Johnston for suggesting we get advice from former Parliamentarians in the first place.

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Any errors, of course, are our own.

Samara’s Advisory Board also contributed helpful suggestions over the duration of this project. Thank you to Sujit Choudhry, Heather Conway, Scott Gilmore, Kevin Lynch, Robert Prichard and Perry Spitznagel.

Thank you to everyone for your support of this project.
Names of Participating MPs

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

The Honourable Peter Adams
The Honourable 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 Boshoff
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 and we believed that MPs’ first-hand experience would yield interesting insights into this form of government.

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

Samara also consulted extensively with other key groups of experts in the development of this project, including academics at several Canadian universities. While the report is not intended as academic research, professors from the University of British Columbia, Carleton University,
Memorial University, the University of Ottawa, Queen’s University, the University of Toronto and Wilfrid Laurier University all provided input into the interview process to ensure it was built on existing literature, and many helped review early drafts of our findings. Samara also consulted political journalists, current and former Parliamentarians and several senior public servants.

**INTERVIEW STYLE**

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

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

**QUESTIONS ASKED**

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

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

**ON THE RECORD**

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

**RECORDINGS AND TRANSCRIPTS**

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

**INTERVIEW ANALYSIS**

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

**PUBLIC EDUCATION**

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

Samara has the consent of the interviewees to deposit the interviews in the National Archives once the MP exit interview project is complete. 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.