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A ROOKIE'S GUIDE TO POLITICAL OTTAWA-INFLUENCE



MPs who enter Parliament hoping to affect policy are the most likely to voluntarily step down from office due to their frustration. This is a worrisome trend for Parliament and Canada's democracy. Become an expert in something. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright

Five strategies for new MPs

MPs can't change everything, but they can change a few things.

BY JANE HILDERMAN AND PAUL THOMAS

TORONTO—In the 42nd general election, Canadians sent an extraordinarily large class of newly-minted Parliamentarians to Ottawa—200 in total, which means rookies will outnumber the experienced MPs. Though they range across age, background, and profession, many are attracted to politics in hopes of having an impact on public policy. Yet, typically, new MPs face a different reality once actually on the job.

Former MPs who participated in exit interviews conducted by the non-partisan charity Samara Canada recalled that their first weeks in Ottawa are consumed by pride, a sense of responsibility and the realization that they've entered a completely different world. Setting up offices, hiring staff, learning the rules of the House—most of which are not written down—all take time. Emotionally, former MPs characterized this time as “confusing,” and “overwhelming,” and said mistakes were often “embarrassing.”

But even after that initial period, many former MPs still reported struggling to have the “impact” that inspired them to run in the first place—a reality that left many disillusioned. Research by political scientists Matthew Kerby and Kelly Blidook confirms that MPs who enter Parliament hoping to affect policy are the most likely to voluntarily step down from office due to their frustration. This is a worrisome trend for Parliament and Canada's democracy.

Just as candidates worked and campaigned to get elected, so too must they plan and strategize to make the most of the levers for influence available to them once they're MPs. Here are five strategies, taken from the advice of the 80 MPs in Samara's exit interviews, that can help new Parliamentarians get off on the right foot.

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Liberal Kirsty Duncan, who was re-elected in Etobicoke North, Ont., last Monday night, was first elected in 2008. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright

There's significant room for entrepreneurial MPs to manoeuvre

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First, become an expert in something. MPs can't change everything, but they may change a few things. "You got to find something that you can put your stamp on," said one former Conservative MP. "There has got to be an issue in your riding or your province that you can say, 'This is the issue I want to focus on during my time in

Parliament and I want to become an expert' [...] and when people want to know about these things they are going to come to me and I'm going to try to make my mark on this issue." A former prime minister agreed: "Don't develop 50 [issues]. Develop a couple of areas of real expertise so that you're the person who is going to be called on."

Second, narrow the "ask" and offer a worked-out solution.

MPs are more likely to succeed if they put forward feasible proposals. "You just can't go [to Parliament] and expect to change the world because it isn't going to happen," observed one former Liberal MP. Instead MPs should develop a proposal that a minister can say 'yes' to—one identifies a clearly-defined problem and seeks to address it through a specific, achievable policy change.

Third, build coalitions among fellow MPs.

As a former Liberal MP observed "one voice isn't going to move it [an issue in caucus]." To increase their chance of success, MPs can find allies in regional caucuses or all-party groups to support their ideas: "When it came [time] to speak in caucus, I would always have two or three other caucus members supporting my initiatives, which I did for them and they did for me. And it ended up that we got a lot of things done," he said. Having broader support also reduces the threat of discipline when an MP expresses a view offside of their leader.

Fourth, speak directly to the Prime Minister or Cabinet ministers.

Ministers seldom seek new ideas from MPs. Instead, MPs must usually go to them—a reality that ministers expect. Indeed, a former Cabinet minister noted that MPs are "not shy about buttonholing you... to tell you what you should be doing." Before and following Question Period or Wednesday caucus meetings are typically good opportunities to catch a minister or the Prime Minister.



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Finally, build a public campaign.

Some MPs work with non-profits or other public interest organizations to build parliamentary support for their initiatives. Typical tactics include letter writing campaigns to MPs, or organizing events on Parliament Hill. MPs may also have a direct hand in their own grass-roots organizing efforts—for example, 27 per cent of MP websites hosted petitions for citizens to sign in 2014.

In the Parliamentary setting, much remains beyond the control of the individual MP: whether it's a minority versus majority government, the leadership style of the party leader and even their assignment to committee. Yet, as the MP exit interviews demonstrated, there is significant room for entrepreneurial MPs to manoeuvre, but it requires planning, preparation and strategy, and is unlikely to happen simply by accident.

Jane Hilderman is the executive director of Samara Canada, a national nonpartisan charity working to reconnect citizens to politics and improve political leadership. To learn more about Samara, visit www.samaracanada.com. Paul Thomas is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Toronto. He is currently a visiting researcher with the Bell Chair for Canadian Parliamentary Democracy at Carleton University and an instructor with the Clayton H. Riddell Graduate Program in Political Management.

The Hill Times



Prime Minister designate Justin Trudeau, pictured recently out on the campaign hustings in New Brunswick. Rookie Liberal MPs should try to speak directly to the Prime Minister or Cabinet ministers, Jane Hilderman and Paul Thomas write.

The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

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