

EMBARGOED until 12:01 a.m., October 31, 2018

To request an advance copy of the report or arrange an interview, please contact:  
José Ramón Martí, 647-822-1731, jose.marti@samaracanada.com

## Former Members of Parliament say polarization and partisanship are amplified, hindered their ability to lead

MP: "It's exhausting. It's frustrating. It's humiliating... And it's alienating for citizens."

Toronto, October 31, 2018—With political parties exerting a powerful and growing influence on MPs' time in office, interviews with over 50 former MPs who sat in the Parliament with Stephen Harper's majority government suggest the current practice of partisanship is a source of enormous frustration.

In a new report by the Samara Centre for Democracy, many former MPs describe their parties as obstacles to meaningful work, yet they struggled to turn their sense of diminishment, embarrassment, and even betrayal into a constructive force to improve their parties.

More specifically, the report finds:

- **Extreme partisanship:** Former MPs expressed concern that Canadian politics had entered an age of extreme partisanship. They regretted the extent to which they themselves participated in partisanship, or were submerged in it.
- **Hollow caucus deliberation:** MPs were divided on caucus: some MPs accepted that caucus deliberation was substantive but had to remain out of the public eye, while others argued that caucus meetings were used by leaders for briefing members rather than real consultation.
- **Inability to check party leaders:** Party leaders like Stephen Harper and Jack Layton were often held in awe by MPs but were generally seen at a distance, except by members of an exclusive in-group. Most MPs reported a limited ability to impact leaders' decisions.
- **Intense peer pressure:** MPs who were not considered absolute team players faced incredible pressure within the party—from the leader but also through ostracism from fellow caucus-members.
- **Diminishment of local parties:** The ability of local party associations to govern themselves, grow the grassroots, and choose candidates varies greatly, resulting in more than half of interviewed MPs running uncontested for the party nomination in their community.
- **Boys and girls in "short pants" pull the strings:** Experienced parliamentarians described the growing power and influence of staffers in the leaders' offices. Many MPs were concerned about unelected staffers making many policy decisions, and some even complained that elected representatives were treated as "puppets."

The third in a series of three reports, "The Real House Lives" sets out the case for why recent Parliaments have been among the most partisan in Canadian history. This original research explores MPs' experiences in the local party, the parliamentary caucus, and the office of the party leader. Finally, it proposes approaches that could help generate positive, appropriate partisanship, strengthen parties in the right ways, and improve Parliament as a democratic forum.

“While Parliament has always been and should remain a partisan space,” says Jane Hilderman, Executive Director of the Samara Centre, “there are problems with how party politics works that have real consequences for the health of our democracy. These are broad institutional and cultural problems. Fixing them requires further deep examination of the party as a whole, from the grassroots to the leadership.”

In the words of one former MP: “Empty, nihilistic, repetitive partisanship tires everyone out. It’s exhausting. It’s frustrating. It’s humiliating, sometimes, for those taking part. And it’s alienating for citizens. But—we need strong parties.”

Please contact José Ramón Martí if you would like to receive an embargoed copy of “The Real House Lives: Strengthening the role of MPs in an age of partisanship.” Embargoed until 12:01 a.m. on October 31, 2018.

**The full report will be available at 12:01 a.m. on October 31, 2018, at:**

**[samaracanada.com/the-real-house-lives](http://samaracanada.com/the-real-house-lives)**

### **About Samara’s MP Exit Interviews Project**

From 2009 to 2018, the Samara Centre for Democracy conducted the first-ever systematic series of exit interviews with former Members of Parliament. In total, 134 interviews have taken place in the homes and communities of former MPs. The first round of exit interviews (2009-2011) formed the basis of [a series of research reports](#) and the bestselling book *Tragedy in the Commons*. The latest round of interviews (2017) gave rise to a second volume of reports. The first report, “[Flip the Script](#),” examined the role of MPs in Parliament. The second, “[Beyond the Barbecue](#),” looked at their role as their local community representative. The third, “The Real House Lives,” explores their role within their political party.

### **About the Samara Centre for Democracy**

The Samara Centre for Democracy (formerly Samara Canada) is a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada’s democracy, making it more accessible, responsive, and inclusive. The Samara Centre produces action-based research—as well as tools and resources for active citizens and public leaders—designed to engage Canadians in their democracy.

To learn more about how our research and engagement programming is building better politics and a better Canada, visit [samaracanada.com](http://samaracanada.com).