Beyond the Barbecue

Reimagining constituency work for local democratic engagement
One of the quintessential experiences of the Member of Parliament in their constituency is the summer barbecue circuit. MPs travel from community event to event, spatula in hand, in order to meet as many constituents as possible face-to-face. But are MPs and citizens really hearing each other? “At the end of it all, I really don’t know how to connect with the broad range of constituents. I door-knocked every Friday for four and a half years. I held town halls. I did my social media. I sent something in the neighbourhood of six million pieces of literature. Really trying actively for engagement. I don’t know that there was any real uptake.”
Representative democracy is in trouble.

Trust in democratic institutions has been declining for decades, but recently we've seen how this trend can be mobilized to do lasting damage when leaders amplify distrust in democratic institutions for their own gain. According to one former Member of Parliament: “We’re not just in a sort of post-truth politics, but we’re in a post-democratic politics.”

In 2018, it’s urgent that Canadians rehabilitate representative democracy as the middle ground between daily referendums and government by unchecked elites. At the centre of representative democracy are the representatives themselves—the critical link between citizens and their democratic institutions.

From 2008 to 2011, the Samara Centre for Democracy conducted the first-ever systematic series of exit interviews with former Members of Parliament. In the first research project, 80 interviews took place in the homes and communities of former Members of Parliament who sat in the 38th, 39th and 40th Parliaments (2004-2011). The discussions formed the basis of a series of research reports and the bestselling book *Tragedy in the Commons*.

In those interviews, we noticed something surprising: Even after years of public service, MPs lacked a clear, shared sense of what their job as political representatives actually was—how they should spend their time and energy to represent their constituents in Parliament and the community. So how can we expect parliamentarians to defend representative democracy if they don’t agree on what core purposes they are supposed to serve?

Last year, Samara, with the assistance of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, again reached out to past representatives—this time to MPs who had sat in the 41st Parliament (2011–2015) and who resigned or were defeated in the 2015 general election. We wanted to understand if the MPs’ roles were changing—for better or worse. Once again, parliamentarians opened up about their experiences as representatives in one-on-one interviews that took place in their communities. More than 100 hours of interviews with 54 MPs representing all parties, in all parts of the country, made one thing clear: the problem of a “job with no description” has not been solved. In some ways, it has worsened. Parliamentarians are more cut off from the essential work of scrutiny, legislation and representation than before. If the work of an MP is hollowed out, elections themselves
become hollow. Parliament is degraded, and as one former MP put it: “We don’t have a democracy, outside of that institution.” An intervention is needed.

This report series uses the stories and experiences of former Members of Parliament to make the case for a particular vision of political representation—one which is independent, thoughtful, engaged and empowered.

Yes, this is an ambitious view. Yes, this vision requires individuals to step up and share power. But Canadian democracy requires ambition, especially in a public climate of greater polarization, partisanship, cynicism and distrust. Democracy requires Canadians to strive to make it better, and the country deserves nothing less.

Each report in this series will focus on a key setting where all MPs spend significant time and energy. Each report will also share recommendations that advance the specific goals in these settings:

**In Parliament:** MPs—whether from the backbenches of the governing party or from the Opposition—should independently shape law and policy, and take the lead in careful scrutiny of Government, rather than going through the motions of debates and scrutiny under direction from their party centres. Please read *Flip the Script*, published June 2018.

**In the constituency:** MPs should find new and innovative ways to bring citizens into political processes, rather than doing the basic customer service provision that is properly the job of the public service.

**Within political parties:** MPs should open doors to citizens and participate in true deliberation about party policies, rather than gatekeeping and following the leaders. Forthcoming fall 2018.

Please follow Samara for future report releases in this series by signing up for our newsletter and following us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
Members of Parliament (MPs) are meant to be the representatives of constituents in Ottawa. They exist to connect citizens to national democratic institutions, and to allow Canadians’ voices to be heard in federal decisions. But the role that MPs play in the constituency has transformed over time, becoming more focused on service delivery and events, than consultation and legislation. Even as MPs spend more time in the riding, Canadians see national institutions as increasingly remote. It’s time to dramatically reassess how MPs spend their time in their constituencies.

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<td>Constituency work overwhelms their time and uses up a lot of their staff’s resources.</td>
<td>When MPs commit resources to constituency work, they have fewer resources and staff to help them with their essential parliamentary work of scrutinizing Government.</td>
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<td>They feel intense pressure from party leaders and constituents to be physically present at an ever-increasing number of events in the community.</td>
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<td>Casework—helping constituents overcome problems accessing public services—occupies a huge, and apparently growing, share of staff time and resources.</td>
<td>Problems with public services could be more equitably and fairly solved by focusing on solving system-wide problems, rather than only assisting the constituents who come looking for help, piecemeal. At worst, using constituency offices for casework creates the potential for some citizens to receive preferential treatment.</td>
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<td>Many reported feeling they were unable to engage meaningfully and consult constituents. They reported relying on traditional methods like town hall meetings, despite feeling they were just hearing from the same small subset of constituents over and over again.</td>
<td>MPs want to find better ways to connect with, hear from, and speak to constituents. But to do so they need more time, resources, and support.</td>
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Constituency work wasn’t always part of the job. Today’s MPs spend less time in Ottawa and more time in their local communities than previous generations of MPs. They are more visible and more accessible than ever before—and yet public trust and satisfaction with politicians is much lower than it was in the past when MPs left the community for months at a time to live in Ottawa. And still MPs are not functioning as a crucial link between constituents and Ottawa.

Instead, this means that constituency offices should be reimagined as civic hubs and outposts of Parliament, rather than service centres. This vision is achievable, but it requires institutional change and political buy-in. This paper proposes taking two major steps in this direction: First, to reduce the casework burden on MPs and their staff. And second, to allow MPs and their staff to focus on public engagement and consultation.
WHO PARTICIPATED? (54 MPs WERE INTERVIEWED)

PARTY

- Green/Independent/Forces et démocratie: 3
- Liberal: 3
- Conservative: 23
- NDP: 25

GENDER

- Male: 31
- Female: 23

REGION

- Ontario: 19
- Quebec: 16
- Atlantic: 3
- Prairie: 10
- British Columbia: 6
- North: 0

- 10 FORMER MINISTERS
- 38 Defeated in 2015 election
- 48 YEARS OF TOTAL EXPERIENCE IN PARLIAMENT
Being an MP is really holding two jobs. The two jobs don’t always have much to do with each other, either—and they can get in each other’s way. One MP explained:

I used to say this to [an Ottawa reporter] who’s a lover of Parliament—"You should go cover an MP in their riding for a weekend, and then, have some understanding of the pressure they’re under back there." Because, if you criticize an MP for not doing much [scrutinizing] of the [financial] estimates in Parliament, well, the reason maybe they haven’t read all the estimates in Parliament is because when they go back home from Thursday night to Sunday afternoon, they’re doing events. When are they reading the estimates?

