

Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description

The second of a series exploring political leadership in Canada

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Introduction

In June 2010, Samara released *The Accidental Citizen?*, a report that described the backgrounds and paths to politics of the 65 people who participated in Canada’s first-ever systematic series of exit interviews with former Members of Parliament.

Samara is charitable organization that studies citizen engagement with Canadian democracy. This project began when co-founders Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan learned that exit interviews, common in many organizations, had never been undertaken systematically in one of the most important workplaces in our country – our federal Parliament.

Exit interviews indicate the care and interest that an organization takes in its employees by providing an opportunity for departing staff to reflect on their work and share ideas on improve-

ments. It concerned us that those who served as the democratically-elected link between citizens and their government—our Members of Parliament—were not regularly asked to reflect on their experience or to provide advice on what can be improved for future Parliamentarians and in the service to all Canadians.

Samara’s goal with this work is to better understand how Canada’s democracy functions, and to suggest ways to strengthen it. This project is based on the personal reflections of MPs, providing different and often more detailed information

than that provided by polls, surveys or media commentary. We approach this work as documentarians, reporting on how the MPs described their feelings and beliefs.

Samara was able to conduct these interviews almost entirely in person, and often in the homes or communities of participating MPs, thanks to introductions from the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians. The former Parliamentarians generously gave their time, allowed us to record the interviews and granted us permission to use the information to advance public understanding of Canadian politics and political culture.

This report is the second in a series sharing the stories and advice of these 65 Parliamentarians, each of whom dedicated an average of nearly ten and a half years to national public life, acting as a bridge between Canadians and their government. Many served during a transformative time in our political history: when the Bloc Québécois, the Reform Party and the merged Conservative Party of Canada rose as important players on the national stage. Each MP served in at least one minority Parliament, and during a time when changes in media and communications technology had begun to take hold. This report should be read with this context in mind.

Memories are often coloured by the passage of time and personal interpretations of events and experiences; we assume that the testimonies of the participating MPs are no different. In many ways, these subjective reflections on the experiences of these MPs provide some of the most illuminating insights into Canadian politics.

This report observes how little consistency existed among the MPs when they explained the core purpose of a Member of Parliament. They held disparate, and often conflicting, views

as to the essential purpose of their position and what they were elected to accomplish. They also acknowledged feeling unprepared for their roles

The MPs acknowledged arriving in Ottawa feeling largely unprepared for what lay ahead. They recall their initial orientation to Parliament as hurried, slap-dash or lacking altogether. They had little initial sense of where to focus and their assignments seemed to be allocated at random.

as Parliamentarians, and indicated they received little or no formal training or orientation.

The overarching themes in this report are very similar to those of our first report, *The Accidental Citizen?*, which described the MPs' backgrounds and paths to politics, as summarized on page 5. Both reports highlight the lack of preparation and happenstance nature of how most citizens come to national public life.

Welcome to Parliament: A Job With No Description picks up where the last report left off: with the MPs' arrival on the steps of Parliament Hill in Ottawa. As with our first report, it exposes aspects of our political leadership and the culture of our politics that were largely unexplored until now.

In *The Accidental Citizen?* we discussed how opaque nomination rules and their inconsistent application made it difficult to understand how a citizen is nominated as a political candidate. In this report, the MPs describe their initial orientation (or lack thereof) to Parliament and the allocation of their Parliamentary responsibilities, which are similarly confusing and unclear.

The MPs acknowledged arriving in Ottawa feeling largely unprepared for what lay ahead.

They recall their initial orientation to Parliament as hurried, slap-dash or altogether absent. They had little initial sense of where to focus and their assignments seemed to be allocated at random.

Likewise, in the same way that there is little consistency in MPs' backgrounds and in the process by which they decided to run and were chosen as candidates, there is little agreement among MPs in their explanations of the core purpose of a Member of Parliament.

Perhaps more worryingly, the MPs that we interviewed held often-conflicting ideas regarding the role and purpose of a Member of Parliament. Their interviews revealed that they didn't agree on what they were elected to accomplish or what the essential purpose of their role was intended to be.

Our initial report, *The Accidental Citizen?*, contained both good and bad news for our democracy. The good news is that Canadian politics are more open and diverse than we often assume.

The bad news is that the political nomination process can be very confusing to the public and is fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies, making widespread citizen participation difficult. Furthermore, many MPs claimed they didn't consider running for federal politics before they were asked—a reluctance that may suggest a more broadly-held belief that politics and public service is something for which one cannot admit ambition, even after the fact.

This professed reluctance was most troubling given the importance of a Parliamentarian's job. MPs are responsible for framing and lead-

ing many of our public debates, deciding on the policies and laws that will shape our country, and serving as the democratic conduits to our citizenry. This is an important job.

With our first report, we sought to initiate a discussion about the functioning of our democracy, its strengths and weaknesses, and how to improve citizen engagement. We feel honoured that we've been asked to share the findings of *The Accidental Citizen?* with national and local media, and that we've been invited to speak to groups of teachers, principals, public servants,

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university students and other engaged citizens from British Columbia to Atlantic Canada.

This report, unfortunately, contains more bad news than good regarding the current state of Canadian democracy, as you will soon see. We encourage readers to actively engage with this report, to carefully consider its implications and share their thoughts and opinions with others. We hope you will help us in our mission to make our democratic institutions more open to the Canadian citizenry by sharing this report with your friends and colleagues, talking with them about its implications, or by contacting us if you're interested in participating in our work. ^

RELEASED IN JUNE 2010, *THE ACCIDENTAL CITIZEN?* FOCUSED ON HOW SO MANY OF THE MPS TO WHOM WE SPOKE DESCRIBED THEIR JOURNEYS TO PUBLIC LIFE AS ACCIDENTAL. THIS WAS UNEXPECTED AND REVEALED ITSELF IN SEVERAL WAYS:



First, few said they set out intending on a career in public life. Most said they sought a party nomination only after they were asked. Even those who served in local or provincial office claimed that running for federal politics was something they had not planned. The average age at which they entered public life was 47, meaning they spent a generation pursuing other careers and interests. The life experiences of this group of MPs were far more varied and much less predictable than we'd assumed.

Second, participating MPs did not consider themselves to be political insiders, even though they were generally highly involved in their communities. Instead, most defined themselves as "outsiders." This was not an explicit question in our interviews, but was a notion commonly and voluntarily used by participants to describe themselves. For many, the desire to bring their particular outsider perspective to Parliament was one element of their initial decision to pursue politics. Whatever the case, the MPs' collective narrative was in direct conflict with the traditional public perception of politicians as consummate insiders.

Finally, there was no uniform path to politics for the MPs who participated

in this project. They were approached to run for office in a variety of ways, and they decided to enter public life for an equally diverse set of reasons. The nomination process for a candidate's political party also seemed subject to chance. Few MPs described the nomination process consistently, and it was difficult to understand the terms on which the nomination contests were fought. Most MPs were critical of some aspect of the process, even though they had navigated it successfully. One can only imagine what interviews with less successful candidates, or with citizens initially seeking to participate in politics, might reveal.

All told, *The Accidental Citizen?* painted a picture of Canadian politics that is both positive and negative. On one hand, we have no established political class. People from a wide variety of backgrounds can become MPs in Canada. One doesn't need to be the child of a politician, a millionaire or a graduate of a prestigious school, as seems to be the case in some other democracies. As a result, there is far greater diversity among our Parliamentarians than we commonly appreciate.

