

Watching the Watchdog: Three Scary Truths About Canadian Democracy

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The samara is the winged seed of the maple, elm and ash tree.

Because of those wings, the samara "helicopters" to the ground when ripe. Which is a very clever way of landing far from the parent tree. Which, in turn, gives the samara a better chance of sprouting and flourishing and becoming a mature tree, a thing of beauty.

The Toronto-based charity, Samara, named after the seed, works in pretty much the same way. Its commitment is to examine how our political system works. And to do that, it "seeds ideas for relevant and responsive politics that Canadians can believe in."

And hopes they fall on fertile ground.

This all sounds very Canadian. Very formal. Very polite. In actual fact, however, Samara is a major shit disturber.

Consider this -- right under the main heading on its website, *Why We Exist*, is this warning: "Despite Canadians' belief in the importance of democracy, more and more people say they feel disconnected from politics. They don't feel their voices are heard. And they're giving up."

As proof, Samara has just come up with a new report on the state of Canada's democracy. It's titled "Who's the Boss?" and make for really scary reading.

Scary thing #1: Canadians' satisfaction with democracy is at an all-time low -- 55 per cent - down 20 points in just eight years.

Scary thing #2: In evaluating Member of Parliament performance across different aspects of their jobs, Canadians award MPs less than 50 per cent in most areas.

Scary thing #3: Two out of three of Canadians aren't satisfied with how MPs do their jobs. We believe they do their best work at a job that we see as a low priority: representing the views of their political parties.

Michael MacMillan, who is Co-founder and Chair of Samara, sums up with surprising understatement: "This precipitous decline in Canadians' perceptions of their democracy is troubling. It might go some way towards explaining the apathy and disengagement we see reflected in Canada's declining voter turnout."

Alison Loat, who is Co-founder and Executive Director of Samara, displays much the same restraint and delicacy: "MPs are an important link between Canadians and their politics, but that relationship is not well understood and seems to be overshadowed by political party messaging. Canadians identify political leaders as important players in their issues of concern. This research indicates that steps should be taken to ensure political parties -- and MPs -- better reflect citizens' priorities."

Hidden underneath the polite words (maybe they have something to do with the old maxim that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar) is *Samara's* powerful commitment to warning us about what is obviously a damaged and dysfunctional Canadian political system.

When only half of us are satisfied with the way democracy works in our country, something is terribly wrong.

This view is the same right across the nation, regardless of gender or where we live (although Francophone Quebecers report even greater levels of dissatisfaction.)

Here's what we believe MPs see as *their* priority, their most important job:

61 per cent of us see it as "representing the views of their party."

53 per cent of us see it as "debating or voting on important issues."

46 per cent of us see it as "representing the views of constituencies."

45 per cent of us see it as "holding the government to account."

44 per cent of us see it as "managing individual constituents' concerns."

Put simply, all this means that Canadians feel MPs are a lot better at representing their parties than they are at representing we the citizens who elect them.

This view agrees with a previous *Samara* report which created a lot of excitement. It's called *Welcome to Parliament* and reveals that "there is little agreement among MPs in their explanations of the core purpose of a Member of Parliament."

And it worries about "a Parliament whose members disagree so fundamentally on the basic aspects of the job, as well as on what they were elected to achieve."

All of this makes our Canadian parliament, in effect, a hidden undemocratic state -- or groups of hidden undemocratic states -- secreted within a quasi-public democratic state.

Scary.

But at least now, because of *Samara*, we know the problem.

So all we have to do is fix it.