

Harper's cynical assault on democracy

Growing sense of powerlessness and frustration could undermine Canadian democratic institutions

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Back in 1985, barely five months after Brian Mulroney became prime minister, his defence minister Bob Coates resigned after leaving top secret NATO documents in a German strip club.

Over the next three years, Mulroney either fired or accepted the resignations — some after stiff prompting — of seven other Conservative cabinet ministers.

Mulroney's actions were swift and decisive, aimed in each case at convincing Canadians he was eager to cut out the rot in his government.

In sharp contrast, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has stubbornly refused to take any action in a series of emerging scandals that are fast branding his government as incompetent, arrogant, hypocritical and uncaring.

He has steadfastly defended cabinet ministers, such as Tony Clement, Bev Oda, Peter MacKay, Christian Paradis and Lisa Raitt, over incidents involving G8 slush funds, doctored documents, private use of government helicopters, ethics breaches — and possibly lying to Parliament and the Canadian public.

At the same time, Harper has cavalierly dismissed evidence that his government hid the true cost of F-35 fighter jets from voters during last year's election and that his party was involved in the robocall affair during the last campaign.

This stubborn streak is typical of Harper, who is constantly pushing against the boundaries on his government's powers, acting as if Parliament is merely an annoyance and voters a nuisance between elections.

It's a cynical reversal for a political leader who in opposition promised a return to government accountability.

Unlike Mulroney, who always sought public approval and valued the principle of accountability, Harper seems as if he couldn't care less about what people think of him, his governing style or his government.

No wonder growing numbers of Canadians are turned off by politics, a trend that in the long run could undermine our democratic institutions as we know them today.

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Indeed, Harper's don't-give-a-damn attitude is leading to a weary cynicism and increased disengagement among voters who are uncomfortable with the Prime Minister's obvious lack of respect for the basic rules of conduct and decency in Parliament.

Clearly, across Canada there's a growing sense of powerlessness among many citizens — not just at the federal level, but also at provincial and municipal levels.

Research shows that growing numbers of Canadians perceive politicians as untrustworthy and corrupt people who think nothing of breaking promises.

The same research also indicates we are becoming increasingly disillusioned with unaccountable politicians and government institutions.

These findings were borne out in two recent elections.

Just two weeks ago, fewer than 50 per cent of card-carrying New Democrats bothered to vote in the party leadership contest won by Thomas Mulcair. And barely 44 per cent of eligible voters took part in the federal byelection in the Toronto Danforth riding in what was considered a "hot" race.

On the federal scene, it's Harper's lack of accountability — from F-35 costs to election financing violations to sleazy campaign tactics — that is most frustrating for many citizens.

If the leader isn't accountable, then who is?

In Harper's cabinet, apparently no one.

Fatigued by years of seeing successive governments ignore pleas for more accountability and respect, many citizens will never re-engage in politics.

But others still believe the system can be changed, that our democratic process can be improved. These voters are neither apathetic nor ignorant. They support democratic values and have a real sense of what democracy means.

For them, there is hope.

They believe we must continually press for answers, write to elected officials voicing our concerns, demand our leaders tell the truth and discipline those who break the rules.

In effect, we must become "nags."

Encouragingly, we don't need to work in isolation.

[Samara](#), a non-profit organization devoted to promoting citizen engagement within Canadian democracy, will soon launch Democracy Talks, a national program to help revitalize our democracy.

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Starting this summer, Samara will develop a series of resources and online discussion forums aimed at helping individuals “to participate, better understand and connect with the political process.”

Samara will also create an annual “democracy index” to measure the health of Canadian democracy from year to year.

None of these is a huge step — and none of them on its own will change Harper’s approach.

But it is better than doing nothing and letting our leaders run roughshod over our cherished democracy.