On the other hand, MPs described the process by which political parties select their candidates as confusing and

inconsistent. It appears that, at times, federal politics are organized in ways that may discourage wide and ongoing participation at the local level.

These narratives led us to title Samara's first report *The Accidental Citizen?*. The word "accidental" encapsulates how most MPs said they did not plan a life in politics, and how much of the journey to public life is subject to chance. "Citizen" gets to the heart of representative democracy: the concept that citizens govern themselves by electing members of their communities to represent them.

The interrogative form—the question mark—indicates that the MPs' description of arriving in politics largely by accident may require further reflection. It seems unlikely that they hadn't thought about politics before. Indeed, many were active for years in their communities. Perhaps our Parliamentarians are instead telling us that they believe that politics are something for which one cannot admit ambition in this country, even years after having been elected. If that is so, it is not a positive comment on the state of political leadership in Canada.

65



FORMER PARLIAMENTARIANS WERE INTERVIEWED FOR THIS PROJECT. THEY LEFT PUBLIC LIFE DURING OR JUST AFTER THE 38TH AND 39TH PARLIAMENTS, WHICH SAT FROM 2004 TO 2008.

The average age at which the MPs entered federal office was 46.8 years. The median age was 48 years.

The MPs' average tenure was 10.3 years. Their median tenure was 12.3 years.

11% are immigrants.

41% represented urban ridings, 23% suburban and 36% rural or remote.

82% indicated English as their preferred language. 18% indicated French.

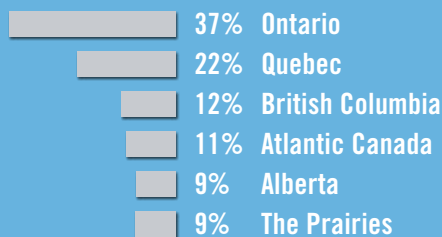
86% of the MPs have at least one college or university degree. Nearly half have more than one degree.

57% of the MPs left politics due to retirement and 43% left as the result of electoral defeat.

The MPs held a variety of legislative roles, and many held more than one. One served as Prime Minister. 31% were Cabinet Ministers and 35% were Parliamentary Secretaries. 65% held a critic portfolio. 58% chaired at least one committee.

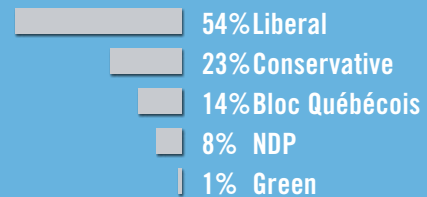
22% are female.

REGIONS REPRESENTED BY THOSE INTERVIEWED



This mirrors almost perfectly the distribution of the Canadian population.

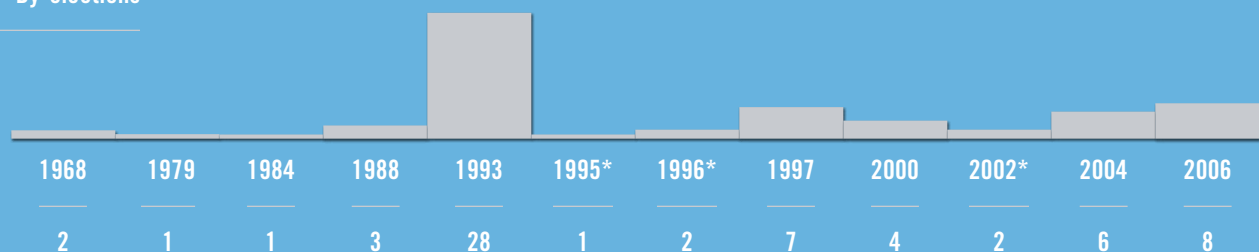
MPs' PARTY AFFILIATION AT THE TIME THEY LEFT OFFICE



This group is more heavily weighted to the Liberals than the current Parliament due to the outcome of the 2008 and 2006 elections.

YEARS THE MPS WERE FIRST ELECTED

* By-elections



Chapter 1: Arriving on the Hill

After a federal election, about one-third of Canadian Members of Parliament arrive on the steps of Parliament's Centre Block as rookies. They emerge victorious from an often difficult nomination battle and general election campaign. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and bring with them a diverse set of experiences and motivations, but with little—if any—experience in elected office or in the context of national public life.

Most of the MPs to whom we spoke matched this description. For nearly all of them, federal politics represented a career change. On average, they were 47 years old when they were first

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elected, having pursued other careers and interests mostly in fields outside politics and in cities and towns far from Ottawa.

So how did these accidental citizens feel upon arriving in Ottawa? And how did they navigate those initial weeks and months in office?

Most participating MPs recalled being filled with awe for the institution of Parliament, its history, and for the opportunity to serve. They believed that they were part of something important, and felt that the work awaiting them was a great challenge.

“I’ll never forget it,” recalled one MP, remembering his first day in the House of Commons. “It was overwhelming to be in that chamber... to feel the presence of those who have gone before you.”

“I have to say I knew very little about [how] Ottawa worked. I had never been there. The very first time I walked up to the doors of the House of Commons was after I was elected.”

Another remembered feeling honoured, knowing that his constituents had granted him the latitude to speak on and advance issues in a way that only 308 other Canadians, his fellow MPs,

had the opportunity to do. “It’s a huge privilege,” the MP said.

But the MPs also discussed feeling overwhelmed and unsure of what lay ahead. As is often the case for anyone starting a new job, many of the MPs we interviewed recalled their first days as a time of nervous expectation. “It is very exciting. We were all ushered in, and there was [the Prime Minister]... it was definitely exhilarating,” one MP recalled. Some MPs had never visited the capital before, amplifying their initial insecurity. “I have to say I knew very little about [how] Ottawa worked. I had never been there. The very first time I walked up to the doors of the House of Commons was after I was elected,” one MP said.

Many acknowledged that it was not something they’d ever imagined doing. “I was overwhelmed. I grew up modestly and never aspired to any of

“All of a sudden I said, ‘I’m going to Ottawa.’ I had never planned to do that. It was just one of those things that happened.”

this stuff. I wasn’t one of those people who was thinking about this when I was 12. I was naïve,” one MP admitted. “All of a sudden I said, ‘I’m going to Ottawa.’ I had never planned to do that. It was just one of those things that happened,” said another MP.

LITTLE TRAINING OR ORIENTATION

The Parliamentarians’ adjustment to public life was made more difficult by the lack of structured orientation to help them acclimatize to their new roles. Few recalled receiving organized support or formal training. “The orientation is terrible,” one MP declared. “You get there, they take you in the House, they give you a book [on] constituency

rights and responsibilities, the former Speaker talks about being in the House, and that's it. There's no orientation. There is no training.

“You learn by the seat of your pants.”

There is nothing on how to be effective,” said another MP. “You learn by the seat of your pants,” admitted a third MP.

These new Parliamentarians acknowledged that their preparation was largely ad hoc and really only began once they arrived in Ottawa. “I was always amazed at how people go into it without having done any kind of homework,” one MP observed. Another argued that by the time MPs arrived in Ottawa, it was already too late. “[Orientation] should take place long before the election... Find out what the heck you're getting into before you ever decide to run,” he said.

