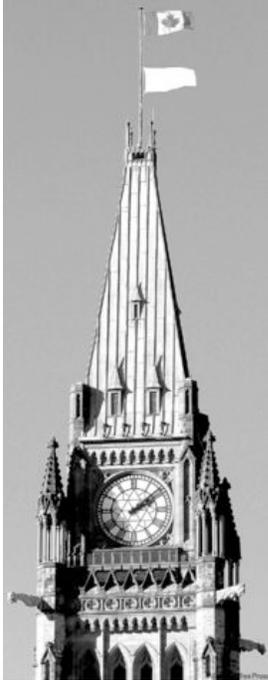


Parliament of little use: departing MPs

Members who sat 10 years still feel like they're outsiders

MIA RABSON, WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Published on: September 14, 2011



Departing MPs said their best work was done in constituency offices or caucus, not in the House of Commons.

CNS The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA -- Federal politics has developed such a negative reputation that former MPs prefer to cast themselves as outsiders who did what they could to buck the system, a new report shows.

Samara Canada, a charitable organization that studies citizen engagement, today will release its fourth and final report based on exit interviews with 65 former MPs. This report focuses on advice to incoming members of parliament as well as how the MPs themselves functioned during their time in Ottawa.

The interviews, said Samara executive director Alison Loat, were fascinating because of how many MPs said, directly or indirectly, that little of value was ever accomplished on the floor of the House of Commons.

"It is a little bit alarming," said Loat. "It really struck us how much they claim their best work is done outside the House of Commons."

The report cites the MPs saying they did their most important work in their constituency offices or caucuses, but few took responsibility for any of the reasons Parliament isn't functioning.

"What's worrying is that nothing constructive is going on in Parliament," said Loat. The time in the House is so poorly regarded that some of the main recommendations made by former MPs are to find ways to spend less time there. That includes implementing electronic voting to reduce time it takes to vote on legislation and eliminating Friday sitting days to give MPs more time to spend in constituencies. Improving committees so reports on policy are debated by the House rather than shelved by cabinet ministers and removing the influence of party leaders on nominations and committee membership are also on their list of recommendations.

All the MPs had happy stories about what they accomplished as MPs but their favourite memories usually involved helping individuals navigate the bureaucracy, whether it be to reunite an immigrant with their family from abroad or help a laid-off worker access unemployment benefits.

"Their stories say a lot about how hard it is to work within the system and suggest that MPs, rather than changing the system so that it's workable, instead opt to find their own way and advance the issues they can in the time they have," the report says.

Winnipeg Free Press

Nearly all of the 65 MPs interviewed described themselves as unlikely politicians, and most distanced themselves from the poor behaviour displayed in Parliament. Few of the MPs even acknowledged participating in the partisan attacks and games that fuel public disenchantment.

Loat acknowledged some of the frustration likely arises from the overwhelming influence of party politics and the limited individuality allowed by party leaders.

"If the people with their names on the signs are frustrated, it's not surprising citizens are not feeling engaged."

The report said it's both shocking and almost unbelievable that MPs who spent an average of more than a decade in Parliament, and include former party leaders and cabinet ministers, still think of themselves as outsiders to the political process.

"Why aren't these representatives of Canadians working within the system to make change," the report asks. "Or if they are, why aren't they willing to admit it."

The Samara project is the first time MPs have been surveyed after leaving Parliament, providing good and bad glimpses at the world they left behind. Loat said the hope is to give Canadians and parliamentarians a better understanding of what needs to improve and how we can better bring Canadians to engage more in the democratic process.

A second round of interviews with MPs who resigned on or before the recent election is beginning this month.