

Study undercuts stereotypes about politicians

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Published on: June 16, 2010

A new study drawing on interviews with 65 former Members of the Canadian Parliament cuts against some commonly held stereotypes about politicians.

Did you assume most are super well-connected “political animals” who begin strategizing their paths to power at an early age?

You would be wrong, given the findings released earlier this week by the Samara foundation. In fact, most Members who sat in Parliament between 2004 and 2008 before leaving public life described their route into politics as a detour from other callings, a path largely shaped by luck and happenstance.

Which is why, the Samara Foundation, which conducted the study, titled its report *The Accidental Citizen*?

Here is their summary of findings:

First, Parliamentarians’ backgrounds, experiences, pre-political careers and expressed motivations for running were far more varied and much less predictable than we’d assumed.

Most spent a generation pursuing other careers and interests before becoming an MP. Few self-identified as political candidates. Most say they sought a nomination only after they were asked, and some accepted it with only weeks or mere days before the nomination vote took place.

Further, these MPs did not consider themselves to be political insiders, even though they were generally highly involved in their communities. Rather, most portrayed themselves as outsiders, and indicated they came to the job with that mindset.

Finally, even the nomination process for a candidate’s political party seemed subject to chance. The nomination is an essential element of anyone’s path to politics.

It was thus surprising that, for so many MPs, their gateway into politics was so unpredictable. Few MPs described the nomination process consistently; the confusing rules and their varied application made it difficult to understand the terms on which the nomination contests were fought.

Perhaps as a result, most MPs were critical of some aspect of the nomination process, even though they had navigated it successfully. One can only imagine what interviews with less successful candidates might reveal.

The interviewing initiative by Michael MacMillan and Alison Loat, who created the charitable organization Samara to study citizen engagement with Canadian democracy, will be yielding further reports.



The views we tend to get of politicians are through the harsh and often cartoonish lens of the news media (The Tyee is a culprit on some days too!).

Samara's research allows public servants to relate the complexities of their working lives and how the current system supports or thwarts their best efforts to make a positive difference. The Tyee will be tracking this project closely.

Find the *The Accidental Citizen*? **here** and go **here** to watch an interesting video of MacMillan and Loat discussing their research.