In the first report in this series, *Flip the Script*, Samara argued for a more robust parliamentary role for MPs—including more direct influence on law and policy, and more meaningful scrutiny of Government. But the reality for many MPs and their staff is that as things stand, they have little capacity to take on such a role on Parliament Hill—in part, because of the effort and attention focused on work in their ridings.

This is a problem. Certainly, democracy demands that political representatives are engaged locally with the people they have been elected to represent. But parliamentary work is the work that only MPs can do. And the expanded constituency role—dominated by providing public services that could be more equitably provided by the bureaucracy—does little for representing constituents in national politics. As one MP put it, with unique candour:

When I read MPs that say, "Oh well, Ottawa’s all theater, and the real work is when you can solve a problem for your constituent," I think that’s bullshit. That’s the work I used to do [before I was elected], I solved people’s problems. I went up against the state and fought for their rights. I did not put my name on a ballot so that I could do more of that work.
Given how the parliamentary role of MPs has been hollowed out\(^1\), it is only natural that members would gravitate to the realm where they have the relative freedom to do independent work to solve tangible problems. After all, most elected officials ran for office so that they could make a difference in their community.\(^2\) Former MPs we interviewed expressed concern for their local communities, and sincerely wanted to work for their constituents. And in many cases, through service work, they do help individuals.

**But this report makes the case that:**

- Constituency work in its present form is too often weakly connected to MPs’ parliamentary work, and can hinder, rather than enhance, MPs’ focus on legislation and Government spending.
- There are better ways of helping citizens, such as by systematically addressing problems in public services, rather than creating workarounds on the individual level.
- There are better ways of representing citizens, such as by making innovative consultation founded on public learning the central focus of constituency work.

It is important that elected officials get local democratic engagement right. Citizens feel out of touch with their political institutions, despite MPs spending more time and resources in the riding. It’s time to try a new approach. This report will present a vision for how to do that, by reshuffling responsibilities and redistributing the workload to free up MPs to be more effective representatives.

**BUT THAT’S HOW IT’S ALWAYS BEEN**

The constituency role of an MP is, in fact, a relatively modern phenomenon. Before constituency offices and cheap, fast, long-distance travel, MPs would depart the local community for Ottawa and largely remain there during a parliamentary sitting, only returning to their riding seasonally. In 1967, for example, Parliament sat for a total of 176 days, requiring MPs to spend about half the year in Ottawa (see Figure 1).

MPs lacked a permanent physical presence in the riding except at election time. The creation of the first constituency offices is sometimes attributed to former
MPs Ed Broadbent and Flora MacDonald in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their innovation was to open up a dedicated space in the community that would encourage continued discussion on local priorities and the Federal Government’s intentions.³

Other scholars point to a longer, more informal history that dates back to offices established in Quebec during the 1930s,⁴ or to the work that the wives (and sometimes mothers) of MPs performed out of their homes up until the 1960s, answering phone calls from constituents and offering informal help.⁵ In any case, constituency work was not always a part of the job of the MP. But there are indications that constituency work has come to occupy an increasing share of MPs’ time and efforts, as Parliament sits less frequently (Figure 1), freeing up MPs to spend more time at home.

**Figure 1**

**HOW OFTEN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS SITS**

*By parliamentary session, excluding sessions that lasted fewer than 100 days.*
There are several factors that could explain this change.

- MPs described feeling the greatest responsibility to those who elected them.
- “There are no votes in Ottawa,” MPs recalled Prime Minister Stephen Harper saying in caucus.
- They perceived a growing public expectation for office holders to be visible and accessible.
- They perceived that the public needed more assistance navigating public services.
- Cheap airfare and increased travel expense accounts made frequent trips back and forth from Ottawa possible and therefore expected.
- More modern and gender-based attitudes toward balancing work and family mean MPs of both genders seek more time caregiving for children and families.

But there are also strong push factors away from Ottawa. Long-tenured MPs recall a more collegial atmosphere at Parliament—a stronger sense of community—in decades past and feel that has declined over time. Moreover, when discussing constituency work, many former MPs described a feeling of independence, agency, and general satisfaction. This was in contrast to how they spoke about life under the close supervision of party leaders and staff in Parliament. As one MP explained:

> [Constituency work is] when you got to meet the real people, and you felt very valuable because you actually were, in many instances, able to help, right? Whereas sometimes you’re on the Hill, like, sitting through Question Period. I mean—a lot of that is not very effective work, let’s put it that way.

The fact that constituency work is relatively new in Canada draws attention to some paradoxes. MPs have never been more physically accessible and present in the community. Yet declining levels of citizen trust and satisfaction suggest that the public is increasingly inclined to believe the opposite, or are at least unconvinced. MPs and constituents also see constituent work differently. Many MPs are quick to express how happy they are to escape the “Ottawa bubble” to be with constituents. And yet surprisingly, some recent public opinion aggregation finds that a majority of Canadians would rather see MPs stay and focus their energy in Ottawa.

Something isn’t adding up.
THE JOB DESCRIPTION: MPs IN THE CONSTITUENCY

A strong representative democracy requires MPs who are independent and empowered, thoughtful and engaged. These values should be reflected in all domains of MPs’ work.

In the constituency, this means that MPs:

→ Foster ongoing dialogue with constituents on public priorities
→ Create space for constituents to engage actively on national issues
→ Connect with the full diversity of constituents.

Constituency work should be connected to MPs’ core responsibilities of representation, scrutiny, and legislation. To accomplish this, parliamentarians should be relieved of other kinds of responsibilities that they have assumed by default over time—work that can be better and more equitably accomplished by others.

