

Samara is bringing hope, change and political engagement to Canadian politics

PIALI ROY, YONGE STREET MEDIA

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When Samara's first report, *The Accidental Citizen*, came out this summer, the pundits were surprised. Their 'exit interviews' with Members of Parliament, who had left office in the previous 5 years, showed that they had arrived in Ottawa not as careerists, but as individuals who saw themselves as political outsiders. It was a finding few expected.

Samara may look like the country's newest think-tank, officially started in 2009, but according to co-founder and Executive Director Alison Loat, it certainly is not. Their aim is to emphasize engagement in the political process rather than mere research.

"Our ultimate goal is not to influence policy change on xyz policy issues," says Loat. "We are much more about igniting the public imagination and conversation."

Named after the helicopter-winged seeds that fall from maple and oak trees, Samara is a non-partisan organization developed to foster conversations about different aspects of the political process including the role of elected officials, public affairs journalism and civic engagement.

The impetus for Samara came from co-founder Michael MacMillan's disillusionment with dinner party conversation. For years, the then-CEO and Executive Chairman of [Alliance Atlantis Communications](#), found himself on the losing end of polite debates about the state of Canadian politics.

"They would say, 'why do you care? Why does it matter?'" says MacMillan who recently participated in The Stop Community Food Centre's '[Do the Math](#)' campaign where people spent a week eating only from a food bank hamper this past April.

For a political junkie who had once subscribed as a teenager to the [Hansard](#), the official record of the debates in the Parliament of Canada, the questions belied what he calls "the Canadian experience of general disengagement." It was not a unique feeling worldwide, but troubling nonetheless.

So MacMillan, who had recently sold Alliance-Atlantis to [Canwest Global Communications](#) convened an impromptu advisory board to think through this question, including former University of Toronto President Rob Pritchard (and current Metrolink CEO and chair), who introduced him to his future Executive Director. Loat, who was then working for management consulting firm [McKinsey and Company](#)'s Toronto office, had just received an award for her work with [Canada 25](#), a non-profit she co-founded out of university, dedicated to

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encouraging public policy debates and research among young Canadians.

One of the first tasks of the fledgling organization, now housed in a Victorian mansion on Prince Arthur Ave, was to figure out not only its actual mission but its premiere project. One idea involved supporting an MP's difficult transition to public life via a training program, mentoring or even, executive education. Instead, it was suggested that they simply ask the MPs what they needed.

It was a small suggestion that became a "light bulb" moment. Why not conduct the kind of formal exit interviews common to corporate life?

"We learned that it had never been done before," says Loat. "And we thought that this is so obvious."

The two co-founders travelled across the country to do more than half of the 65 interviews personally in what Loat proudly considers to be one of the largest pieces of research on leadership in Canadian history. The results of the MP Exit Interview project, designed specifically for future use by academics, will continue to be published just like *The Accidental Citizen*; future reports will cover what the work of an MP, their role as the "nexus" between government and citizens and finally, their reflections and recommendations.

Much of Samara's success comes from their belief in consulting with core audiences. They had full houses for their journalism seminar series, co-sponsored with University of Toronto's Massey College, which included speakers from high profile American institutions such as the investigative journalism non-profit [ProPublica](#), [NPR](#), and the Pew Center's [Project for Excellence in Journalism](#). The reason? The Canadian media wanted to hear from outsiders.

"The feedback we got was 'if you can bring somebody who we can't normally hear, we don't have an opportunity to talk to, we prefer that'," says Loat.

Despite the emphasis on the next big project -- they have big plans for a Democracy Barometer to measure the health of the system -- Samara is trying to emphasize the importance of the conversation. They want to be a change-maker kind of institution.

"If we can be as much about generating a neat idea and helping people see that it is possible that would be as much success for us as doing it ourselves. That's ultimately how you sustain change," says Loat.

"We can't do everything and nor do we want to. The more we encourage other people to do things, the happier we will be."

Samara's agenda may seem broad, even too ambitious, with its results hard to measure. But that is not a problem for MacMillan.

"I come from a fairly complex business. I have a high tolerance for ambiguity," he says, referring to his Alliance-Atlantis past. "Here we are more focused on how the table is set."

It's one way to provide a welcome antidote to a public's cynicism to the political system.

Piali Roy is a Toronto-based freelance writer.