

Rob Ford scandal may lead to better democracy: Hepburn

The scandal engulfing Toronto Mayor Rob Ford sparks unprecedented attention on politics and the state of our democracy

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Alison Loat has spent years fighting to promote and protect democracy in Canada.

So it would seem understandable that she'd be discouraged by the political scandals swirling around Toronto Mayor Rob Ford and the Canadian Senate.

Surprisingly, though, Loat is positively upbeat these days.

That's because, as hard as it might be to imagine, the current scandals engulfing Toronto City Hall and the Senate may ultimately be good for Canadian democracy.

The scandals are generating "an unprecedented level of attention on politics and the state of our democracy," says Loat, the executive director of [Samara](#), a non-profit organization focused on promoting citizen engagement within Canadian democracy.

And that's good for democracy because greater citizen engagement in politics will ultimately strengthen our democratic institutions and processes, which have been under siege in recent years by unaccountable governments and corrupt or untrustworthy politicians and their aides who break promises at will.

As Canadians, we have a clear choice with both the Ford and Senate scandals:

We can turn away in disgust or we can become engaged and work toward improving our democracy.

Loat says she is particularly pleased that more Canadians are asking "how we allowed this to happen," referring to Ford's refusal to step aside despite using crack cocaine, being drunk at public events and lying to voters, as well as the Senate expense account scandal in which Mike Duffy, Pamela Wallin and Patrick Brazeau were eventually suspended without pay.

Instead of being complacent and tuned out, Loat says these citizens now are eager to create a new political culture, one that doesn't operate as if it's OK to abuse power and ignore citizen concerns.

For his part, Ford claims that city council's move to kick him out of office is "absolutely the worst thing you can do for democracy and the city of Toronto."

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But it is Ford who politically hijacked democracy by refusing to step aside in the face of the virtually unanimous vote by city council and the unprecedented disgrace and dishonour he has foisted upon the office of mayor.

Long before the Ford and Senate scandals, though, growing numbers of Canadians, especially youth, were becoming turned off and disillusioned by politics, a trend that threatens to undermine political institutions as we now know them.

A Samara survey earlier this year suggested barely 10 per cent of Canadians volunteer, donate or belong to a political party.

To combat these trends, Samara and other organizations, such as the Montreal-based [Trudeau Foundation](#), are trying to capitalize on the widespread public attention on the current scandals and get Canadians more involved in politics.

For its part, Samara kicked off its [Everyday Political Citizen](#) of 2013 project last week, designed to celebrate “unsung political heroes” who work or volunteer in roles such as community organizers to improve their communities.

Samara is seeking one nomination from all 308 federal ridings. In January, a 14-person jury that includes comedian Rick Mercer and former Reform Party leader Preston Manning will select two overall winners.

Maybe Rob Ford could check out some of the nominees from his own Etobicoke neighbourhood who bring a fresh perspective to civic politics rather than the nasty style of operating displayed by the disgraced mayor.

For example, he might listen to Idil Burale, a Somali community member in north Etobicoke who has worked to bridge the divide between urban and suburban parts of the city.

In Montreal this week, the Trudeau Foundation is holding its annual conference centred on the theme of Democracy in the 21st Century.

The goal of the conference, which is attracting 300 top scholars and political thinkers, is to share ideas on how to promote and protect democracy, which organizers say is “threatened on all sides” by growing inequality, damage to human rights and declining electoral participation rates.

Ultimately, it is up to all citizens to take our democratic responsibilities seriously. Complacency, cynicism and disengagement are the signs of an unhealthy democracy.

As Alison Loat says, we can all play a role by demanding more respect, accountability and responsibility from our elected leaders. In that way we can reinforce and protect our democratic rights and institutions.

And if that happens, we can thank Rob Ford.

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