

THE PARALLEL PARLIAMENT

At Our Front Door

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Sometimes good news can be wrapped up in negative packages. For years now citizen action groups have been attempting to leave their mark on the political order. It hasn't been easy. Caught between an insensitive politics and an uninterested citizenry, it's been tough sledding and many have given up in despair along the way.

Just this week we woke up to some new research claiming that some 55% of Canadians say they are satisfied with their democracy. That's a 20 point drop in just 8 years. Samara, a non-profit group aimed at improving political participation among citizens, reminds us that a 75% approval rating in 2004 wasn't all that bad. What is troubling now is not just the drop, but the speed of the decline. Clearly something is troubling Canadians and they're making their feelings known.

Samara's findings were published under the timely heading, *Who's the Boss?* and focused primarily on federal politics and the role of MPs. In many ways the figures don't surprise us. MPs were given a score of 61 when it came to representing the interests of their respective political parties but scored in the mid-40s for holding government to account and reflecting the interests of their constituencies over their parties. In addition, MPs were given only a score of 44 for their management of the concerns of constituents.

We need to take this disillusionment as part of a larger context. In a previous blog we noted that democracy has been on a 40-year decline, according to research from Freedom House, which uses data ranging from social, political and economic freedoms. Opinion polls worldwide also reveal that people feel the quality of their democracy is declining. The Barometer Series of polls asked citizens in a number of nations their views on democracy and discovered the confidence has eroded significantly. Why? Because leaders elected on democratic reforms in Asia, Africa and South America in the early part of the millennium went on to be autocratic politicians who protected their power base and tossed renewal to the winds.

Is that not similar reasoning to Samara's findings in Canada? Regardless of whether the context is a penny-poor developing nation or a sophisticated society in the northern hemisphere, democracy runs the risk of illegitimacy the moment it forgets its citizens. And since this is happening on a recurring basis, system failure has entered our political lexicon.

So what's the good news beneath all this negative wrapping? Mark Kingwell, in his *The World We Want*, provides a clue:

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We begin to think we can do nothing to make this a world we want because things seem larger than any of us. Larger than any of us they may be; larger than all of us, no. Citizenship, if it means anything, means making our desire for justice active. It is not something we can do alone.

In other words, politics doesn't just become dysfunctional when politicians fail to speak up for their constituencies but when citizens fail to band together to accomplish what they couldn't alone. It has been my sense that Canadians are clear in their understanding that the politicians are increasingly becoming isolated from their ridings but not aware that citizens themselves often suffer from the same malady – separate from one another and therefore incapable of shaking up the political order.

But we are changing. The extent of political dysfunction has become obvious in research from groups like Samara, but inherent in that challenge is the unique opportunity for citizens themselves to now stake their claim. Democracy requires citizens and their representatives to work in an often tension-filled kind of harmony, and when one side fails the other must pick up the slack, seeking to restore balance or introduce a new kind of paradigm.

We are on the verge of the citizenship era, and despite all appearances to the contrary, through coordinated effort we can have greater effect than at any other time in recent memory – if we take to the field, that is, and that is the great unknown. Our political peers are wounded, unable to transact the important business of our communities, bringing our greatest challenges to our front door as citizens and voters. We look out over an array of difficulties – climate change, poverty, lack of productivity, struggling demographics, city challenges, and, yes, political dysfunction – and realize that if we don't engage for the sake of our children it might be too late. Politics without citizenship is merely autocratic management; citizenship without politics is but a grand echo chamber. One without the other represents a franchise ruined.

The politics of the past said that the representative was boss, but today's leaders must be partners with those who selected them. Leading just because you are in power is to demean the leader, citizens, and ultimately the state of democracy. Now is our chance to help politicians understand that concept. In a speech to human rights workers, John Kennedy reminded them that the Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word "crisis." One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. We must be aware of the first but act on the second.

The threat of an empty democracy is something most acknowledge, but the possibilities inherent in that danger for citizenship are profound. By refusing to perform as it ought, politics has delivered the chance to our own door, along with the imposing threats that have resulted from political inaction. It's our chance; we should take it, and quick.