



Is there ever an excuse for not voting?

ELIZABETH RENZETTI, THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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In honour of Canada Day, I'd like to share one of my grandmother's favourite stories. She was living in rural Nova Scotia with a provincial election approaching when a man from one of the political parties offered her \$5 for her vote. Five dollars! A windfall.

She took the money and tucked it into the undergarment she always called a brassiere, where most of her valuables were stored. Then she went to vote. My grandfather was horrified that she had accepted a bribe. "I took the money, Herman," she told him, "and then I voted the way I wanted."

I should have been shocked too, but I was always proud of her instead: I imagined her trudging along some dirt road (she didn't drive), thinking about the chores she had to do when she got home, on her way to the ballot box. A hundred other things required her attention that day. There were deer to keep out of the garden, men to keep out of the moonshine. But she voted.

What's Pamela Wallin's excuse? The embattled senator has been too busy to vote, it was revealed this week. "I have not been able to vote in the last federal, provincial or municipal elections due to the travel and work schedule," Ms. Wallin wrote in a letter to Senate administrators, The Globe's Kim Mackrael [reported](#).

This is intriguing, to say the least. If only the senator had provided more details about the tangled thicket of obligations that kept her from voting in not one, not two, but three separate elections. Perhaps a tiger was loose on the streets. Three times. Or was she at a barn dance in Wadena? Might it have been a meeting at Porter Airlines, where she once sat on the board of directors? Maybe she was on tour with Burton Cummings.

Of course, Ms Wallin didn't need an election to win her Senate seat. From the lofty heights of the upper chamber, voting may indeed seem like something for chumps with lots of time on their hands. And, to be fair, she's only emulating the common folk, who find less and less time for voting: Turnout for the federal election of 2011 was 61 per cent; it's been falling for decades.

We're in a bit of a pickle here on Canada Day, and not the tasty kind you put on your burger. The electorate, especially its younger part, is increasingly turned off by the formal political system. Engagement with politics and politicians, which has never been easier thanks to new technology, has also never been more threadbare. New research by the advocacy group Samara, to be released July 8, suggests that just 40 per cent of Canadians have had even a single political conversation in the past year.

The problem, says Samara director Alison Loat, is that politics isn't valued in any way in this country – not properly taught in schools, not respected as a profession, not emphasized as a vital component of society for incoming new Canadians. One immigrant told Ms. Loat he was amazed there was only a single line about the importance of voting in the citizenship guidebook *Discover Canada*: "There was more in it about beavers," he complained.

Ms. Loat doesn't buy the argument that Canadians are put off by so many scandals bobbing past like detritus in a sewer. "It's easier to focus on the one guy doing something wrong than the small actions of the many," she says, "but it's the small actions of the many that build democracy every day." The problem is, the small building blocks of democracy don't get celebrated every day. (Feel free to hurl rotten tomatoes at me, the journalist. Guilty as charged.) It's hard to get people talking about politics when the basic conversation begins with a lip curled in contempt. Even politicians distance themselves from the practice of politics: Samara did exit interviews with 79 MPs, and almost all of them were eager to identify themselves as mavericks, operating outside the political system. Imagine

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/for-canada-day-ill-take-civic-engagement-medium-rare/article12896237/>

if your doctor said, "I don't really have any faith in this whole medicine malarkey. The rest of them are a bunch of quacks."

In its upcoming report, Samara is suggesting 20 small ways for Canadians to introduce civic engagement into their lives in a positive way. Think of it as putting a little flax in your Cocoa Pops. It could be as easy as signing a petition, choosing a political biography over a novel for your book club or starting a discussion about current events at the dinner table.

Perhaps it's possible to call a cynicism armistice for a day. I'm planning on doing this at my own Canada Day barbecue. Teenagers will be asked to read the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and list the ways their parents have broken its conventions and, like, totally ruined their lives. Old people will be encouraged to talk about how they had to wade through snow drifts eight feet high and run from bears to reach polling stations, and how no one appreciates their sacrifice so why do they even bother and please pass the ketchup.

I figure it will be an ace party. I hope yours is, too.