

# Sydney teacher with penchant for politics on shortlist for national honour

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SYDNEY — A Cape Breton teacher's love of civics and democracy has earned her a new title.

Neeta Kumar-Britten of Sydney is one of four Nova Scotians who were recently named an Everyday Political Citizen by the non-partisan charity Samara Canada of Toronto.

A teacher of 20 years, Kumar-Britten most recently taught at Sydney Academy, but due to a declining student population and changing priorities, the high school decided to no longer offer its political science program.

In September, Kumar-Britten slipped back into elementary teaching with the hope of engaging more youngsters in the political process.

She now teaches Grade 5 at Brookland Elementary School on Cottage Road in Sydney.

"In 2014, when we are having such struggles as a country with our democracy, I think the place to start is with our young people, and high school might actually be a little late," said Kumar-Britten.

"The younger they are, the more energy they have, and they get so excited about meeting their (member of Parliament)."

Known in the local community for her love of politics, Kumar-Britten was nominated for the distinction by Mark Eyking, Liberal MP for Sydney-Victoria.

In March 2009, she also gained national attention after launching a Facebook campaign for a Senate seat to replace the retiring Gerard Phalen of Glace Bay.

"My foray into a pursuit of a Senate seat was really tongue-in-cheek, and it was more to show that (Prime Minister Stephen Harper) was going to stack (the Senate), and I, myself, identify very publicly as a Liberal outside of school.

"When I'm teaching, of course, I stay completely non-partisan, and I'm about democracy education as a whole and engaging kids in whatever direction they want to go. I knew, for sure, I wasn't getting the call from Mr. Harper, but it was really a fun exercise because we got to talk about how senators were being picked."

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Beyond the classroom, the married mother of two has been volunteering her time to help fight the closure of the Veterans Affairs Canada service centre in Sydney.

She is also a board member of a committee that seeks to construct a new public library in downtown Sydney.

Joining her on the list of Everyday Political Citizens are registered nurse Patti Melanson of Halifax, teacher Tim Halman of Dartmouth and Lois Miller of Lower Sackville, a member of the NDP party since 1961 who serves as the president of her electoral district association.

The foursome are among 12 people shortlisted for Samara Canada's accolade. There was a list of nearly 350 nominees.

A panel of 16 judges, including CBC personality Rick Mercer, singled out individuals who are making a difference through youth engagement.

Currently, Canada falls into the bottom 20th percentile in terms of voter turnout and civic engagement.

For that reason, Samara Canada developed the campaign to celebrate the unsung heroes of Canadian democracy.

Two winners will be selected Dec. 3 as this year's political citizen of the year for both the adult and under-18 categories.

The 2013 title was won by Halifax resident Mark Coffin, founder of the Springtime Collective and an advocate for democratic renewal.