One MP observed that there was no opportunity to set goals or develop a plan. “It would be very wise to have someone encourage you to sit down at the beginning and say, ‘Okay, what

“You get there, they take you in the House, they give you a book [on] constituency rights and responsibilities, the former Speaker talks about being in the House, and that's it. There's no orientation. There is no training. There is nothing on how to be effective.”

is it you want to accomplish?’ It is such a busy life, you just tend to jump in and keep swimming. You should almost have to go on a retreat to think through what it is you want to accomplish,” she said.

Many MPs sought informal advice and mentorship, but found that even that wasn't always straightforward. “You're getting tugged in every which way by different advice, so it was pretty confusing when we were first there,” said one MP. “You can ask...People would share with you and they'll tell you. You just need to know the right question to ask and the right person,” said another.

Other times, more experienced Parliamentarians were unable to provide direction. One MP recalled asking for advice from a colleague, “He said, ‘I don't know; I've been here for three years and I really don't know.’ And I thought, ‘Gosh... It takes a long time to learn things.”

The only exception to this lack of guidance was that, upon their arrival, the majority of

“Next to nobody knows the rules of the House.”

Bloc Québécois MPs to whom we spoke were assigned a mentor within the party. One Bloc MP was greatly appreciative of this support: “As a new MP, I was lucky to have a mentor, a fellow Bloc MP. He was a valuable aid through his advice.” Another Bloc MP said, “I had a good MP as a mentor; he had been there for a long time... I asked for his advice often. I didn't even know that when the bell rang I was supposed to enter the Chamber. I didn't know that; I didn't know anything.” However, this seemed not to be a formal program since other Bloc MPs explicitly mentioned that they would have benefitted from mentorship.

Only a few MPs said they spent time learning Parliamentary rules and procedure. “Robert's Rules of Order, all those books were there, I read them, I learned them, I sat and watched

other people, and I didn't participate much in the beginning. I really just absorbed," said one MP. Another MP pointed out that it was rare for his colleagues to engage in that kind of preparation. "Next to nobody knows the rules of the House," the MP said.

Even beyond the rules, many claimed to have had little or no knowledge of the methods, traditions or culture of Parliament. This was particularly the case for those elected as members of the Reform Party. "51 of us went and didn't know a damned thing about the House of Commons... [We were like] deer in the headlights," one Reform MP admitted.

"YOU'VE GOT ME ON THE WRONG COMMITTEE"

The MPs' haphazard orientation was further complicated by confusion over their committee appointments. Nearly every MP is expected to serve on at least one committee—the multi-party groups of parliamentarians that are charged with considering a particular policy or program area.

This work is important, and the 65 former MPs stressed this. It is through committee appointments that MPs, in conjunction with the public service, interest groups, experts and citizens, deliberate and decide how our laws and public policies should evolve. From economic to social policy, on issues both domestic and international, these decisions impact the lives of all Canadians.

Given the importance of committees to the overall work of Parliament, it was a surprise that so many MPs described their initial appointments as unexpected or unsuitable. Although many MPs acknowledged that regional and gender balance was important to committee composition, they still felt frustrated when their appointments did not accord with their experience or interests.

Some MPs with a particular area of expertise expressed feeling surprised or disappointed when their appointments had little to do with their pre-existing knowledge. One MP, who came to Parliament with a background in literacy and skills training, was surprised when he was placed on a committee whose focus about which he knew little. "I got to Ottawa and said, 'You have made a mistake. I am on the health committee. I should be on the human resources committee. I was a senior policy advisor [in this area in my home province], and we are doing great things.' I was baffled that it didn't seem to matter," the MP said.

The appointment process was confounded further by the lack of formal opportunity to request a particular policy focus, and the lack of any recourse if a committee appointment was found to be inappropriate or not of interest to the

"It was funny because if you were put on a justice committee, you were thought of as a justice person, when maybe your expertise was in health. People in your caucus saw you as what you were working on, and sometimes it was a match, and sometimes it wasn't."

MP. "I couldn't go to somebody and say, 'Look, you've got me on the wrong committee.' That wasn't the way it worked. You're on a committee because that's where you're put. [We're told], 'Don't worry if you don't know enough about it; we are going to give you notes anyway,'" one MP said. "They put me on the public accounts committee. I was not keen on being on [that committee]. I couldn't get myself changed [yet] I ended up as the vice-chair," said another MP.

The result was not only confusion, but at times a misapplication or waste of one's expertise. "It was funny because if you were put on a justice committee, you were thought of as a justice person, when maybe your expertise was in health. People in your caucus saw you as what you were working on, and sometimes it was a match, and sometimes it wasn't," one MP said.

"THERE WAS SO MUCH THAT I DIDN'T KNOW"

Most MPs admitted feeling very unprepared for their new role as Parliamentarians. Many soon realized they had no sense of the numerous rules and processes—both written and unwritten—of Parliament Hill, or how to navigate a place where

"You tend to understand where you come from really well, and you think of reality through that prism. All of a sudden you are in Parliament. You are working with men and women from right across the country, all who come from a different prism."

so many divergent personalities and issues are brought together. It was difficult to see the pattern of the place, and many MPs said they quickly learned that life as an MP wasn't as straightforward as they may have thought.

For some MPs, the challenge came from the realization that they lacked a broad knowledge of the country and its regional idiosyncrasies. "I was naïve, thinking this place has 300 people and that they can all work together on global problems... That wasn't the case at all," said one MP. Said another, "You tend to understand where you come from really well, and you think of reality through that prism. All of a sudden you are in Parliament. You are working with men and women from right across the country, all who come from a different prism."

Others described being overwhelmed by the volume of work and the range of policy files they had to understand, usually very quickly. "Despite all the people that advised me, I had no clue as to what I was getting myself into... the biggest surprises were the demands placed upon you. There weren't enough hours in a day. There never would be," said one MP. "You've got these issues of the day, and they overwhelm you. The stuff just keeps coming," said another.

In some ways, this should not be a surprise. Unlike in the United States, where there is a formal transition between elections in November and the start of Congress in January, MPs begin work almost immediately after they are elected. This leaves little time for orientation or acclimatization.

Furthermore, most MPs to whom we spoke said they agreed to run only after they were asked, and claimed to have given little prior consideration to politics. Even those who'd run at the local or provincial level indicated politics was something they initially fell into unexpectedly. When it did become a priority, the MPs first had to navigate a political party nomination and an election before they knew if going to Ottawa would become a reality. Therefore, their efforts were spent getting nominated and then elected, not preparing for the job itself. This was only reasonable; after all, had they not been elected, there would have been no job for which to prepare anyway.

Part of their initial challenge was logistical. For most Parliamentarians, Ottawa was a new city, and often a plane flight away from friends and family. MPs must quickly set up and staff at least two offices—one in Ottawa and at least one in the riding—and orient themselves to the labyrinth of Parliament Hill and the federal government writ large, as well as find a place to live and sort out family arrangements.

A number of MPs mentioned that they had little or no experience hiring staff and managing an office, and found little support in doing so. “I didn’t have a clear idea of what type of person I should hire to run my office. What are their day-to-day tasks?” one MP recalled asking. “There are a few areas in which MPs bring very little experience to the Hill [including] how to run an office, how to hire people and how to look for [particular] skills,” another MP observed.

