

POLITICS

OPINION

Attention, new MPs: Don't be robots

By **Susan Delacourt** National Columnist

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Canada's top public servant has some words of advice to the rookie politicians first elected last fall, which they could print out and frame in their sparkling new Parliament Hill offices.

"You are more than a mechanism to make Ottawa work," Privy Council Clerk Ian Shugart warned at an orientation session for new MPs on Wednesday.

It is always a good idea to remind politicians they aren't partisan robots, especially in light of the impeachment spectacle unfolding this week in the U.S. Senate and rote repetition of partisan attack lines.

Closer to home, however, the anti-robot advice is a bit of a theme this week around Parliament Hill. [A newly released study on how the last Parliament worked — or didn't — came out this week from the Samara Centre](#), an organization dedicated to improving Canadian democracy.

Samara interviews current and former MPs to get first-hand reports on how politics could work better. It turns out that a significant number of them regret their robotic behaviour in the last Parliament.

In the "regrets" section of the Samara report, MPs (anonymously) say are sorry they didn't spend more time getting to know people in other parties, that there are too many "talking points" being thrown around in debate, and that many regret "not voting more according to my conscience."

There's been a lot of talk about the need for Canada's federal politicians to improve their tone in the wake of last fall's election.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau framed his entire cabinet retreat in Winnipeg earlier this week as an exercise in setting governing priorities and striking a collaborative tone for Parliament that reopens on Monday.

If that truly is the objective, however, the most important meeting that Trudeau will have this week is the one with his entire Liberal caucus — not just the ministers — in Ottawa.

Much has been said about Trudeau needing to co-operate more with the opposition in light of the new, minority-government reality. But he also needs to collaborate more with his own MPs.

Over the years, Samara's reports have documented how some of the worst excesses of partisanship are felt most deeply within politicians' own parties — the pressure to be a team player, the demonization of others, the marching orders summarily issued by unelected staff members.

This is, in fact, a corollary to the rule that politicians are never done in by their enemies — it's usually their friends who lead to their downfall. Does anyone need to be reminded of the SNC-Lavalin saga last fall and former justice minister Jody Wilson-Raybould?

She too believed she was “more than a mechanism to make Ottawa work,” in Shugart’s language. Wilson-Raybould is now an Independent member of Parliament, and might be one of the MPs who wants to frame Shugart’s words and put them on the wall of her new and smaller office on Parliament Hill.

But not every expression of dissent or independence has to be a body blow to the government.

Before the last election, Trudeau’s majority gave him the luxury of cabinet-led government, one in which priorities and tone were indeed set by the folks at the top of the Liberal hierarchy, then dictated to the backbenchers below.

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But two things have happened since Oct. 21, 2019. First, Trudeau now has a minority, which means that he’ll have to keep a closer eye out for potential dissent in his ranks before it explodes, SNC-like. Second, many of his Liberal MPs believe that they won their seats despite the PM, not because of him. They weren’t mere mechanisms for victory, in other words.

Many of the presentations at the MPs’ orientation session on Wednesday homed in on the importance of resisting the cynicism that is rampant on Parliament Hill. Full disclosure: I appeared on a panel with former MPs James Rajotte (Conservative) and Megan Leslie (NDP), who also urged the new MPs to be true to themselves and their convictions — which these two well-respected parliamentarians did during their time here.

For what it’s worth, I urged the MPs of all stripes to call me every Wednesday, in independent spirit, and tell me what happened in their secret caucus meetings. Unfortunately, while these were new MPs, they were not off-the-turnip-truck MPs, so the suggestion was greeted with general laughter.

But the next few weeks and months will show whether these new and returning MPs — as well as their leaders — are willing to shed some of the robotic partisanship that permeates politics on the Hill. Automation kills jobs in the manufacturing sector; it kills spirit, and the best of intentions, in politics.



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