In the exit interviews, former MPs were given open-ended opportunities to talk about their experiences in the constituency. The interviews made clear that MPs varied widely in how they approached constituency work. But certain commonalities of experience also emerged. The following section is structured around three major domains of constituency work: being seen at local events, consulting constituents, and casework—helping constituents access or navigate public service.
One of the major planks of constituency work is the old-fashioned “grip and grin.” Former MPs described pressure to appear at as many events in their constituency as possible—things like charity events, fundraising barbecues, parades, citizenship ceremonies, and ethnocultural festivals. This pressure came from several sources. One MP explained that even in this local domain of the role, pressure from the party leadership was inescapable:

We had enormous pressure to go to events, and it was the driving, fundamental outreach strategy to make sure your MP was visible and at events, all the time. At certain events, they tracked your attendance…. [The PMO] tracked whether or not you were going and how many you went to, and would talk to you about it…. I never thought it was a good use of time.

Pressure could also come from peers. One MP received competing advice on the number of events they should attend:

I remember getting the advice at the beginning from one MP. He said, “If you’re not doing at least five events on Saturday and another four or five on Sunday…you’re not getting out there enough.” And then another one, in the riding next door to him, he said, “That’s bullshit.” ... He said, “Don’t forget your family. You’re home on the weekend. If you’re doing five events on a Saturday, you’re not seeing them. That’s not good. Say no to things whenever you can.”

Of course, pressure also came from constituents themselves. MPs from the 41st Parliament perceived a growing public expectation that they be present, in person, at a level of demand that they sometimes felt was impossible to meet. As one MP recalled: “There are probably a hundred, hundred and fifty things on the ‘can’t-miss’ itinerary…. Those are the events that if you don’t go to them, then you have to explain yourself. ‘Why wasn’t she at that?’ ‘Where is she?’ … ‘She’s not working....’”
According to another: “I did about seven to nine [events] a day… And still, people felt that I wasn’t showing up… I spread myself as puff-pastry thin as possible and yet, still… I just constantly felt like I was letting people down.”

Many interviewees described a full week of parliamentary work in Ottawa followed by weekends filled with back-to-back community events. Of constituency work in particular, Samara heard that “it’s easy to get burnt out” or “if you want to do everything well, it’s overwhelming.”

The go-go-go schedule has serious personal repercussions. One MP recalled a colleague “who went to everything. As much as I did, he put me to shame. He did twice as much—so his marriage broke up.”

No one goes into politics with the expectation that it will be easy. But there is a finite amount of time and energy that MPs and their staffs have to commit. So, is the “grip and grin” circuit time well spent?

“I’M HERE BECAUSE YOU WERE SMILING”

Doing the rounds at community events renders some public benefit. The former MPs we interviewed suggested it can humanize politicians, and make them more accessible. For example: “Barbecues are an incredibly important part of political work because people see you. And they say, ‘Oh, well that’s the nice lady who gave me a hamburger, and she smiled, and she chatted with me. She’s not so scary. I could go talk to her. I could tell her my opinion or ask her for help or get some advice.’ Or: “I saw you at the Pride Parade, and you looked really nice and friendly, so I’m here [at the MP’s office] because you were smiling.”

It can also help MPs get to know their community. Even long-time resident MPs can learn something new about their neighbours by attending local events: “God, I’ve lived in this riding for twenty years, and there’s so much in it I don’t know, or see, or understand properly, and so much activity, and community-building, and whatnot that goes on—you just marvel.” On the value of attending local events, one MP offered this:
For MPs with diverse constituencies, events can be important opportunities to learn more about distinct communities: “You go to all these ethnic events, the cultural events to eat the food... You get to go to all of that. And although you get tired on the weekends, every time you get to the event, you enjoy it.” A number of interviewees specifically pointed to the value of attending events hosted by ethnocultural community groups, and particularly newcomer communities that experienced marginalization. But another MP noted that the event circuit was still no way to really connect with disengaged communities: “Some of the cultural groups just are silent, and some of them are very active.”

**THOSE ARE NOT THE PEOPLE**

On the other hand, making multiple short appearances at events over a single day likely provides only limited opportunities to bring national politics to the constituency or vice versa. After investing huge energy in the work, with the goal of being a true “riding MP,” one MP expressed doubt about the enterprise and the trade-offs it entailed: “In the end, it doesn’t matter that much. Was it great to meet everyone and to go to all those things? Yeah. But it’s exhausting. And more often than not, you’d go back to Ottawa on the Monday and you’re just exhausted.”

On the other hand, events of this kind may help promote the party’s brand and message, recruit volunteers to the cause, or, it’s thought, attract votes. Nonetheless, these events offer only brief, fleeting chances to speak with constituents—and there is little reason to believe that they render a representative vision of the constituency. When it was suggested to one former MP that events could provide opportunities to hear the concerns of constituents, their response was blunt: “That’s crazy talk. I’m sorry, but that’s crazy talk. Those events are not the people who are typically the ones in need and have documents they want to show you. It’s crazy talk. Events—that’s where you’re drinking and socializing,... You don’t have time to have a fulsome discussion.”

“Did you know that there’s food that comes in a format that is not a pizza or a hamburger? That was a revelation for me. Wow!”

“Was it great to meet everyone and to go to all those things? Yeah. But it’s exhausting. And more often than not, you’d go back to Ottawa on the Monday and you’re just exhausted.”
Consultations: “How much are you going to yell at me today?”

Events are not consultation, and most MPs recognized this. But generally speaking, former MPs suggested few effective methods for engaging with constituents on the issues. This was not necessarily for lack of caring, or trying. Some MPs strenuously tried to consult their constituents on a range of issues. One MP recalls just how futile their efforts proved:

I really tried hard. I had, like I said, three to four town halls every year on various topics and I would send direct-mail letters and a “ten percenter,” and they were in a different area of the riding. I’d blanket the entire area. Let them know when it is, it’s free, there will be coffee and snacks: “Come and talk to your MP” It seemed to me that I generally got the same people every time. It didn’t matter where I held them. The turnout was always low.

HOW DO MPs COMMUNICATE WITH CONSTITUENTS?