Even those MPs with prior experience in provincial or municipal government found the initial weeks and months difficult. One MP, who’d served as a municipal councillor and a provincial cabinet minister, said it was “incredibly difficult”

“It takes time to figure out how it works, and does it work. And [to figure out] what I want to do here. What can I do here? You don’t do that in a month, or a year. It’s an evolution over time.”

to get started operationally. “There was just so much that I didn’t know. I was very frustrated at not being up and running as quickly as I thought I should be which, of course, is always yesterday,” the MP said, with a smile.

In the end, many MPs said they simply accepted that there was just no way to be prepared to be a Member of Parliament. “Well, I think we all did rather well. But were we prepared? No, I don’t think there is any school for preparation for being a Member of Parliament,” said one. “If you could arrive at Parliament knowing the way it works and all of those things, then you are going to be more productive from day one. But that’s theoretical; it’s never going to happen that way,” said another.

Instead, they were forced to prepare for their new positions with little institutional support—sometimes assisted by informal mentoring or by

“I don’t think there is any school for preparation for being a Member of Parliament.”

reading up on Parliamentary procedure—realizing there was little to do but dive in headfirst. Most coped by simply acknowledging that the learning curve was steep, and that the only way forward was to learn by doing. One MP said, “It takes time to figure out how it works... and [to figure out] what I want to do here. What can I do here? You don’t do that in a month, or a year. It’s an evolution over time.”

More notable is how many MPs went out of their way to describe their lack of preparation, particularly since it was not an explicit question in our interviews. The MPs’ descriptions of their lack of preparation were frequent and intense; however, given their varied backgrounds and the unpredictability of a job that requires winning elections, perhaps this is understandable.

It was notable to us how frequently and loudly the MPs talked about their lack of preparation.

Yet it is still remarkable that this unpreparedness aroused such emotion, even years after they first took their seats in the House of Commons.

Lastly, it was surprising to learn that newly elected Parliamentarians had so little support during their initiation into national public life, including insufficient training or formal orientation. As it turns out, this isn’t the only frustrating aspect of the Parliamentary workplace. ^

Chapter 2: Why Are We Here?

Even more surprising and notable than the MPs' lack of training and preparation was how little consistency existed in the way they reflected on the essential purpose of a Member of Parliament. When we asked participants to describe the role of an MP and how they thought about the job, there were nearly as many responses as there were MPs.

Stated most simply, there was little agreement among MPs about what they were in Ottawa to do in the first place.

Ultimately, our 308 Members of Parliament all hold the same essential position. Given this fact, we were surprised that the MPs lacked a shared understanding of the job’s key components, responsibilities and expectations. For ex-

It turns out that, at least among the 65 MPs to whom we spoke, there is little shared idea of what forms the central elements of the actual job itself. This was a surprise coming from a group who had served in the job for, on average, over ten years.

ample, two-thirds of MPs we interviewed spent at least a portion of their time in Ottawa on the opposition benches, so it came as a surprise that only a few mentioned holding a government accountable as part of their job.

A similarly small number mentioned engaging the public in determining the policies that shape our country and communities. Even those MPs who defined their role as representing constituents were unlikely to talk of such engagement. This raises important questions about the relationship between Parliament and the citizenry, themes we will address in future reports.

It is important to look at this in context. Unlike traditional professions—and indeed unlike the vast majority of jobs across the country—which come with generally accepted and agreed upon responsibilities and codes of conduct, there is no job description for a Member of Parliament.

But even if we were to draft this job description, it would be difficult. Among the 65 MPs to whom we spoke, there is little consensus on the

central elements of the job itself. This was not expected, coming from a group who had served in the job for, on average, over ten years.

SOME HISTORY

According to Canada’s Library of Parliament, an MP in the Westminster system of government—the system on which the Canadian Parliament is based—has three traditional roles. The first is to consider, refine and pass legislation. In other words, to establish policy and pass laws.

The second is to hold government accountable for its administration of the laws and to authorize the expenditure of required funds. That is, to ensure that the laws are being carried out properly, and that tax dollars are being spent responsibly.

The third role is to determine the life of the government by providing or withholding support. This means to vote for things you support, and against things you don’t.

Today’s conventions expand this traditional definition considerably. MPs perform a variety

“My experience leading to Ottawa was that you should have a clear understanding of what an MP does. But even when I explained it to people, I didn’t [entirely] know...and [when I asked others], I didn’t get a clear answer.”

of roles in addition to those outlined above. Most notably, they are also responsible for the constituency and party duties that have emerged with a growing population, a larger Parliament and the evolution of Canada’s party system.¹ As it turns out, modern politics and political life are much more complicated than what the classic Westminster description suggests.

1. Source: The Parliament of Canada, “On the Job with a Member of Parliament” and Stillborn, Jack, “The Roles of the Members of Parliament in Canada: Are They Changing?” (2002: Library of Parliament)

Perhaps as a result of this growing complexity, there was little consistency in the ways the Members of Parliament described the essential purpose of an MP or how they balanced the competing aspects of the role. We were surprised to hear such vastly different descriptions of what, at its heart, is the same position.

None of the MPs in our group described their jobs in terms consonant with the traditional Westminster definition, and only a few were even close. One MP was even brave enough to acknowledge that he wasn't entirely sure what the job entailed. "[I thought one] should have a clear understanding of what an MP does. But even when I explained it to people, I didn't [entirely] know...and [when I asked others], I didn't get a clear answer," the MP said.

When we asked MPs to describe how they conceived of their role, at least five general categories emerged, and each included substantial degrees of difference within it. These categories are summarized in the right sidebar and are described in greater detail below.

The wide disparity in the way MPs described their own jobs is echoed by Professor Suzanne Dovi, "The concept of political representation is misleadingly simple: everyone seems to know what it is, yet few can agree on any particular definition."²

Overriding nearly all of these descriptions was a stated desire to do politics differently. Few were happy with the status quo. For many MPs, this desire to approach public life in a new way echoed sentiments expressed when describing their motivations for running in the first place.

Many articulated a concern that the system was moving in the wrong direction and that politics were shifting away from citizens. "I ran on an

2. Source: Dovi, Suzanne, "Political Representation." From the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

MPS HAD VASTLY DIFFERENT VIEWS ON THE ESSENTIAL PURPOSE OF THEIR ROLE

THE PHILOSOPHERS

MPs who expressed sharp philosophical differences: some believed their job was to directly represent the views of their constituents; some stated that their job was to develop their own perspective on the best course of action and others said they had to find a balance between the two.

THE GEOGRAPHERS

MPs who defined the role as a choice—or a balance, depending on the MP—between advancing local versus national interests. The role was also confused by the different requirements placed on cabinet ministers and backbenchers.

THE PARTISANS

MPs who emphasized acting in the interests of a political party. Again, interpretations of the appropriate balance of this role with other obligations varied dramatically.

THE SERVICE PROVIDERS

MPs who defined the role as a choice between focusing on developing laws and policies versus providing more direct service to constituents. This distinction was further highlighted by the differences between urban and rural ridings. The tensions marked by these different interpretations were described in detail.

