

Hilderman & Campbell: A chance to change the culture in Ottawa

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Published on: August 11, 2015

The federal election is only in its first week and we already know that come Oct. 19, our Parliament is going to look a lot different — not because a new party is necessarily going to be in power, but because the new Parliament will feature one of the largest classes of new MPs in Canadian history.

Sixty-one current members of Parliament have already retired or announced they will not run again this fall — the largest number since 1993. Add to that the 30 new ridings that have been created for this election and some incumbents that likely won't get reelected, and it's easy to see why this is such a historic event.

Yet this will also create a challenge for Canada's governance. A staggering total of 659 years of Parliamentary experience is departing the legislature. The loss is particularly acute in the Western provinces, with more than a quarter of the seats west of Ontario already vacated.

But from challenges, opportunities arise. This election presents a chance to change the political culture in Canada. Research from the nonpartisan charity Samara Canada shows that Canadians are disenchanted with politics. A mere 46 per cent of citizens are “very” or “fairly” satisfied with how MPs are doing their jobs.

Rather than causing more people to get involved, dissatisfaction has fostered cynicism. The inexorable decline in voting rates over the last several decades has moved in lockstep with a citizenry that feels increasingly disconnected from politics — only 31 per cent of Canadians report that political decisions made by elected officials affect them “every day,” while 17 per cent indicate they “don't know” how often they are affected.

For those voters disappointed with the status quo, an opportunity to see a revitalized Parliament can provide a compelling reason to get involved. In ridings across the country, Canadians should be asking candidates what their plans are to combat the

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increased cynicism among the Canadian public. This is a chance to ask candidates to go beyond their own party's platform, and speak to what they will do individually as powerful and important political leaders.

Former MPs have, in fact, reported their own frustrations with the political process. In exit interviews conducted by Samara Canada, former MPs describe the atmosphere on Parliament Hill as toxic — driven by partisanship with little opportunity for individual members to make a real difference. Yet the significant class of new MPs this fall will have the ability to significantly change this situation for the better.

For one, the Reform Act, passed by Parliament in June, will give MPs a chance to vote on how they want their caucus to be run at their first meeting after the election. MPs can vote to give themselves more autonomy from their leader, and more opportunity to talk about issues important to their community and the country. This act only reinforces an enduring truth for MPs: they themselves have the power to improve the culture around politics in Canada, if they choose to use it.

There will be an opportunity this fall to conduct the affairs of government differently — with less partisanship, less concentrated power for party leadership and more MPs who display an independence of mind in the legislature. But for all this to matter, Canadians are going to have to push their MPs to seize the opportunity.

This can start on the hustings: voters need to raise Parliament's culture as an issue for candidates. After all, MPs are important. Contrary to how elections are sometimes portrayed, in Canada we elect a Parliament, not a prime minister. With more open seats available this election than in recent memory, 2015 can set a new direction for politics in this country. It will take all Canadians — voters and candidates alike — to make sure the window of opportunity does not go to waste.

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lead up to the October 19th election, a “spark” is shared in the Saturday pages of the National Post, which asks Canadians to respond. Replies via tweet or email, are shared each week in Postmedia papers across the country and reveal the diversity of Canadians engaged in their democracy as well as the myriad of ways to be involved beyond voting.