

# Don't Disparage Democracy If You're Not Doing Your Part

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Published on: February 10, 2013



In December, the non-profit organization Samara [reported](#) that Canadians' satisfaction with democracy is at an all-time low -- 55% -- down 20 points in just eight years. That same research found only 27% of Canadians think Ottawa deals with the issues they care about satisfactorily. As the Samara report's introduction put it, "These statistics echo comments from Canadians who are disengaged from politics: 'Politicians are concerned for their own interests.' 'They

don't really care what people want.'

Why should we blame politicians for how we feel about the state of our democratic institutions? Don't we elect them? Thomas Jefferson [once wrote](#): "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves."

Complaining about politicians has become a national pastime, and granted, there is much to complain about. We say that the system is "broken," which gives us an expedient justification for shirking our responsibilities as citizens. We are voting less and participating less, and are increasingly disengaged from our public life. But democracy is not a one-way street. Philosopher Benjamin Constant [once said](#) that liberty could only be protected and strengthened when citizens have "an active and constant participation in collective power." In a country like ours, there will always be what Pierre Elliot Trudeau called a "creative tension" of opposing forces between regions and parties. These tensions exist within parties themselves and often clash. That's where leaders are truly tested.

While it is true that we have not seen it in a few years, courage in our political leaders is not as rare in the Canadian experience as some would like us to believe. Trudeau's patriation of the constitution and Charter of Rights; Brian Mulroney's attempts at constitutional reform, tax reform, privatization of Crown Corporations, deregulation, environmental protection, free trade; Jean Chretien's decision to keep Canada out of George W. Bush's "Coalition of the Willing" to invade Iraq, repairing our national balance sheet, and raising the threshold for any separatist government intent on destroying Canada.

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Real leaders don't pretend to have the corner on all wisdom; they try to bring people together in search of broad-based consensus to act. Real "courage" isn't in low-hanging fruit. It is only found in the will to take on seemingly intractable questions such as reform of health care, national productivity, or strengthening the efficiency of our social and economic union. Leadership defines and shapes an agenda and then meticulously builds the necessary coalitions and public support to bring it to life.

And that is never as easy as it looks, nor without great political risk. That too is the very nature of politics in a democracy. By its very nature, democracy intrinsically defies "right" and "wrong." So does politics, which is the art of the possible. Politicians receive hopelessly inconsistent and contradictory demands that must be balanced. The question of "courage" is very easy for those who do not bear the responsibility for elected office.

If party labels are to mean anything to voters, MPs and candidates have a responsibility to adhere to party platforms. But parties must also be flexible because circumstances change. And the only way for parties to grow, renew, and remain relevant is by demonstrating tolerance to dissent and new ideas.

Contradictory allegiance is a perpetual and innate struggle for politicians. Is their first responsibility to their party, their constituents, or to their individual consciences? This is never easy, nor should it be. MPs must sometimes lead, inform, educate, correct, and sometimes even ignore the opinion of constituents. Ultimately, politicians must exercise their judgment.

For a democracy to function effectively, two-way commitment must be the imperative. Just as the politician must trust the wisdom of the people, the people must have confidence in the judgment of their representatives. If that trust is broken, so goes the relationship. That is the very essence of democracy and that is why elections are so crucial.

However, this necessarily implies engagement. More than two thousand years ago, Thucydides quoted Pericles as telling his fellow Athenians: "We do not say that the man who fails to participate in politics is a man who minds his own business. We say that he is a man who has no business here."

Our political culture will only change for the better when we decide to engage. It is time we realized that the indispensable condition of our freedom is the participation of citizens in our public affairs and a passion for the public good.

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