THE NONE-OF-THE-ABOVERS

MPs who interpreted the role in more personal ways. Some described their role as bringing an aspect of symbolic representation—such as one's ethnic identity—into politics. Others viewed it as a call to service or an opportunity "to make a difference" (interpreted in various ways). This group gave a laundry list of colloquial descriptions that often bore little resemblance to, and were often in direct conflict with, one another.

unofficial platform but one that was very clear to me. It consisted of what I was hearing over and over again at the doorstep: ‘If we elect you, we want you to take our message to Ottawa, and not the other way around.’ That reflected, I think, the concern that the previous government simply didn’t listen,” one MP said.

Another MP put it this way, “To me, the whole point of Parliament was to create change, to create good change. It wasn’t to keep the status quo. I didn’t leave my family and my city and a life to let somebody else tell me what to do, or to roll along with the flow,” she said.

Several MPs described wanting to change how politics were conducted, or how politicians acted. “The challenge is to figure out how we break this cycle... [and to create] a tone that was at least grudgingly respectful,” said one MP. Another described how he hoped to lead by example, saying that he refused to engage in partisan bickering. “I’m not out there to smear people. I am from an immigrant family, and I took enough of that abuse when I was young. I didn’t like it then, and I don’t like it now. I wouldn’t do it to someone else,” he said.

For others, this desire to contribute to a different sort of politics was linked to one of the unexpected findings in our first report: how many MPs described feeling as though they were outside the political mainstream. This outsider self-identification was articulated in a number of ways, including as a matter of personal identity or of a particular socio-economic status. It stood in direct contrast to the traditional public perception of a politician as a consummate insider.

So perhaps unsurprisingly, many MPs expressed a desire to bring their own variation of the outsider sentiment to Parliament. MPs, both male and female, noted the influence women had on changing the tone and substance of politics.

“Women do things differently,” said one female MP, noting several policy areas, such as old age security, that women had influenced. “I was told by people who were there before me... that Parliament has become more civilized [because of women’s participation],” she added. “Women bring a different perspective,” said another MP.

Many MPs articulated how they sought to bring their particular constituency—whether defined by geography, culture or status—closer to government. “My biggest concern was... [giving] people an opportunity to be part of our society,” said one MP. “I think there was a notion that somehow the average Canadian could take back Parliament and show that we can behave differently,” said another.

THE PHILOSOPHERS

Many of the MPs to whom we spoke described their role in ways that correlated with two classic competing definitions of a political representative’s role: what political scientists refer to as *trustees* (representatives who follow their own understanding of the best action to pursue) and *delegates* (representatives who follow the expressed preferences of their constituents).

Unlike the other groups described in this report, the philosophers’ views on the role of an MP correlated somewhat with political affiliation. There was no clear majority of trustees or delegates among Parliamentarians from the Liberals, New Democrats or the Bloc Québécois. Each of those parties had MPs in both groups. Yet while several Conservative MPs described themselves as trustees, the overwhelming majority indicated that they approached their role as delegates.

The majority of MPs who defined their roles in philosophical terms described themselves as trustees, elected by the public to use their own

judgment in making decisions. One Liberal claimed, “I am not there as some kind of thoughtless representation of local views. [Voters] have chosen me and I have to apply my best judgment to the situation. It may not always be popular with the constituents, but if they wanted a popularity contest or poll, they wouldn’t need an MP.”

A New Democrat described it this way, “My job as an MP was to do the thinking and the listening at the committee hearings and the meetings—albeit out of a certain perspective that I was up-front about when I ran—and then to make judgments. [My constituents] will hold me accountable at elections and in between with their input with letters of criticism or support.”

A smaller number of MPs described themselves as delegates, viewing their role as the representatives of their constituents above all else.

“It’s my job to bring the voice of the people to Ottawa and stand up for what we have here.”

“They select you to be their representative in Ottawa, to speak for them, to vote on legislation and, in some cases, to develop legislation that they feel is wanted. Basically to work [for their interests] and to deliver for them whatever benefits might flow,” said one Conservative MP. “MPs should be in Ottawa to represent their constituents,” said a Liberal MP.

Others described themselves primarily as delegates, but expanded the description beyond simply representing their constituents’ views. “The purpose of an MP is to facilitate the opportunity for the people who you represent to be engaged in the public enterprise,” one MP said.

A more common view described the purpose of an MP not as a trustee or a delegate, but as someone whose job it was to balance the two.

Several described the tension between reflecting constituents’ views and leading the way towards or developing a broader view. “My job was to provide leadership. Not just to reflect the dis-

“I knew I had to represent the voices of my constituents whether I agreed or not... [but] it didn’t mean I championed those causes.”

ussion, but also to lead the discussion,” said one Liberal MP. “I knew I had to represent the voices of my constituents whether I agreed or not... [but] it didn’t mean I championed those causes,” said a New Democrat.

At times, the MPs expressed resentment for colleagues who viewed the role differently. One MP suggested that those who viewed themselves solely as delegates didn’t fully appreciate their job. “You’re not running for councillor. You’re not the alderman here. You are the ambassador to Ottawa,” the MP said.

Others expressed similar resentment toward those who failed to stay close to those who elected them. “I’ve seen too many people change. You go to Ottawa, and you’re the guy next door, and then [you come home and] you’re [an important person] who doesn’t know anybody,” one MP said. Another argued that MPs quickly fall out of touch with their communities and begin to believe their own rhetoric. “Politicians have become too removed from their own constituents,” he declared.

THE GEOGRAPHERS

For a second group of MPs, the role was described principally in terms of a balance or choice between advancing local or national interests.

Some MPs felt a Parliamentarian’s emphasis should be on the entire country. “[The job is] coming up with rules that govern our society.

Primarily we need to look at it from a Canada-wide perspective. I know it is important to represent your constituents and your province, but I think you have to think about what is happening throughout the whole country,” said one MP.

Another MP was even more forceful on this point. “I think what I’m really doing is calling upon voters to... rise above the merely self-interested and local, and think more broadly about what they want for their families, their provinces and the values they want their country to represent,” she said.

Other MPs argued that their attention should be on representing local perspectives. “MPs should be in Ottawa to represent their constitu-

“I’ve always been driven by trying to represent the people who elect me. That’s always been my first commitment and obligation.”

ents,” one MP said. “I think it’s our job—and I always said this—it’s my job to bring the voice of the people to Ottawa and stand up for what we have here,” explained another MP.

Others articulated it as a balance, although one that was often difficult to find. “[It’s a challenge] to find a balance... You serve a national interest if you are sitting in Parliament, but you also serve local interests, which is the whole beauty in our system of having constituencies. You are accountable to the country as a whole, but also very specifically to the electors that put you in that office. [MPs] are driven by both those things.”

This was particularly the case for MPs in cabinet and party leadership positions, roles that forced them to adapt their initial conceptions of where an MP’s focus should be. Some enjoyed the challenge in this, but for others it exacerbated the

tensions already inherent in the role of an MP.

“I believe to the core... that the principal purpose of an MP is to represent [constituents]... It was more difficult when I became the [party]

“People elect you to be in Parliament. They don’t elect you to schmooze with them in the constituency... This whole constituency thing becomes, I worry, a kind of substitute for real input and activity.”

leader because I occupied two roles simultaneously, one of which took you away from your constituents a lot,” one political party leader explained.

A cabinet minister expressed a similar sentiment. “The purpose of the MP is to represent, to the best of their ability, the interests of their constituents,” the minister said, before adding that this definition did not accord with her cabinet experience. “[There] the focus was on [the country].”