MPs receive a budget from the House of Commons to produce and send communications materials to their constituents. In addition to a general advertising budget, there are two main categories of permitted mailed materials, which must meet certain requirements:

- “Householders”—newsletters printed up to four times annually and sent to all households in the constituency.
- “Ten Percenters”—flyers which are printed in black and white, and which can be distributed to no more than 10% of households in the constituency.

These tax-funded mail-outs are supposed to be used to update constituents on activities in Ottawa, as well as to seek input and feedback. But research has observed that in recent Parliaments, ten percenters were also increasingly subject to a central party message through the use of templates that MPs’ offices were encouraged to use. It has also been found that ten-percenters can contain negative messaging about other parties and their leaders.

Only the usual suspects would turn up:

You had the people that hated you that just wanted to come and yell at you. I always had those same people. I would always say, “Hi, it’s nice to see you again. How much are you going to yell at me today?”

That was a shared experience. Another MP described the challenge of “guys at mics”: “You put up the note that you’re going to have the meeting on something. You get up. You speak. And I call it ‘guys at mics’ come next. Because it’s always [the same] guys at mics. Wherever you are.”
MABEL, HE’S CALLING FROM OTTAWA!

Other MPs took pride in their direct approach at soliciting constituents. Interviewees talked about the effectiveness of traditional door-to-door contact—sometimes waiting for “the most miserable, rainy, pouring night” to show constituents how dedicated they were.

One MP was widely known for cold-calling constituents: “I would rip out a page of the phone book, and I would call people from the airport. Just say, ‘Hey. There’s a particular bill on this issue. What do you think?’” He recalled with satisfaction the surprise constituents would display by his directness: “Mabel, Mabel get on the phone. He’s calling from Ottawa!”

FEELING AROUND IN THE DARK

Recognizing the limitations of town halls and newsletters, some MPs tried to innovate how they consulted. One former MP hosted constituency forums organized around specific issues that were timely and relevant to the community. The objective was for constituents to learn about a policy issue and co-create a solution:

We started doing forums. And so, we would have … four hours. On a Saturday, typically. On an issue…. People said, “What are you doing that for?” It was a riding issue. And I had a cycling summit. And I brought in people … There’s always people who know stuff about an issue. Right? They’re right around you. And so, I brought in some people to talk about the issue. And then we had a roomful of people. At tables, facilitated. To talk about what they thought was important about the issue, come up with some solutions. Do the report back.

“I would rip out a page of the phone book, and I would call people from the airport. Just say, ‘Hey. There’s a particular bill on this issue. What do you think?'”
Another MP tried to respond to the diversity of the constituency by establishing smaller forums within the riding:

My *modus operandi* was to look for what we called “Community Groups.” A community group could be defined by geography. We had twelve different local governments in the riding and each local government represented a very different geographic area. It could be defined by ethnicity or culture.... They would become virtually my boss in that area.... So, I was loaded with great expertise in areas where I would otherwise have none.

One MP saw that their engagement with citizens could and should serve an educational function, but this was not a widely expressed view. They explained:
The more citizens are engaged, the better that public service, which means that, as a conduit, one should measure how successful you are by how many citizens are actively engaged... A lot of people have a philosophical understanding that the role of MPs is to solve people’s problems. I don’t see it that way. We do solve problems, but the education, the organizing is much more important—so that they can solve their own problems.

TECHNOLOGY WILL SAVE US!

During the 41st Parliament, social media was emerging (at least theoretically) as a new frontier for citizen engagement and consultation. But for most MPs in this cohort, social media hadn’t really been developed as a useful tool yet. A younger former MP who had tried to cultivate social media as an engagement platform concluded that “penetration was very small.” Another MP admitted frankly,

I didn’t fully understand it as a platform. I never know whether if I tweet something who is actually picking up on that... You have a lot of people watching your world, but they’re watching a bunch of other things. So it’s very hard to know exactly what the impact is, because it’s early days.

Overall, with only some exceptions, interviewees described how other aspects of constituency work had crowded out opportunities for thoughtful and innovative consultation. And for the passionate MP who entered office eager to engage their constituents, years of hard work did not seem to change the situation very much:

At the end of it all, I really don’t know how to connect with the broad range of constituents. I door-knocked every Friday for four and a half years. I held town halls. I did my social media. I sent something in the neighbourhood of six million pieces of literature. Really trying actively for engagement. I don’t know that there was any real uptake in engagement.
If MPs had little to say about consultation, almost to a person they described the huge responsibility for casework that their offices handled. MPs also often cited casework among their most satisfying achievements. As one MP shared:

“[Working in the riding] was the most important part of my job. It should be the most important part of every MP—should be people in the riding. The Ottawa bubble is the Ottawa bubble. But if you can help your people in your community, in your riding, it’s all worth it.”

**WHAT IS CASEWORK?**
Casework has become one of the major responsibilities of MPs and their staffs in the constituencies. This refers to working with individual constituents to help them access or navigate public services. It can take several forms. For example:

- Many MPs held passport clinics, in which their staff provided assistance to constituents to fill out application forms and collect the appropriate documents.
- MPs and constituency staff also served an ombudsperson role, working to resolve complaints or challenges faced by constituents in their dealings with public authorities.
- They responded to problems that were—according to constituents—unresolvable through the normal channels.

Interviews suggested that the casework of MPs and their staff is often dominated by a several main programs, including pensions and old age security, employment insurance, veterans’ services, passports, and immigration.

The interviews suggest that MPs were allocating major staff and time resources to solving the individual personal problems of constituents. Again, this is very much the product of a recent evolution in the role. Research suggests that casework was a very modest share of MPs work at least until the 1960s, if not much later. But these tasks gradually began to occupy a significant amount of representatives’ staff time and effort. One MP from the 41st Parliament recounts just how much things changed over their lifetime:

“You see, there didn’t used to be constituency offices. The MP would meet people here and there, and stuff like that, but now its whole services that we are providing to the population. And we have kind of no choice, because people [now] rely on that.”
It’s been suggested that cutbacks to the frontline public service, combined with the personal face-time that constituency offices offered, created the conditions for constituency casework to thrive and expand.\textsuperscript{15}

What was initially conceived as a touchpoint between the local and the national is now a last-stop shop for constituents who have reached a dead end in the federal bureaucracy. Some of the people who are helped are citizens and newcomers who were let down by the bureaucracy and not given fair recourse. It can also include citizens who are looking for political help to sidestep the usual processes. In addition to their full-time work as parliamentarians, MPs have become part-time caseworkers.

