

## Senate scandals may reaffirm Canadian distrust in political leaders

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The troubling Senate *spending report* released by Canada's auditor general this month and Wednesday's *shocking allegations* about the conduct of Senator Don Meredith come at a time when Canadians' trust of politicians is estimated to be at an all-time low.

It's hard to gauge whether scandals in Canada's Upper Chamber affect how Canadians view leaders in the House of Commons or other levels of government. Jane Hilderman, incoming executive director of non-profit Samara, said the news of Meredith's personal conduct isn't likely to strengthen trust in political leaders.

"It may confirm what Canadians already have as a dominant opinion, which is that generally those elected to office aren't very well trusted," Jane Hilderman said in an interview with *Yahoo Canada News*.

"That's going to be a very hard thing to shift over time."

Meredith was booted from the Conservative caucus after news broke that he had been in an inappropriate relationship with a young woman that began when she was 16. The issue has been referred to the Senate ethics officer for review, with senators on either political side calling for his resignation.

The Meredith incident comes not too long after Auditor General Michael Ferguson's report on inappropriate Senate expense claims, shining a negative spotlight on an already embattled institution — a very different kind of scandal from what Meredith is facing, but a scandal nonetheless.

Samara's research points to a sharp decline in trust for elected officials; most Canadians don't trust MPs or political parties to do what is right, Hilderman said.

A report released by the organization earlier in the spring notes that only 40 per cent of Canadians trust MPs to do what is right, while 42 per cent feel the same way about political parties. Sixty-two per cent of Canadians in the study feel that politicians are only out for their vote, and nothing else.

<https://ca.news.yahoo.com/blogs/canada-politics/meredith-scandal-may-reaffirm-canadians-distrust-223505052.html>

“Trust is a hard thing to build and such an easy thing to lose,” Hilderman said. “And yet it’s this glue we think holds the system together, because if you don’t trust someone to do something on your behalf then there’s not a lot of social capital in the system.”

She added that we’re coming to a point where trust — something that’s very intangible — is dangerously low and where people are seeing politics, particularly politics in Ottawa, as incredibly irrelevant.

“They’re just turning away from the system altogether, and that I think is the most worrisome thing about it, regardless of the details of today’s scandal... it’s this broader shift that’s been happening over time.”

It’s going to take a lot to turn things around, Hilderman said. Her organization is trying to change the narrative and show that politics isn’t just about people in the professional sphere, it’s about everyone, with initiatives like the annual Everyday Citizens Project.

The project, which launches for the third time next week, highlights the positive work of politically engaged Canadians across the country.

“We need to get some of that trust, that good will back into the political system,” Hilderman said, “because otherwise it’s going to just continue on a path of irrelevance for Canadians.”