

How to fix our politics

The quest to develop new-and-improved leaders—and help the current crop become better at their jobs

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Back to Class: *New MPs go through two half-days of orientation after arriving on the Hill, Carleton is working on an additional training program.*

“Can you imagine a doctor saying, ‘Well, I never thought of becoming a doctor before?’” asks Alison Loat, co-founder of Samara, a charitable organization dedicated to the study of Canadian democracy.

Indeed, one would probably not entrust their health to a brain surgeon who claimed to have come to the profession quite by accident, made it through a confusing and mysterious nomination process, and shown up for the first day of work feeling mostly unprepared for the surgeries they were expected to perform. And yet, we expect little more of our parliamentarians.

For sure, politics is a pursuit neither easily explained, nor particularly well-regarded. The job of elected office itself is subject to wide interpretation and powerful competing pressures. But if the political process is to be improved upon, it may require dealing with these issues of confusion and ill repute, up to and including how we might build a better politician.

Two years ago, Loat and her team set out to conduct exit interviews with recently defeated or retired members of Parliament. In a series of reports based on those conversations, Samara has raised a number of questions about the political experience: from the nomination process to the power of political parties and the competing views on what exactly the job of an MP is supposed to be. First and foremost among these concerns is how many former MPs claimed to have come to elected politics quite inadvertently. To Loat, this goes to the very nature of how we talk about politics as something one might—or, rather, should not—aspire to. “We don’t encourage people to consider public life as a way to spend their time or something to consider in their careers,” she says.

There are ways this might be addressed. Over the past several months, Equal Voice, an organization focused on increasing the involvement of women in politics, has met with female students in junior high and high school to conduct campaign workshops. “Even at the high school level,” says Nancy Peckford, executive director of Equal Voice, “already people are weeding themselves out of certain processes. ‘Oh, I’m not really that political. I don’t need to run for student council, that’s for the popular kids.’” Peckford and her team asked the young women to think constructively about what a campaign would look like were they to pursue one. “We really had them think strategically: what do you really care about, what do you feel passionately about, what are you motivated by and how could you capture that and actually campaign on it,” she says. “All of a sudden you had these younger women connecting with thoughts about what it means to be political and what it means to run a campaign. You could just kind of see that people kind of lit up: ‘Okay, yeah, I really do care about stuff.’”

In Britain, the Young Foundation, a think tank devoted to social policy and innovation, has for the last three years been conducting a program called UpRising. Inspired in part by youth race riots that struck two northern English towns in 2001, the program aims to channel the activism of young people into the democratic process and nurture a diverse stable of future leaders. “Essentially, what we’re looking for are young people who have potential,” says Alveena Malik, director of the program, “but not the opportunity to become future leaders.”

UpRising seeks those between the ages of 19 and 25 who have already taken an interest in giving back to their communities. There is an application process, and those accepted are enrolled in a 12-month program. Participants hear from community leaders and politicians, work on skills like public speaking and networking and, as teams, manage “social action projects” (one, for example, aims to increase the voting rate among young voters in the next British election). UpRising, which has

<http://www.macleans.ca/politics/a-political-fix/>

been endorsed by the leaders of all three major political parties in Britain, is not specifically aimed at prepping young people to stand for election, but it does take as motivation the lack of diversity in the British House of Commons. And some of its graduates, says Malik, will likely end up pursuing office of one kind or another. “We’re nurturing and supporting what we think is a new form of leadership,” says Malik, “that is going to be much more relevant to 21st century Britain, which is much more diverse, much more aware of the global-local context and much more akin with understanding what the key issues are locally.”

In the Canadian context, it is, in some cases, too late to worry about nurturing those between the ages of 19 and 25 for public office: as a result of the most recent election, the House of Commons includes eight MPs within that age group. These eight are among more than 100 MPs who took their seats in the House for the first time last week when Parliament resumed business. And if Samara’s findings are any indication, many will find themselves initially at a loss to understand their new world. “Most MPs admitted feeling very unprepared for their new role as parliamentarians,” Samara wrote in a report last year. “Many soon realized they had no sense of the numerous rules and processes—both written and unwritten—of Parliament Hill, or how to navigate a place where so many divergent personalities and issues are brought together.” This year’s class of new MPs participated in two half-days of orientation last month on Parliament Hill. They were schooled in parliamentary procedure and advised on setting up constituency offices and hiring staff, while veteran MPs spoke to them about various facets of Ottawa life.

More could be done. Carleton University in Ottawa is currently pursuing what it calls an “Initiative for Parliamentary and Diplomatic Engagement.” Director Maureen Boyd, a former civil servant and journalist, is reaching out to the major political parties and hopes to find mutual agreement for policy or practical training that could complement the orientation offered by Parliament. (Separately, Carleton is also launching a graduate program in “political management” that aims to train prospective staffers.) In the United States, new members of Congress are invited to participate in a bipartisan conference organized by Harvard’s Institute of Politics. Participants are treated to workshops on policy issues and practical matters and hear from prominent guest speakers (last year’s panellists included former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and former presidential adviser Lawrence Summers). Perhaps most important, Democrats and Republicans are offered a rare chance to get out of Washington and commune with each other. “Civility is a big topic for us right now, and I think our program supports civility better than anything else,” says conference director Christian Flynn.

The degree to which members of Parliament should be better trained is a lingering question. A Library of Parliament report on a series of seminars conducted after the 2004 election, for instance, noted that: “At each session, members acknowledged that some kind of continuous learning program is as essential for members of Parliament as it is for members of any other profession.” In the next sentences, it was noted that myriad other obligations and the stresses of minority government made it difficult to set aside precious time for such things.

It may be, more generally, a matter of viewing political office as a profession: an idea that runs counter to a certain populist understanding of democratic representation. The term “career politician” is, after all, considered a slur. As Loat has also found, the job of parliamentarian is subject to interpretation. And in addition to balancing public, partisan and personal responsibilities, the MP operates as something of a small-business person with the responsibilities of operating and staffing Ottawa and constituency offices on fixed budgets. But all such questions are part of the same conversation, one requiring us to take more seriously the pursuit of politics and the role of elected office.