**WHERE THE WORK IS**

Of course, they don’t do it alone. MPs have staff who usually shoulder most of this responsibility. A recent participant-observation study of MPs in their constituencies found that MPs vary widely in how personally involved they become with casework, with some MPs devoting their whole Friday to casework and actively soliciting requests for help whenever they met constituents, and others leaving that work overwhelmingly to staff.\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless, casework has real implications for MPs’ capacity to fulfill the other parts of the job.

It is a question of resource allocation. Members have a set budget for staff, and can themselves choose to deploy that staff either in their parliamentary office in Ottawa or their constituency office in their riding. MPs try to achieve a balance, but the volume of constituency work can overwhelm parliamentary work. One MP suggested constituency work was where staff was really needed: “Sometimes I [pulled] my Ottawa people into helping constituents because their workload isn’t anywhere near what the constituency office is… You know what? They work harder in the constituency.”

Another recalled reorganizing their staff in response to overwhelming demand in the constituency: “At one point by the end, I had zero staff in Parliament. I did everything myself… I did my own expenses….” On preparing for core legislative work on committees alone, while the whole staff team was in the constituency: “It was me and the security guards. Because they felt bad for me, at the wee hours of the morning… If the Confederation Building stunk of popcorn, it was my

“Sometimes I [pulled] my Ottawa people into helping constituents because their workload isn’t anywhere near what the constituency office is… you know what? They work harder in the constituency.”
fault.” Shifting the balance (or in a rare case, the entirety) of staff support to the riding means MPs have less help to do policy research, analyse legislation, scrutinize Government activities, prepare for committee work—to perform the work of legislators. This imbalance of staff allocation makes MPs more dependent on their parties for help, and less able to act independently as a result.

NOT CREATED EQUAL

This was not the case for all former MPs who were interviewed and depended somewhat on the riding. Not all constituencies are created equal and have the same needs with regards to the federal government. Some ridings will, in general, have more new immigrant families, who want to be reunited with members still waiting in the queue. Some ridings will have an older demographic, whose access to old-age security is in jeopardy.

Interviewees revealed unevenness in the level of demand in casework from constituency to constituency, with some inundated and others waiting for the door to open. MPs are, in some ways, free agents, but they’re all similarly resourced (unless they are a Minister). The funding of constituency offices takes account of geography, population density, and transportation challenges, but the socio-demographic needs of ridings can still vary considerably. The MP who described having to assign all staff to their constituency compared the amount of cases their office had to two neighbouring constituency offices:

It was [an] extremely high-volume casework area. And we took walk-ins, until a point where we couldn’t take walk-ins anymore. I did a comparison between my office and my next-door neighbour. So, [one MP] had walk-ins, maybe he’d have one once every two weeks. [The other MP] had maybe one every week. I had one every two hours.

As well as differing levels of community need, constituency offices themselves offered different levels of service, contributing further to the unevenness that Canadians experience across the country. Former MPs even suggested that they resolved casework for citizens from neighbouring ridings. Those citizens had arrived claiming that they were unable to get the support they needed from their own MP.
PLUGGING HOLES IN THE DAM

The interviews suggest that MPs and their staff committed real energy to solving constituents’ individual problems, and for the most part seemed to enjoy it—even if it took the place of legislative work. And in an effort to avoid the complexity of government, get their cases resolved sooner, or simply speak to someone they recognize, Canadians are going straight to their MPs’ offices. So what’s the problem?

Along with the forced reallocation of resources, which diminishes MPs’ ability to do parliamentary work, former MPs also questioned why this work wasn’t the responsibility of the public service. As one MP remarked, “We were basically running a subset of the Federal Government of Canada in our constituency office.” Another recalled “I had great [staff]. But I’d think, ‘Why are you doing this work? There’s a Service Canada down the road.’”

CONSISTUENCIES BY THE NUMBERS

- Largest and smallest riding by geography, Median 368 km²
- Largest and smallest riding by population, Median 100,535 people

Edmonton—Wetaskiwin
158,749 people

Nunavut
2,093,190 km²

Labrador
27,197 people

Toronto Centre
6 km²
Constituency offices are not always optimal for assisting citizens. A common observation of MPs was that constituents did not distinguish between levels of government in their search for help. One ex-MP recalls feeling like a "glorified city councillor" in constituency work. That particular MP took advantage of a politically "vertically integrated" riding—where the same party held office at different levels of government—to redirect citizens to the appropriate office. That dynamic relies somewhat on the varying quality of working relationships between the offices of various local elected officials. But the important point is that federalism makes the constituency office a poor service centre. There is no single access point for government services because different governments render different services, and citizens are relied upon to know whose help they should seek.

The political nature of constituency offices also makes them poor shopfronts for the public service. After elections, everything can change. Sometimes the location changes, requiring constituents to locate their new MP's office. Cases get dropped or lost along the way; without having sought advanced consent from constituents to pass along their files, outgoing MPs reported that they had to destroy files on their way out. MPs also described insufficient transitional support to set up new offices. Staffing, rebuilding, and potentially refurbishing a constituency office is an additional burden on an already heavy workload, and can result in lags in support to constituents. As one MP exclaimed in frustration: "Stop with all the furniture moving!"

The lack of strong central coordination, or direction for how to transition from outgoing to incoming MPs, reflects the fact that these offices are simply not equipped or mandated to do heavy service work.

But the most important issue with casework is that MPs find themselves trying to solve the problems of individuals, when it’s impossible to do so systematically and equitably. One MP summed the issue up succinctly: “Most people won’t phone you. They don’t know how.” Whoever gets through their door benefits, while those who do not may not get their issue resolved. At its worst, this means that some citizens, by contacting their MP’s office, receive preferential treatment in public services. It’s an approach that is out of touch with modern norms about how such services should be universal and impartial. Levels of support can also vary from riding to riding, depending on relative levels of need, but also on varying levels of commitment by MPs and
their staffs. That is unlike a professional public service, which should work to improve the access and quality of service provision evenly and fairly across populations and geography based on needs.

