

## OPINION

# Five (and a half) suggestions for new MPs in the 43rd Parliament

By KENDALL ANDERSON (/AUTHOR/KENDALL-ANDERSON) JAN. 27, 2020

Make friends with parliamentary support staff, fellow MPs, and Senators; develop honest relationships with media; work smart in the constituency; and evolve and respond to democratic anxiety are five (and a half) suggestions Samara executive director Kendall Anderson has for new MPs.



'As the House of Commons gets set to reconvene and new MPs take their places, now is the time to understand the challenges of the past and to apply those lessons to strengthen representative democracy. According to MPs, the top obstacle to their work as legislators was inadequate time to consider and deliberate on policy and legislation,' which could be more relevant in a minority parliament, writes Kendall Anderson. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

[f \(https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/01/27/five-and-a-half-suggestions-for-new-mps-in-the-43rd-parliament/231456\)](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/01/27/five-and-a-half-suggestions-for-new-mps-in-the-43rd-parliament/231456)

 ([https://twitter.com/intent/tweet/?text=Five \(and a half\) suggestions for new MPs in the 43rd Parliament&url=https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/01/27/five-and-a-half-suggestions-for-new-mps-in-the-43rd-parliament/231456&via=thehilltimes](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet/?text=Five+(and+a+half)+suggestions+for+new+MPs+in+the+43rd+Parliament&url=https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/01/27/five-and-a-half-suggestions-for-new-mps-in-the-43rd-parliament/231456&via=thehilltimes))



Over the last decade, the Samara Centre for Democracy has examined political leadership from many angles, including conducting exit interviews with former Members of Parliament after they leave public life and surveying sitting MPs.

As the House of Commons gets set to reconvene and new MPs take their places, now is the time to understand the challenges of the past and to apply those lessons to strengthen representative democracy.

At the end of the last Parliament, we asked MPs to reflect on their last four years in the House. They raised many achievements, such as passing important legislation and representing their constituents. But, alarmingly, almost half felt that the House of Commons was *not* a good forum for debate and democratic decision-making.

According to MPs, the top obstacle to their work as legislators was inadequate time to consider and deliberate on policy and legislation. Additionally, they regretted how they ran out of time to enact the change they wanted, or to engage with constituents or fellow MPs. This concern will be particularly relevant in a minority Parliament, when the future is that much more uncertain.

We humbly offer these recommendations to the next generation of MPs:

First, befriend the clerks of the House of Commons, librarians, and researchers at the Library of Parliament, and the officers of Parliament. Many MPs wished they had been more familiar with parliamentary procedure. Clerks will be able to help you learn the language of Parliament and make you more effective legislators. The librarians and officers of Parliament are indispensable in helping you discern intricate budgets and policy issues.

Second, make friends and allies in Parliament through good communication. While you will lean on your fellow party members, don't forget that MPs from across the floor can also provide support. Look for opportunities to connect in committees, all-party caucuses, or in the halls. They can also provide a sounding board and a support. Start off on the right foot by avoiding destructive heckling during debates, keeping in mind that 45 per cent of MPs said that cross-party collaboration got worse, and 55 per cent said incivility got worse, over the course of this last Parliament. In a similar vein, when developing your private members' bill or motion, make Senators part of your outreach plan. In the last Parliament, 15 of 25 PMBs that passed the House died in the Senate.

Third, develop honest and clear relationships with media. The media was the second biggest obstacle for MPs in the last Parliament. Get media training, speak with journalists, and, most importantly, don't be afraid to say "I'm not ready to answer that question. I'll get back to you."

Fourth, avoid spouting canned speeches given to you by the party and work on developing your own voice. Specialize on one or a small set of policy issues. Whether it's through committee work, private members' business, or caucus meetings, becoming an expert in something and getting support from other caucus members and the public can put you in a position to effect real change.

Fifth, work smart in the constituency. You'll spend two thirds of the year in (or travelling to) your riding, and it's easy to get caught up in a cycle of endless events and piles of constituency casework. These aren't always the most effective channels to consult with a broad range of constituents. Instead, consider using innovative public engagement techniques, such as polling constituents regularly or creating local, issue-based councils.

Finally, Parliament needs to evolve to respond to a worldwide increase in democratic anxiety. Canadians have tremendous faith in democracy, but they are concerned it's getting weaker. Parliament may seem unchanging and unchangeable, but you need to make it change so it can adjust to the cultural needs of each new generation. One MP's regret was that they didn't get started earlier in their work to fundamentally rehabilitate the institution.

The work of an MP isn't easy and it has only gotten harder with time. But by drawing on the experience of past MPs, and heeding their practical wisdom and warnings, you can do the job better—and make your life easier. In doing so, you will be helping to cultivate a healthier Parliament and a stronger democracy for all Canadians.

*Kendall Anderson is the executive director of the Samara Centre for Democracy, a national charity committed to strengthening Canadian democracy.*