



# Candidate, educate thyself

DALE SMITH, OTTAWA CITIZEN

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This summer will be busy with nomination races in ridings across the country, as all of the major parties plan to have their candidates in all of the new riding boundaries in place by the fall, with the intention of getting teams ready for the inevitable election – just in case it happens to be called sooner than the “fixed” date next fall. This leaves candidates plenty of time to do a very important thing: learn about what it means to be an MP.

In reading Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan’s *Tragedy in the Commons*, we found most of the former MPs they interviewed felt unprepared for their roles, and only one or two were able to correctly identify the proper Westminster role of an MP – that is, to hold the government to account. And while there was some effort here and there to find mentors within the parties, most of these MPs felt they had no guidance when they were first elected.

The other thing the interviews showed, however, was that almost none of these new MPs took any personal responsibility when it came to learning about the job of an MP. They all blamed the Commons’ administration and the parties for not providing that guidance or training for them. This appears to be a growing problem when you consider the degree to which MPs have since become scripted automatons on the floor of the Commons, and only when they start to rub up against the party the wrong way do they start learning more about their actual role within a Westminster, Responsible Government system, as we saw with Brent Rathgeber.

2015 will also be a particularly brutal year because it is likely to be one where the incumbency rate is going to be low. A lot of long-time MPs aren’t running again, and we can be sure to see a lot of changeover in seats if the polls continue along their current trends. Add to that, the Liberals have kicked their senators out of caucus, which was a great source of institutional memory that they no longer have ready access to. That means a lot of new faces without a lot of guidance to draw from, and that also means that these new faces will be vulnerable to much more control from leaders’ offices – again, something we have seen to an increasing degree in the past several parliaments.

So what can they do about it? First and foremost, every candidate running should start reading up on Parliament now, before the race really starts to heat up. This means learning about things like how Responsible Government works, about the oversight role

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of MPs – especially when it comes to the Estimates and the Public Accounts – and about the constituent elements of Parliament, including the role of the Senate and the Crown. They need to learn about the different roles between government (meaning Cabinet) and backbenchers within the governing party so as not to blur those lines. They need to know the important role that the opposition plays within our system of politics when it comes to accountability, and that it's not just "being negative," as we often hear people construe it, but that there is a real purpose to it.

Candidates should also probably start thinking about what kinds of committees they would like to sit on if they get elected, and should probably have two or three choices in mind, as one can imagine that all of the cool kids want to sit on some of the high-profile committees like justice or ethics. They should learn that they need to tell the whip where their areas of interest lie for committee assignments, rather than to meekly take what is assigned to them. They also need to know that even if they are a member of the governing party, that their role on the committee remains one of oversight, and not being a "team player" to shield their government from criticism. After all, no government is perfect, and it's their job to help them do better.

There are any number of good books out there on how Parliament functions, and I would highly recommend that candidates start with those written by David E. Smith, Canada's pre-eminent parliamentary scholar. And we, as voters, should be encouraging these candidates to demonstrate that they are taking these lessons to heart rather than just feeding us platitudes about how they just want to work together to get things done.

We depend on our MPs to know their roles if we want Parliament to function. Now more than ever, at a time when civic literacy among MPs themselves is apparently at an all-time low, we need to start demanding better, and there's no better time to start than today.

*Dale Smith is a freelance journalist in the parliamentary press gallery.*