

## Fixing the way we “do democracy”

Are you feeling disillusioned with the apathy and cynicism that so many Canadians display toward politics and public service nowadays? These two concerned alumni are, and they're doing something about it.

SHARON ASCHAIK, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY ALUMNI REVIEW

Published on: November, 2012



The way we “do democracy” in Canada is being put under the microscope by **Alison Loat, Artsci'99**, and **Michael MacMillan, Artsci'78**, who are striving to get more people involved in all aspects of public life.

The two-winged Samara, is a non-profit charitable organization that focuses on improving civic engagement by pulling back the curtain on the people and institutions in government, and by creating ways for Canadians to get more engaged in politics and public life. It's an especially important objective in light of Canada's declining voting rates. In the last federal election, turnout among eligible

voters was just 61.4 per cent, the third lowest number in this country's history. (The lowest was in 2008, at 58.8 per cent).

Alison feels this disconnect, which is strongest among young people, recent immigrants, Aboriginals, and low-income Canadians, reflects serious problems with our democracy.

“People feel they're being turned away from the system. They're never asked to participate in any meaningful way,” she says.

Alison, the Executive Director of Samara, started the organization with Michael MacMillan in 2009. Alison got interested in civic life during her student days at Queen's, where she says her political studies professors instilled in her an appreciation for Canada's political institutions. Alison also served as Vice-President of University Affairs for the AMS and was the news editor of *The Queen's Journal*.

She went on to complete a Master's degree in Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Along the way, she founded and led the non-profit group Canada25 (which engages young Canadians in public policy debates) and worked as an analyst for the Privy Council Office, helping to facilitate then-Prime Minister Paul Martin's transition to power. She also worked at the McKinsey & Company consulting firm, developing strategies for organizations and governments in areas such as health care, financial services, and consumer



goods. In addition to co-leading Samara, Alison now teaches in the Rotman School of Management and the School of Public Policy & Governance school at U of T.

Michael's interest in revitalizing Canada's democracy also took root at Queen's, where he served as a student senator and education commissioner, and co-organized Orientation Week one year. However, unlike Alison, his involvement in Samara has been a major departure from his life's work.

Building on his training as a film major, in 1978 he started Atlantis Films, then a film and - television production house. The company evolved into Alliance Atlantis, and, as chairman and CEO, Michael oversaw 13 Canadian TV networks. But along the way, he became increasingly concerned about the state of Canada's democracy. In 2007, after he sold his company, he moved in new career directions. He now runs Blue Ant Media, a specialty TV and digital media company. He's now had more time to reflect on issues that were troubling him.

"I was growing more and more frustrated with otherwise intellectual friends saying, 'Why worry about this policy or that politician? Whatever you do has no impact.' I began thinking a lot about the public good and the idea of achieving important social goals through acting together," Michael recalls.

Among the goals the staff and volunteers of Samara have accomplished are conducting exit interviews with MPs, publishing three research reports, hosting public talks about democracy in communities across Canada, and running seminars on public affairs journalism. Next year, Samara will release its "Democracy Index," which will measure Canadian involvement in public life, and by 2014, it will publish a book on democracy and politics in Canada.

"People universally support democracy in Canada, but their day-to-day reality doesn't always feel that democratic," Alison says. "So I think there's a lot to be said for finding creative ways to discuss this problem and figuring out ways to allow people to contribute."