

Editorial: Voters' interests can't be ignored

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Canadians who like to think of their country as a comfortably democratic refuge from the political upheavals that rock the rest of the world should sit up and pay attention to a disturbing trend in opinion.

More importantly, members of Parliament — including South Island MPs Elizabeth May, Randall Garrison and Murray Rankin — should take note: Two-thirds of Canadians believe their interests are not being represented in Ottawa.

A recent survey commissioned by the charitable organization Samara found that 55 per cent of Canadians are very or somewhat satisfied with the way democracy works here.

That's a big drop from 2004, when 75 per cent of those surveyed said they were satisfied.

The survey respondents seem to believe that our country does a good job of protecting their freedom of speech and their right to equality, Samara says. The problem is in dissatisfaction with the way the political system deals with their daily issues.

This is cause for concern, because as much as we appreciate living in the True North strong and free, it is the mundane workings of politics and government that affect us most often and most closely. Do politicians hear our pleas? Do they share our priorities? Are our opinions reflected in legislative debates?

Sadly, the Samara study suggests most Canadians think the answer to all those questions is no.

The survey found only 36 per cent thought their MPs were doing a good job.

More significantly, it looked at their opinions of where the MPs were doing well. The lowest rating — 44 per cent — was MPs' success at "managing individual constituents' concerns."

The highest score — 61 per cent — was for "representing the views of their party."

In other words, the MPs did the best job of the task that voters care about least.

Members of Parliament know they are falling down in representing their constituents. Samara also completed a unique series of exit interviews with 65 former members of Parliament. The politicians said they went to Ottawa with their ears ringing with what they had been told on the doorsteps of their ridings: "Speak for us." But they soon found themselves bound and buckled into the straitjacket of party politics.

The MPs resented having to follow party orders that they thought were out of touch with constituents' priorities. Members of all parties said the antics in the House of Commons were a joke that accomplished nothing, and almost all their useful work was done out of the public eye, in committees and caucus.

If we are trying to understand why voters are becoming disengaged, three things stand out from this: the unproductive House of Commons, the parties obsessed with their own goals and the work being done out of sight of voters. All three undermine voters' understanding of and belief in the work of their elected representatives. The MPs themselves lay much of the blame on the parties, and there is a strong argument the other two issues stem from the party political system.

To restore voters' faith in their democracy, we must look at ways to make their voices heard in the halls of power. Proportional representation could be one option. Reducing the influence of monied interests is another. Some way to ease the stranglehold of party discipline is essential. The people of Greater Victoria don't care about party machinations — they want their interests defended in Ottawa.

As long as voters believe their interests are being ignored, they will continue to drift away from the political process. That way is dangerous, because those who are ignored and disengaged will find other, less constructive means to press their agendas.

All of us, voters and politicians, must look for solutions because democracy can only thrive when its citizens are committed to making it work.