

Politicians need training to be ‘professionals,’ report says

Why can't Canadian political jobs be more businesslike? A new report suggests that MPs need better training and clearer job descriptions

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OTTAWA—The politicians in Canada's Parliament could use some businesslike training and job descriptions, according to a new analysis of what's ailing politics in this country.

Based on interviews with 65 former MPs, the Samara organization has issued a new report that recommends political jobs be “professionalized.”

“Rules and procedures were described as opaque, processes inefficient and human-resource decisions baffling,” states the report. “As such, MPs suggested numerous ways to professionalize the management of politics.”

Samara, a non-profit, non-partisan research organization, has been conducting what it calls “exit interviews” — also a term borrowed from business — with former MPs of all political stripes.

The fourth and final report on these interviews calls for MPs to receive more rigorous training and clearer job descriptions, so that politicians elected to Parliament — as well as citizens — know better what's expected of them.

“Many said they were left to their own devices to determine how to go about their job,” the report says.

In fact, there are several training programs for Canadian MPs, including a big two-day session being held at Carleton University this weekend, as well as the ongoing training and education provided to MPs by the Canadian Parliamentary Centre.

But the former MPs who talked to Samara's researchers complained that they were ill-equipped for the demands and vagaries of political life in Parliament.

“Rookie MPs are, for all intents and purposes, abandoned the day after they're elected,” one ex-MP is quoted as saying in Samara's newest report.

“One of the major flaws is orientation. We sat in the House, had a speech from two former MPs, saying ‘Don't drink too much.’ That was about it,” another ex-MP told Samara. (The report uses anonymous quotes from the former MPs who participate in the research.)

Samara's researchers were apparently struck by how often the former MPs said that they gained career satisfaction outside the “bubble” of politics and daily political gamesmanship in Ottawa.

“It’s notable that the achievements the MPs chose to highlight rarely concerned carrying out the agendas of their parties,” the report says, noting that nearly all the former MPs cast themselves as “outsiders” to the Canadian political system.

“It’s shocking to think that most of these 65 MPs — who worked in Parliament for, on average, over a decade, one-third of whom served in cabinet posts — still describe themselves powerless and outside the system,” the report says. “How must this language make those citizens who are truly marginalized and outside traditional power structures feel? Perhaps they have good reason to feel cynical toward, and removed from, the politics that is supposed to represent them.”

If MPs are doing their best work at the constituency level, helping citizens navigate bureaucracy, Samara says, then it’s probably time that Canadian politics built this into the job description for MPs — if only to help draw clearer lines between politics and the supposedly non-political public service.

Samara’s next project is to build a “democracy index” to help measure the health of Canada’s political system. It will be issued annually and will examine how well citizens, the media, Parliament and political parties are contributing to “the functioning of Canadian democracy.”