

Editorial: Ailing democracy can't be fixed by government

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Samara's report finds that many respondents have a negative view of their members of Parliament. They feel that MPs are better at parroting the views of their party than they are representing the views of their constituents or helping individuals.

Mike Carroccetto / Postmedia News files

A growing number of Canadians are unhappy with the way democracy works in this country.

That finding from Samara, a Canadian organization that aims to improve political participation, won't surprise anyone who watched voter turnout decline at all levels over the past couple of decades.

The findings are in one of a series of short reports that are being extracted from a large cross-country survey. The report released this month concludes that 45 per cent of Canadians are not happy with our democracy, which is a 20-point increase from a similar survey in 2005 that found three-quarters were satisfied.

The decline is linked to the respondents' view of their members of Parliament. They felt that MPs are better at parroting the views of their party than they are representing the views of their constituents or helping individuals.

These are valid and real complaints. Our parliamentary system depends on loyalty to political parties for stable government. But that loyalty can limit the ability of individual MPs to represent their constituents' views on issues, at least outside of the confidential discussions in caucus.

In practice, ambitious MPs will temper their dissent even in caucus if they are angling for a position on the front bench, either in government or opposition.

Not surprisingly, that can breed discontent on the part of constituents, who as individuals can reasonably feel that if democracy is supposed to be a system in which the voice of the people is reflected in government, our system can't be working all that well.

It's also no surprise that if people feel their participation through the ballot box will not or cannot result in any significant change, they will use their time on election day for more rewarding pursuits.

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If citizens don't vote, they transform their belief that democracy doesn't work into evidence of the same. Without the backing of a substantial portion of the population, it is difficult for a democratic government to claim legitimacy.

Samara has been looking at the role of MPs as an avenue for improving the system.

But Canadians who are unhappy with the system should also look in the mirror.

For our democracy to be effective, individuals have to be active at every level. And voting every couple of years is only one of the ways we can influence how our affairs are handled.

Every day, school boards, municipal councils, regional and provincial governments and the federal government are working on issues that affect the quality of life in our community. We all have busy lives and not all of these issues are pertinent to everyone.

But unless we as individuals are paying attention to those institutions that have the capacity to affect us, we won't know when issues come along that will make a significant difference.

So a functioning democracy needs citizens that pay attention to their governments at all levels.

Then for government to be representative, it has to hear what we the people think about issues that concern us, whether it wants to or not. It's always easier to make and implement decisions in private than in public. The natural tendency of governing bodies historically has been to try to move behind closed doors. Public pressure is the only thing that keeps them open.

We always need to consider how our institutions work, whether procedures and protocols crafted in centuries past are still relevant today. But unless individuals play their part, democracy will always disappoint.