For some, this was an invigorating challenge. “Part of the job is to try and build the threads that

“Part of the job is to try and build the threads that hold the country together... you’ve got to try and encourage people to be bigger than they think they can be in terms of spirit and vision.”

hold the country together... you’ve got to try and encourage people to be bigger than they think they can be in terms of spirit and vision,” the MP said.

For others, the balance was so difficult as to be nearly impossible. “The purpose of an MP is—and our slogan was—to be [our riding’s] voice in

Ottawa, not Ottawa’s voice in [our riding]. That’s what an MP is. And that’s in direct conflict with the role of cabinet,” the MP said.

THE PARTISANS

The variety of these descriptions was compounded by a third group of MPs that went beyond the trustee/delegate or national/local divisions to emphasize an additional purpose: representing the views of one’s political party. Even so, each described this obligation differently.

Some felt the party and the constituents were the primary groups to balance. “The purpose [of an MP] is to be a leader from your community in the national affairs of the country. On the one hand, you should be listening to the people you represent, and that means whoever is in the community and not just the people who voted for you... [One the other hand], you’ve campaigned on your party’s programs and issues and so you also have an obligation to that,” said one MP.

Others felt that their role was to balance the interests of the country with those of the political party. “I can give you the canned thing of why they tell us we’re there and I can share with you what I believe is the truth. In a nutshell, we’re there to adopt national policy for the betterment of all in the country. The truth is, you’re there to develop policy that is beneficial to your party in order to keep you in power and get you re-elected. That national premise is, kind of, always there, but there is politics involved in everything,” the MP said.

An understanding that re-election was also part of the role was echoed more broadly in other MPs’ remarks as well. “You want to win your seat, [because] if your party wins enough seats, it will be asked to form the government,” said one. “You have to do what you have to do to get re-elected,” said another.

Others described a different balance still, framing the role as one that required navigating among obligations to one’s constituents, political party and party leader. One described it as a hier-

“You have to do what you have to do to get re-elected.”

archy, “[An MP’s] first purpose is to serve his constituents... Second, whether you like it or not, you belong to a team. I think your loyalty to the values and principles of that political entity [are important]. Third, I think, is loyalty to the leader,” the MP said. For others, it was more straightforward. “You have a mandate to try and implement the things [your party] ran on,” declared another MP.

THE SERVICE PROVIDERS

A fourth set of descriptions came from MPs who characterized the job as a combination of developing public policy—whether national or regional in its focus—and working in the more direct services to constituents. Direct service provision includes assisting constituents with a wide variety of casework, such as questions about immigration, employment insurance, passports and veterans’ support, helping constituents benefit from federal programs or legislation and fulfilling a representative role by attending social occasions or other commemorative events.³

Most MPs recognized that both policy and constituent service work were important, but clearly articulated that one was more important than the other. “I was not motivated by constituency work,” said one MP, adding that most of it was handled by his riding office staff. Others described the riding-level work as the most important part of the job. “You’re the ombudsmen. When there’s a federal problem, you’re the go-

3. Source: Adopted from the Parliamentary Centre’s article “On the Front Lines: The New MP and Constituency Work.”

to-guy. You're the one that they look to for help because if you can't help them, who can? You either help or put them in touch with someone who can. You listen to their problem," another MP explained.

Whether one's riding was urban or rural also influenced how MPs chose between local service and policy work. Many MPs from rural ridings, for example, emphasized that constituents expected them to be present in their riding, focusing on local concerns. "My first riding was 20 percent rural, and they were much more demanding. They want their MPs at everybody's 40th birthday celebration... I didn't miss it when they redistributed my riding and it became a totally urban riding. The demands from the rural constituents, socially, were as heavy as from the urban 80 percent," one MP said.

Several MPs observed that, given the demands placed on rural MPs by their constituents, there was little in common between urban and rural MPs. One MP from a rural riding described them as two different jobs. "When we go to Ottawa we're all the same, but in the riding, a rural MP has to be very people-oriented. In a big city riding, people [don't] know their MP, and they often don't even know which riding they're in," one MP said. He then recalled an urban colleague describing the difficulty of getting to several constituent events in one evening. "I said, 'It's hard getting around? For God's sake, I can walk across your riding faster than I can fly across mine.'"

MPs were often quite forceful about where a Parliamentarian's emphasis should be. One urban MP was sympathetic to the demands of his rural colleagues, but nonetheless stressed that

SOME OF THE WORDS THE MPS USED TO DESCRIBE THEIR JOB



the role in Ottawa was the most important. “To do your duty [in a rural riding], you can’t be an absentee MP. But the job is in Ottawa, ultimately, and that’s what they pay you for,” the MP said.

A few were hostile to the emphasis placed on constituency service. One called the work “distasteful.” Another felt it was “a sidebar... It’s repetitive problems. It takes less skill to actually operate the constituency office... a lot [of it] can be done by your staff—80 to 85 percent,” the MP said.

Yet another MP was even more direct on this point. “People elect you to be in Parliament. They don’t elect you to schmooze with them in the constituency... This whole constituency thing becomes, I worry, a kind of substitute for real input and activity,” the MP said.

Some MPs were reluctant to place too strong an emphasis on policy. “I didn’t want to be a high-falutin’ MP,” one said, adding that his primary focus was on his constituency. “If you forget your roots, they’ll forget you.”

Others felt no such tension. “I thought of my role this way: [In the riding], I’m dealing with the law as it now stands; in Ottawa, the role was future-oriented. How things could be changed, how things could be improved,” she said.

“The MP’s role is as an opportunity for useful, intelligent people to have a good time... You have such a variety of different things to do... You can talk to anyone, you can learn anything. Some people describe it as the best graduate degree in the world.”

THE NONE-OF-THE-ABOVERS

The final group of MPs described their roles with language that did not fit into the above-

mentioned categories, using more colloquial descriptions that made little or no reference to definitions of representation or to their political party. These descriptions ranged from platitudes

“I was the first Greek-born woman elected to the House of Commons... a lot of young women in the community [saw] me as a role model.”

to personal observations, from inspiring statements of purpose to definitions that bordered on the absurd.

One described his role as an MP as a means of professional advancement. “The MP’s role is an opportunity for useful, intelligent people to have a good time... You have such a variety of different things to do... You can talk to anyone, you can learn anything. Some people describe it as the best graduate degree in the world,” the MP said.

There were others who described it as advancing a vision, or wider change. “Your purpose is to advance the public interest... it boils down to working with your colleagues to advance the prosperity of the people,” said one MP.

Another set regarded the role as a call to service. “Being an MP is not a job, it’s a calling, a way of life. You are one of the lucky people to ever get there,” one MP said. “I think [the role] should be thought of as a professional service honour. Public service is something that can be very good for the country,” said another MP.

Others MPs, reflecting their particular variation of an outsider self-identification, described a core aspect of their role as bringing their own personal identity into Parliament. One female MP, elected less than a decade after she’d completed university, said that representing her demographic was central to her job. “[I have a

responsibility] for broader representation and involvement with young people and women... [I have] an obligation to speak up,” the MP said. Another proudly remembered, “I was the first

“Collectively with colleagues, [an MP] must play a role as a watchdog of government activities, and ensure that the government [pursues] the public interests and spends money wisely.”

