

The World's Older Profession – Tips for Solution Based Advocacy (18)

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Imagine performing for extraordinary long hours every day of the week, in an arena full of people whose predisposition is to boo your every move. Every weakness, every imperfection, every mistake is magnified. You can't hide. Your friends are suspect. You must pretend you don't have a family. You must keep a smile on your face and listen with intense interest to each spectator's opinion or rude critique. And when you run out of energy you are discarded, in favour of the next naive gladiator er candidate.

Sadly these are the working conditions of most politicians today, particularly those in Government.

We have become a society of critics and cynics about politicians. We are dissatisfied with the progress and trajectory of our democracy. And rightly so. It is in need of transformation. I, for example, can't imagine seriously addressing our complex environmental challenges using our current political apparatus. Yet we think we can fix our democracy by mistreating or disregarding the very people who understand its inner workings and just might have insights about transforming our political system.

Surely it is too simplistic to blame our politicians without taking a look at our archaic political structures designed for the 18th century not the 21st; the role of the media in breeding cynicism by focusing almost exclusively on political standards; and our own, often conflicting, expectations of government and elected officials.

A refreshing new approach to political life in Canada has just been launched by **Samara**. Entitled **The Accidental Citizen?** for the first time ever it summarizes exit interviews with 65 Canadian MP's from across Canada.

What a concept – seeking advice from former politicians about strengthening our democracy! Here is their central and surprising finding:

The central finding, and the one that frames this report, is how accidentally these MPs indicated they came to politics in Canada. This is not what we expected, and was revealed in several ways.

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 interest 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.

Their findings reflect my observations. There is no established political class in Canada. The majority of politicians I have met are good capable people, from every walk of life. They

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become politicians with dreams of making a difference, inspired by a Martin Luther King or a René Lévesque. I have seen them while in and after leaving office. Their personalities don't change – those who are decent, stay decent. I have watched idealistic Cabinet Ministers sound like every other politician within months of being elected i.e. guarded and defensive; often leaving office with unfulfilled promises despite the intensity of their original commitment.

This is not because they changed personally. There are many reasons: they may not be as skilled at maneuvering through the internal political process as they hoped. Bad timing and context, also come into play. Fundamentally, it is due to the outdated political structures and institutions they work within. Structure influences behavior far more than we realize.

Knowing how something works is admired and respected in most areas of life. Bakers can teach us a lot about making bread. Doctors about become healthier. Credit unions about how money works. Philosophers about how to act ethically. Similarly, politicians can teach us how to make good policy at the local, regional, provincial and federal levels. Knowing the levers of power and how to use them to improve society is an important skill and an art.

Samara is the brainchild of a most impressive young leader, Alison Loat. Alison is another in a long list of emerging leaders who should give us hope about the capacity of our younger generation to solve the problems they have inherited from boomers! Alison received a Top 25 under 30 award from Maclean's magazine and the **Public Policy Forum's** Young Leader Award in 2005. She and Samara co-founder Michael MacMillan (one of Canada's most successful film producers; who has the good sense to back Alison financially and morally) will produce a series of reports from these exit interview. They also will offer the Samara Massey Journalism series on innovations in public affairs reporting in the spring 2011. They want to increase the calibre of engaged citizens, political journalists and politicians.

Intriguingly, they also have plans to develop a **democracy barometer** to assess the health of our democracy beyond simply measuring voter turnout.

Their work will surely lead to a more thoughtful and engaged citizenry; a better understanding of the pathways to power; improved political intuitions; strengthened political leadership and how to better prepare our politicians for this most important, ancient profession. Samara is closing the gap between getting the politicians we deserve and the politicians we need.

Notes:

Samara is the winged helicopter seed that falls from maple, elm and ash trees. Its shape enabled it to travel far from its parent tree spreading itself far and wide...