MISSING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

There is also another, better way for MPs to respond to the problems that are brought to them. An MP expressed frustration with having to contend with the same problems over and over at the local level, rather than solving them nationally: “Eighty percent of my [constituency-based] files throughout my time would have been immigration…. That’s something they should have a debate about [in Ottawa]….Can we reform that department in a way such that MPs’ offices aren’t doing that work eighty percent of the time?” Just as MPs are responsible for holding the elected Government to account in Ottawa, they have some responsibility to hold the broader government to account on frontline service delivery. Working at an individual level rather than a policy or program level is failing to hold the Government to account for service problems in public services.

The demand for casework support from constituency offices suggests an ongoing need to improve the delivery of public services. These are important problems that need central, permanent, and system-wide solutions. MPs should push for those solutions, and they can do that effectively in Ottawa, armed with the evidence from their constituents’ experiences.
COMPARING SERVICE CANADA SITES TO CONSTITUENCY OFFICES IN CANADA

If not their MPs, then who can Canadians go to with their problems? Across Canada, there are more Service Canada sites than constituency offices, in every province and territory with the exception of Quebec. Service Canada offices, first established in 2005 to act as single access points for government services are located within fifty kilometres of where almost all Canadians live with the added option of using online or telephone services. Constituency offices cannot make the same claim, as their location and level of access is at the discretion of the individual MP.

TOTAL:
591 Service Canada Sites
426 Constituency Offices

Sources:
Service Canada office addresses listed at http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/tbsc-fsco/sc-hme.jsp (June 8, 2018)
Constituency office addresses listed at https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/constituencies/addresses (June 8, 2018)
Parliament is where the job of MPs should begin, but the constituency is where MPs’ hearts remain. In theory, these two roles should be complementary. But over time, and particularly with the advent and growth of casework, the two spheres have come to compete with one another. Former MPs themselves often admit that they didn’t have the balance quite right.

Ex-MPs from the 41st Parliament described how casework and community event-hopping largely dominated constituency work. Arguably, this comes at the expense of meaningful democratic engagement with Canadians. MPs should care about what happens in the lives of their constituents. But that should mean connecting the local to the national, by bringing debates in Parliament to constituents in ways that empower informed participation, and by seeking national solutions to community problems.

The two jobs can be connected in a more effective and democracy-boosting way. But this requires a reenvisioning of modern-day constituency work. To accomplish this, we propose taking two major steps. First, some space needs to be cleared in the schedules of MPs and their staff, and this can be accomplished by handling casework in a more equitable and systematic way—making use of the professional public service. Second, constituency offices should be reconfigured so that they become the shopfront not for public service delivery, but for innovative consultation and democratic deliberation.

Conclusion: Doing local democratic engagement better

MPs should care about what happens in the lives of their constituents. But that should mean connecting the local to the national, by bringing debates in Parliament to constituents in ways that empower informed participation, and by seeking national solutions to community problems.
Create permanent constituency offices:
Former MPs described the challenges of getting constituent offices up and running after being elected for the first time. More concerning was how unresolved cases could potentially get lost in the transition between outgoing and incoming MPs. One ex-MP called for Parliament to develop a “MP-in-a-box process” to get offices up and running faster and more smoothly. Establishing permanent constituency offices could begin to address this concern, and would support some of the other recommendations presented here.

In practice, this would mean constituency offices that are centrally managed from the non-partisan House of Commons, rather than MPs receiving budgets from the House of Commons and being left to open offices themselves. This approach aligns with some recent work by the House of Commons to explore centralizing aspects of constituency office management, in order to ensure more consistent levels of support and better security and privacy.18

Turn constituency offices into civic hubs:
Permanent constituency offices should be located and designed with the civic hub mission in mind. Currently, MPs’ offices are often found wherever square footage is cheapest, which can mean strip malls and low-density areas. Under the new model, administrators of the constituency office system should look for spaces that are more central to the community and other civic activity—for example, near to libraries, schools, or important public spaces.

Bring them together with Service Canada staff:
A key group in this newly envisioned civic hub would be Service Canada itself. This would allow cross-collaboration and a seamless approach for residents. It would also allow for evenness and fairness in services available to constituents. Service Canada could also do a needs-based assessment of the demand for particular services from constituency to constituency.

Make it multi-level: Ideally, in time, provincial and municipal officer holders would join the civic hub, so that citizens would be able to access the jurisdiction of help they require.

Find system-wide solutions to constituent public service concerns: Some MPs questioned why the same issues with public service provision kept reappearing in countless cases. This is a reminder that MPs cannot simply stop helping their constituents with these problems. They should continue to do so, but in a systematic, central, evidence-based way. Current MPs should focus their attention on tackling public service improvement in Ottawa, rather than just fixing the problems of individuals who come through their doors. Accessing public services is the only direct contact most citizens ever have with the state. This may not be the sexiest of policy areas, but getting public service delivery right plays an important role in strengthening citizens’ trust of government.

STEP #1: CLEAR THE CASEWORK FROM THE CONSTITUENCY OFFICE
Since casework occupies such a large share of MPs’ work in the riding, it makes sense to start here. There is some evidence of a gap between the types of services that Canadians are demanding and what the government currently provides, and constituency offices are increasingly filling that void. But MPs are not the best candidates for that role, nor should they try to be.

However, citizens have developed certain expectations about what a constituency office does. The following recommendations are aimed toward reducing casework for MPs’ staff, while also ensuring constituency services for citizens.
STEP #2: FOCUS MPs AND THEIR STAFF ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

If MPs and staff are relieved of some of their casework responsibilities, the resulting new capacity must be committed to more meaningful engagement with constituents on issues of local and national importance.

Constituency offices can be at the centre of more sophisticated citizen engagement, through public learning and consultation. This is where representatives can learn what issues matter most to their constituents, and also bring home national debates. This kind of democratic engagement is the most important work that an MP can do in the constituency to strengthen representative democracy—but it requires a shift away from the conventional constituency model.

There will always be a place for door-knocking and good old-fashioned town halls. But when these methods are unable to engage the full spectrum of constituents, MPs need to try something new.