Greek-born woman elected to the House of Commons... A lot of young women in the community [saw] me as a role model.”

One Aboriginal MP described his role as being a conduit for his community. “They don’t see you as a [party member], they see you as [you], and [say], ‘Screw the political party affiliations, you better do what is good for our people,’” the MP said. A Bloc MP described his job as representing Québec internationally, and interacting with ambassadors of other countries. “Bloc MPs have a big role at the international level... [as] a representative of Québec,” he said.

A further group of MPs compared the role to a wide variety of other professions that had little in common, save perhaps for their heavy interaction with people. These professions included: administrator, doctor, priest, teacher, ambassador, social worker, messenger, spokesperson and lobbyist. One MP equated the role to that of a “guard dog.”

Several MPs who compared the role to other professions also made direct connections to their own pre-Parliamentary careers. One MP, an accountant and executive, described the role as akin to running a small business. Another MP equated it with running two businesses. Another, a lawyer

and mediator, said the role was about building relationships. “The whole story of Parliament is human relationships at the level of the MP. We do that in our daily life in our communities: we build relationships; we build networks,” the MP said.

Finally, and perhaps surprisingly given the attention paid to Question Period in our country’s politics, only a few MPs mentioned that the role involved holding government accountable for its decisions. “Collectively with colleagues, [an MP] must play a role as a watchdog of government activities, and ensure that the government [pursues] the public interests and spends money wisely,” one MP said. Another lamented the sentiment that accountability was disappearing and thought greater emphasis should be placed on it. “The House... as a place... to hold the government to account has to be rethought,” the MP said.

Given that contemporary Canadian politics is marked by cultural, regional, economic and political diversity, perhaps such varied descriptions are inevitable. But we argue that this inevitability is not a given, and nor should it be.

Together, our 65 MPs used an astonishing variety of terms and concepts to describe the very same position. This immense variation should give pause to anyone concerned with the political process.

We would hope that MPs should be in general agreement as to why they are in Ottawa and what they are supposed to be doing there. Furthermore, Canadians should have an understanding of what to expect from their elected representatives. As it stands, it is not clear that Parliamen-

tarians have a shared conception of an MP's job description, which likely makes it difficult for the electorate to have a clear view either.

Furthermore, only a few MPs described coming to public life with a game plan for how they sought to approach their time in office. In describing their initial motivations, most articulated a desire to change the status quo. Whether it was a precise policy area, a more general view of how citizens' voices are expressed or a concern for how politics are conducted in this country, most MPs sought to make a difference. Ironically, this rarely translated into a deliberate plan. Instead, and as our next report specifically address, most said they stumbled into what would ultimately become an important area of interest, or learned to work with what they were given.


To some degree, these inconsistencies should be expected: the role is multifaceted, and does involve a wide variety of often-competing responsibilities.

One reason for this is the inherently complex relationship between an MP and his or her political party. As we will describe in greater detail in our next report, this relationship is akin to the one the owner of a local retail franchise has with the larger national company. While the MP (or the store owner) can be seen as the sole proprietor in the riding or retail district, he or she must

adhere to the standards and rules that govern the wider political party or company brand, even when they chafe against his or her personal views or the desire of the local residents.

Further complicating this story is the fact that not all MPs enter politics for the same reasons. As we reported in *The Accidental Citizen?*, our MPs come to politics with a wide variety of pre-Parliamentary backgrounds, careers and expressed motivations. In addition, some MPs belong to political parties—such as the New Democratic Party or the Bloc Québécois—that are unlikely to win enough seats to form a government. These MPs know their role will be as a member of the opposition benches, and this may influence their interpretation of an MP's essential purpose.

Since contemporary Canadian society is culturally, regionally, economically and politically diverse, some may argue that such varied descriptions of an MPs' role are inevitable. "It's a question that will be answered, probably, in as many different ways as there are Members of Parliament and will probably change with the historic development of the country," one MP admitted.

No doubt the definition will evolve, but surely we can do better than the current inconsistent, and even contradictory, understanding of what an MP is supposed to do. 

The Consequences

Most MPs entered public life with the determination to create a different politics from that which was on offer. A majority of MPs who participated in this project felt strongly that their communities were not adequately represented in Parliament, and they sought to change that. And even while MPs were determined to bring change to the House of Commons, their feelings of awe and reverence upon first entering Parliament as an elected official reflected their understanding of the importance of the institution and the work that lay ahead of them.

But, at the same time, most Parliamentarians we interviewed arrived in Ottawa with neither a concrete understanding of what they would be doing there, or how they could go about doing it. The MPs gave a wide variety of responses to questions regarding their role in the House of Commons. We grouped these responses into five (often overlapping) groups: the philosophers, the geographers, the partisans, the service providers and the none-of-the-abovers. Each group contained its own tensions regarding the definition of an MP's function and role.

Furthermore, our group of MPs was given almost no orientation or training, and was forced to devise their own means of preparing for the job. Their prior experience was seldom considered when it came to their legislative and committee appointments.

There are a few reasons to worry about an unprepared and unsupported Parliament whose members disagree so fundamentally on the basic aspects of the job, as well as on what they were elected to achieve.

First, if MPs are confused as to their job description, their ability to do their jobs effectively is diminished. When roles and responsibilities are not clear in any organization, problems ensue. Critical tasks will be overlooked, or efforts will be duplicated. Important work will not be achieved. Without clarity on who is in charge, and who is responsible to whom and for what, inter-personal tension is bound to result. These issues also tend to be amplified during times of war, economic uncertainty or technological or change—times that especially demand a clear-headed, well-reasoned response from our elected leaders, even when the path forward isn't immediately apparent.

Second, this reality confuses the media who observe Parliament and whose job it is to describe to Canadians how our country is being governed. Organizations whose leaders operate without a

It appears that much of the political process is left to chance in Canada. What we see in Parliamentarians' arrival to Ottawa is, in many ways, a continuation of the same confluence of random events that characterized their own paths to politics that we discussed in *The Accidental Citizen*?

shared sense of purpose or responsibility are difficult to understand and explain. This challenge is only compounded by the reduction in journalistic resources devoted to the coverage of national affairs in news organizations across Canada.

Third, this lack of agreement about what MPs are supposed to be doing confuses the citizenry. This confusion results from impressions formed by the media's coverage of national politics, and from direct interaction with politicians whose views on their essential function are so widely divergent. Within the five groups we describe earlier—the philosophers, geographers, partisans, the service providers and none-of-the-abovers—the MPs spoke of tensions and outright disagreements with colleagues who held different perspectives. It isn't hard to see how difficult it would be to work together effectively given such a wide variety of often competing priorities. If the MPs themselves are unable to describe their own role clearly and coherently, it is hard to blame the media or the public for not understanding it either, and by extension, not knowing what to expect from their elected leaders.

What happens to politics, and the public's perception of it, when there is so little coherence among Parliamentarians as to their fundamental purpose?

This lack of clarity of purpose can cause—and most certainly exacerbate—confusion, partisanship and a relentless focus on the short-term, and

Without a clear sense of purpose, measures of success will be equally unclear. In politics, this prompts Parliamentarians to fall back on what is the simplest and most immediate indication of success – getting re-elected.

in particular, on the next election. These are, in short, the very qualities of contemporary Canadian politics that alienate so many citizens from politics and lead them to disengage from public life altogether. They are also likely to be the very qualities that MPs wanted to change or “do differently” during their own time in office.

