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OPINION

# It's a little rich for MPs to criticize the affluent

By **Susan Delacourt** National Columnist  
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It takes a certain amount of nerve to rail against elites and privilege when your minimum salary hovers around \$180,000 a year.

Yet this is now the daily spectacle in Canada's House of Commons, with MPs on all sides shaking their fists against millionaires, large corporations and pretty much anything that takes a few more dollars from the wallets of "hard-working citizens."

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It remains perplexing how American anti-elites believe that Donald Trump is the man who best understands them, but there are hints of the same kind of “elite-led populism” in Canada, Susan Delacourt writes. (DOUG MILLS / NYT)

These would be the same citizens who presumably didn’t get a \$3,300-a-year raise last month – [unlike your members of Parliament](#).

Thanks to [a new report from the Samara Centre for Democracy](#), we now have a name for this phenomenon of the rich railing against the rich.

It’s called “elite-led populism,” and while the Samara report is mostly reassuring about the current depth of populist discontent in Canada, it also warns that the political elites in Canada are sowing a lot of the anger they’re channelling into public debate.

“Canadians are not turning strongly against elites (but) political leaders can still use the rhetoric of populism to advance their own interests,” Samara says in this report, which may be one of the most interesting the organization has produced in the decade or so it’s been in existence.

“If our politics has taken on stronger populist overtones, that change is ironically coming from elites – politicians themselves.”

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that the government didn't care what they thought. In 2019, only 60 per cent feel this way. Other statistics cited in the report, culled from those comprehensive Canadian election studies done by political scientists over the decades, also show that populist sentiment actually peaked 20 years ago and has been on the decline since.

"As dissatisfied as Canadians are, it is very hard to conclude that Canadians have, in recent years, turned radically against institutions and elites," Samara reports.

Those of us who were around Parliament in those years remember well that 1990s brand of populism — a Royal Commission report by Keith Spicer documenting a "fury in the land" and the rise of the old Reform Party.

What seems to distinguish those years from the current political climate is that in the 1990s, politicians wanted to fix it — not to feed off it. Samara also notes that all politicians want to be seen as "outsiders" now.

And of course, you can't read this report without thinking of Donald Trump, the billionaire real-estate mogul who somehow became a champion for populism in the United States. It remains eternally perplexing how American anti-elites believe that the man who best understands them has spent his life in gilt towers, private jets and golf-course resorts.

Canada's well-paid MPs aren't exactly in that class, no matter how much they trade accusations of fraternizing with the wealthy. But they have upped the quotient of anti-elite ranting in the Commons in recent years. Samara tracked it: between 2009 and 2013, about 3 per cent of sitting days in the House featured complaints about elites. In the last four years, that's rocketed up to 13 per cent of sitting days.

"My constituents do not have an expense account. They do not have a trust fund. They do not have a motorcade to take them anywhere that they need to go," Conservative MP Mark Strahl shouted in the Commons on Tuesday.

Liberal MP Sean Fraser shot back that when Conservatives were in power, they sent child-care cheques to millionaires. On it goes.

Both men have expense accounts and their constituent lists may well include a few citizens with healthy bank accounts. What they're doing here is polarizing advantage, maybe even hard-won accomplishment. Why dream of being a millionaire when you can foment resentment against them instead?

MSNBC host Ali Velshi was in Ottawa this week for a lecture on "weaponizing culture" and talked about the zero-sum game in political debate these days, when others' gains are

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politics, Velshi warned, and authoritarian leaders through the centuries have exploited it to their advantage.

Velshi, who grew up in Canada (his father, Murad Velshi was the first Muslim elected to Queen's Park in the 1980s), doesn't believe that things are as out of control here as they are in Trump's America. But much of his speech was a warning to avoid those politicians peddling what Samara is calling "elite-led populism."

That phenomenon has arrived in Canada, as illustrated nearly any day in the House of Commons in this pre-election year. But we should remember — you can't call it a populist uprising when it's being driven from the top down.

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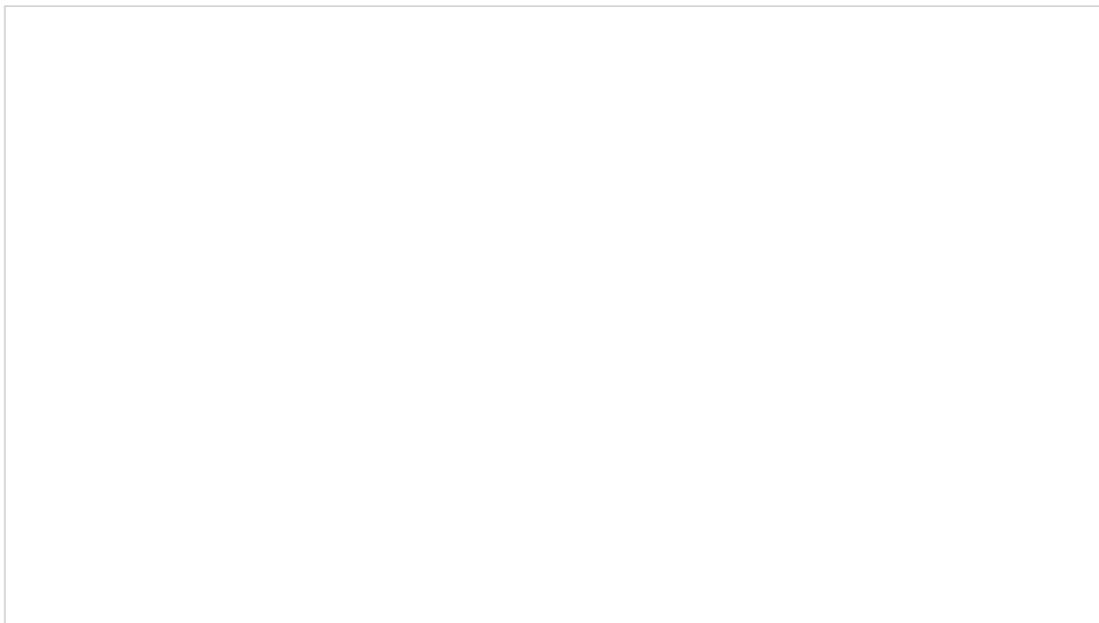
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