Parliament itself can help ensure that MPs are trained to use new tools. Specifically, the Library of Parliament could, in collaboration with experts, develop local engagement, public learning, and consultation supports for MPs. A democratic engagement centre of excellence, housed at the Library and accessible to all MPs, would offer how-to products and in-house assistance to raise the constituent consultation game for all MPs. The House of Commons supplies MPs with funds to communicate with constituents, through householders and ten percenters, so this would allow MPs to take the next step.

Examples of innovative approaches to democratic engagement include:

**Public learning:** Citizens should have an opportunity to learn about an issue and hear all sides of an argument before being asked to offer their views. For example, citizen reference panels—which have been used by various public agencies in Canada and elsewhere to solicit citizens’ views—meet regularly over time to hear from experts and thoughtfully debate. In more sophisticated versions, citizens are randomly selected in, ensuring that the small group is representative of the constituency. The approach carries forward the spirit of randomly calling constituents out of the telephone book, but gives citizens opportunities to consider the issues they are asked to provide input on.
**From consultation to co-production:** At the forefront of participatory democracy is a move beyond public consultation (asking citizens to provide input), to actually providing some opportunities to co-produce policy (asking citizens to design output). Participatory budgeting is a leading example used now by local governments around the world. This is when citizens get to decide directly—through assemblies or online voting—how to spend a small amount of public money set aside by the Government. Citizens are challenged to think through trade-offs and implementation challenges, and to build consensus. MPs don’t have the same authority over Government budgets, but other forms of co-production are possible. For example, in 2018 MP Nathan Cullen ran a contest inviting constituents to submit ideas for a Private Members’ Bill, and pledged to introduce a bill reflecting the winning idea to the House of Commons.20

**Group deliberation:** Issue- or demographic-based group deliberations are another intentional method for hearing from constituents who may not otherwise access their MP. A recent example of this kind of innovation is the increasing use of youth councils, which a number of current MPs have established as a formal mechanism for interacting with youth in their community.21 The structure and intent of these groups varies from riding to riding. But they share the goal of recruiting a diverse group of young people into a non-partisan space where MPs hear directly from them and vice versa. This approach could be extended to other underserved communities in a constituency. A handful of former MPs described convening issue-based committees—for example, local cycling stakeholders—to examine evidence, discuss priorities, and consider how national action could support their goals. Such groups could provide opportunities for substantive community-informed discussion, which can support tangible action by the MP in Ottawa.

**Revitalizing the town hall:** There is something irreplaceable in a town hall meeting, with its open invitation to all community members. Here, innovation has taken place too. For example, technology-enhanced town hall meetings can provide attendees ongoing opportunities to express their views through online voting in straw polls (avoiding the problem of “guys at mics” monopolizing proceedings).22 Town hall meetings can also incorporate a public education function, focussing on a particular issue of national or local importance, and thoughtfully pairing accessible and impartial information (for example, speakers or documentaries) with opportunities for constituents to respond.
HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN: WHO DOES WHAT?

Members of Parliament:
✓ Ask the Library of Parliament to help you develop consultative capacity in your constituency office.
✓ Push officials from Service Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Indigenous Services, Veterans Affairs and other agencies providing public services to review their service provision on the basis of your constituents’ experiences. Parliamentary committees have the power to call for senior public servants to answer questions.

Board of Internal Economy and the House of Commons Administration:
✓ Pursue the central administration of constituencies to streamline office setup and provide greater consistency in service levels, privacy, security, and file management across MPs’ local offices.
✓ Examine options for the House to establish permanent, co-located constituency offices.

Library of Parliament:
✓ Begin consultations with MPs to understand their local democratic engagement needs.

Citizens:
✓ Show support to MPs who are thinking critically about their role in the riding, and are experimenting with different tools for engagement beyond door-knocking and town halls.
✓ Remember that your MP’s absence from an event doesn’t mean that they aren’t working or don’t care.

Public Service:
✓ MPs’ office staff are an important source of data for the needs of a constituency. Consider harnessing that information to make systemic improvements.
✓ Work with Parliament to explore how MP offices and Service Canada staff can work together.
Getting local democratic engagement right means shifting the casework burden back onto the professional public service. That’s the better, fairer way to solve individual problems facing Canadians navigating the service state. In exchange, Canadians should expect that their MPs will have more time to hear from them and speak to them—and, ultimately, to represent them in Ottawa in a way that is more thoughtful and engaged, independent and empowered.

It’s worth remembering that constituency offices were themselves a bottom-up innovation. They were created by a small number of entrepreneurial MPs, and this over time created pressure on others to follow suit. Eventually, a new norm was born. In the same way, ambitious and entrepreneurial MPs can get out in front on this current issue, by becoming the first to experiment with grounding constituency work in innovative democratic engagement. MPs can begin re-imagining their traditional constituency offices as civic hubs now—as a powerful demonstration of the political will to rehabilitate representative democracy.

**WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE SERIES?**

This report has offered a new vision for what the job of the MP should be in the constituency. It follows the first report in the series, *Flip the Script*, which proposed ways to empower MPs to directly influence law and policy, and carefully scrutinize the Government on Parliament Hill. The final report in this three-part series will reflect on the most powerful force shaping MPs’ experiences in public life: the party. It will examine former MPs’ relationships with their leaders and caucuses, and reflect on how parties shape our democratic experience in Canada.
METHODOLOGY

In early 2017, Samara contacted former Members of Parliament who retired or lost their seats after the 41st Parliament (2011 to 2015). As with the first MP Exit Interviews project, we chose to speak to former, rather than current, MPs because we felt they would be less constrained by the demands of office and, having stepped away, would have had time to reflect on their years in public life.

We interviewed 54 former MPs, ensuring that they came from all the major national political parties and most regions of the country. The distribution of interviewed MPs broadly reflects the makeup of the outgoing cohort of MPs in 2015. The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians (CAFP) was our partner in this project and provided the initial letter of introduction and invitation to the former MPs on our behalf.

Interviews were organized using a semi-structured interview methodology. We created a standard question guide, but allowed the interviews to unfold organically, providing space for former MPs to lead the conversation. All interviews were conducted in person, often in the home or office of the former parliamentarian, in their preferred official language. The interviews ranged in length but were commonly approximately two hours long. Each interviewee was asked to sign an informed consent form, which authorized quoting from the interview with attribution.

All but two interviews were recorded, and all the audio records have been transcribed. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using the qualitative research software program NVivo.

We are committed to ensuring the results of this work are made widely available in order to advance public understanding of the role of political leadership and Parliament in Canada. Samara has the consent of the interviewees to deposit the interview in the National Archives once the MP Exit Interviews project is complete, and will do so. This project is among the most ambitious, large-scale and ongoing inquiries into the experiences of Members of Parliament in Canada, and we would like to ensure that its educational value is available to future generations.
**END NOTES**


6. See also the Price and Manaco hypothesis discussed in David Docherty, 1997, Mr. Smith goes to Ottawa: life in the House of Commons, Vancouver: UBC Press.

7. However, expansion of the constituency role has, perversely, increased the time pressure than can negatively affect family lives of MPs. See for example James Farney, Royce Koop, and Alison Loat, 2013, "Balancing Family and Work: Challenges Facing Canadian MPs," Canadian Parliamentary Review 36 (1): 37-42.

8. For example, the rate of Canadians who agree that “once elected to Parliament, MPs soon lose touch” has mostly stayed constant over the last 30+ years (71% in 1984, 67% in 2011). The proportion of Canadians who “don’t think the government cares much what people like me think” increased from 17% in 1974 to 65% in 2011 (Patrick Fournier, Fred Cutler, Stuart Soroka, and Dietlind Stolle, 2015, The 2015 Canadian Election Study, [dataset]).


10. 55% of Canadians prefer MPs who “spend more time on Parliament Hill working on the issues that matter to their constituents” to MPs who “spend more time in their constituency working with constituents.” Vox Pop Labs Inc., 2017, MyDemocracy.ca: Online digital consultation and engagement platform – Final Report. Available online from: [https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/pco-bcp/documents/pdfs/mwdem/MyDemocracy.ca_PDF](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/pco-bcp/documents/pdfs/mwdem/MyDemocracy.ca_PDF).

11. For a full discussion of this diversity of approaches, see Royce Koop, Heather Bastedo, and Kelly Blidook, 2018, Representation in Action: Canadian MPs in the Constituencies, Vancouver: UBC Press.


15. Peter MacLeod, 2005, The low road to democratic reform: Constituency offices, public service provision and citizen engagement, report to the Democratic Reform Secretariat of the Privy Council Office of Canada.


18. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Board of Internal Economy, Transcript, 42nd Parl, 1st Sess, No 7 (24 May, 2018) at 7, available online from: [https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/BOIE/Publications/42/Transcripts/7-9892202/BOIEEV07-E.PDF](https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/BOIE/Publications/42/Transcripts/7-9892202/BOIEEV07-E.PDF).


22. Some research suggests using online platforms to mediate town hall proceedings can produce meetings that can result in genuine persuasion across existing ideological and party lines. See William Minzioni et al., 2015, “Field experiment evidence of substantive, attributional, and behavioural persuasion by members of Congress in online town halls,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America 112 (13): 3937-42.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, we are indebted to the vision of Alison Loat, Samara’s co-founder and first Executive Director, who, with our board chair Michael MacMillan, was the driving force behind Volume I of the Member of Parliament Exit Interview project and the book Tragedy in the Commons. This research project was Samara’s very first initiative, and served to define Samara’s commitment to public leadership, research rigour and accessible ideas.

This second volume of the MP Exit Interviews project would not be possible without the support of many generous donors and foundations that support the Samara Centre for Democracy. We want to specifically thank the MacMillan Family Foundation, Bennett Jones, BMO Foundation, Rosamond Ivey, Bill Graham, and The John and Judy Bragg Family Foundation for their multi-year support of the project. We also want to thank donors Vass Bednar, Grant and Claudia Buchanan, Peter Grant, Tony Griffiths, Beth Haddon, Ernie and Verna Hilderman, Margaret Huber, Gerard Kennedy, Stephen D. Lister, Hon. Jim Peterson, Elaine Solway, Gary Solway, Nalini Stewart, Grace Westcott, Richard Woods and Leen Al Zaibak for helping us build early momentum for Volume II.

We are indebted to the generous support of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians (CAFP), and in particular to Executive Director Francis LeBlanc and the CAFP Board. The CAFP has supported the project since its inception, and without their involvement Samara would not be able to reach so many MPs after they leave public life.

Thank you also to the 54 former Members of Parliament who generously gave of their time to be interviewed, and shared their experiences and perspectives with us. A list of participating MPs is available in the Appendix. The willingness of these MPs to open their doors to us, and to take the time to share their stories in great depth, reflects their commitment to supporting the next generation of political leadership and building a positive public life in Canada.

We are also grateful to those who worked with us to organize and conduct the interviews. Christina Vietinghoff managed outreach, design and planning, and conducted interviews. Miriam Fahmy interviewed MPs primarily in Quebec, and contributed valued analysis to the project. Jane Hilderman, Michael MacMillan and Michael Morden interviewed everyone else. Ruth Ostrower and Erica Chan
coordinated the transportation and other logistics required to visit so many communities across Canada.

Laura Pin, Natalie Brunet, Terhas Ghebretecle and Louise Cockram analysed and coded the interview transcripts.

Royce Koop, Peter MacLeod, and Mel Cappe provided extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of the report.

We thank Erin Tolley and Janice Neil for their advice and training to conduct successful recorded interviews on personal subjects. We also benefitted from the early advice and encouragement of a wide-ranging group of ad hoc advisors, who shared their ideas and shaped our thinking in the planning stages of this project. Thank you to Elamin Abdelmahmoud, Caroline Andrew, Catherine Annau, Michele Austin, Tom S. Axworthy, Stephen Azzi, Karim Bardeesy, Harvey Berkal, Karen Bird, Don Boudria, Morris A. Chochla, David Daubney, Benjamin Errett, Bill Fox, Rachel Gouin, Chris Hannay, Jennifer Hollett, Jean-Noé Landry, Grace Lore, Bernie Lucht, Alex Marland, Laura Payton, Jennifer Robson, Sean Speer and Paddy Torsney.
### PARTICIPATING FORMER MPs

<table>
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