Without an agreed-upon sense of purpose, measures of success will be equally unclear. In politics, this prompts Parliamentarians to fall back on what is the simplest and most immediate indication of success—getting re-elected.

As most Canadians surely agree, as far as indicators of success go in public life, this is hardly satisfactory.

WHAT TO DO?

There are at least two sets of questions that emerge from this report that we encourage our readers to contemplate.

First, and most fundamentally, we need to discuss and consider more closely the role of an MP. Should there be a job description? If so, how do we decide what it should include? And who should decide?

Second, we should also ask ourselves whether we can improve on the way in which newly-elected Parliamentarians are prepared for their positions. Should we consider a longer transition period where, at a minimum, there is a proper introduction to Parliament, including an overview of the rules and expectations of a Parliamentarian? This transition could be facilitated by Parliament and supported by all Parliamentarians and political parties in recognition that an effective orientation is essential to good government; indeed, effective orientation is essential to the success of any organization.

The definition of the MP's role and the appropriate preparation and orientation should be initial questions in a wider discussion on the need to bring greater attention to Canadian politics and support to those who pursue it. The job is important. Symbolically, Parliamentarians are the link between Canadians and their government, and practically, they are responsible for developing and passing the laws and policies that help shape how Canadians live together. These processes

And as most Canadians surely agree, as far as indicators of success in public life go, this is hardly enough.

matter and surely we can do better than the current state of affairs.

These are not easy questions and the answers won't come easily either. There is much about politics that is obscure, and the current trend toward minority governments compounds this lack of clarity. The picture is further muddled by our multi-party structure and the role that parties play in shaping modern politics. At this juncture, we have only begun to share the MPs' impres-

sions of the importance of political parties, and we will uncover more about these relationships in our next report, to be released in early 2011.

Of course, we can't expect that every MP will do the job in exactly the same way. As our next report will show, they most certainly do not. In fact, the dearth of preparation in a system in which there is little orientation or training and the total absence of an agreed-upon role means that, in many cases, MPs must find their own way. Put otherwise, they arrive in Ottawa and are forced to wing it. While this provides much more latitude for individual MPs to pursue their own objectives than we commonly appreciate, it also further contributes to the political behaviour and corresponding public confusion and cynicism that turn many away from public life in the first place.

We hope this report will be a basis for further discussion and will contribute to a greater understanding of political leadership in Canada. The exit interview project stems from a belief that the system can be robust and elastic, but only to the extent that the wider citizenry is willing to engage with it, to understand both how it works and why it can fail to produce the results we may prefer or expect. To help contribute to this, we encourage

you to share this report, along with *The Accidental Citizen?*, with your friends and colleagues. We hope it will provoke new discussions on the ways in which we live together, and how democratic processes can be improved for future Canadians.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

This is the second in a series of reports that share what we heard from the 65 MPs who participated in our exit interview project. Our next publication will pick up from the MPs' initial weeks in Parliament, and expand on how they focused their time and energy in office. Additional reports will explore the relationship between MPs and civil society, both directly through their interactions with constituents, citizens' associations and lobby groups, and indirectly through the media. Finally, we will share how the MPs describe their highs and lows, and the advice they have for strengthening our democracy. ^

For more information on the project, and to discuss the questions it raises, please visit www.samaracanada.com.

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— Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan

Participating MPs

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The Honourable Roger Gallaway

The Honourable John Godfrey

James Gouk

The Honourable Bill Graham

Raymond Gravel

Art Hanger

Jeremy Harrison

Luc Harvey

The Honourable Loyola Hearn

The Honourable Charles Hubbard

Dale Johnston

The Honourable Walt Lastewka

Marcel Lussier

The Honourable Paul Macklin

The Right Honourable Paul Martin

Bill Matthews

Alexa McDonough

The Honourable Anne McLellan

Gary Merasty

The Honourable Andrew Mitchell

Pat O'Brien

The Honourable Denis Paradis

The Honourable Pierre Pettigrew

Russ Powers

Penny Priddy

Werner Schmidt

The Honourable Andy Scott

The Honourable Carol Skelton

The Honourable Monte Solberg

The Honourable Andrew Telegdi

Myron Thompson

The Honourable Paddy Torsney

Randy White

Blair Wilson

Research Methodology

Samara contacted Members of Parliament who left public office during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments (2004 to 2008). We chose to speak to former, rather than current, Members of Parliament because we felt they would be less constrained by the demands of office and, having stepped away, would have had time to reflect on their years in public life.

We chose to focus on those who left during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments for several reasons. The first is because they would have more recent experience with the current realities of Parliament, which includes two political parties that are relatively new: the Bloc Québécois and the Conservative Party of Canada. The second is because there was a change of government in that time, which enabled a larger number of MPs to serve in different legislative capacities. The third is because these were both minority parliaments. Many observers believe Canada will be governed by minority Parliaments more frequently in years to come, and we believed that MPs' first-hand experience would yield interesting insights.

There are 139 living former MPs in this group and we interviewed 65. These individuals come from all the major national political parties and from all regions of the country. The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians (CAFP) were our partners in this project, and provided the initial letter of introduction and invitation to the former MPs on our behalf.

Samara also consulted extensively with other key groups of experts in the development of this project, including academics at several Canadian universities. While the report is not intended as academic research, professors from the University of British Columbia, Carleton University, Memorial University, the University of Ottawa, Queen's University, the University of Toronto

and Wilfrid Laurier University all provided input into the interview process to ensure it was built on existing literature, and many helped review early drafts of our findings. Samara also consulted political journalists, current and former Parliamentarians and several senior public servants.

INTERVIEW STYLE

The questions for these interviews were organized using a semi-structured interview methodology. We created a standard question-guide to ensure uniformity of process; however, follow-up questions varied depending on responses. We felt this approach would better capture the nuances of the MPs' experiences. All interviewees were provided with an overview of the interview objectives and process in advance.

All but two of the interviews were conducted in person, often in the home or office of the former Parliamentarian, in their preferred official language. The interviews were about two hours in length.

QUESTIONS ASKED

The questions we asked the MPs focused on four main areas:

- Their motivations for entering and paths to politics;
- The nature of the job, including how they conceptualized their role, how they spent their time, and what they viewed as their successes and frustrations;
- Their connection to civil society, either directly or through the media; and
- Their advice and recommendations for the future.

ON THE RECORD

The MPs signed a release form and spoke on the record. As a courtesy, the MPs were given the option not to respond to any question if they so preferred, and were free to strike statements from the transcript that they did not want to appear on the public record, a request we honoured in the few cases in which we were asked.

RECORDINGS AND TRANSCRIPTS

The interviews were recorded in mp3-quality audio, and all the audio records have been transcribed. Because our primary objective was to foster an honest and open discussion, we did not film these interviews, concerned that the equipment necessary for a broadcast-quality video would be distracting, or encourage more of a performance-style interview, rather than the open-style conversation we wanted to encourage.

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

All the interviews were coded and analyzed with the support of a widely-recognized qualitative research software program.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

We are committed to ensuring that the results of this work are made widely available in order to advance public understanding of the role of political leadership and Parliament in Canada.

Samara has the consent of the interviewees to deposit the interviews in the National Archives once the MP exit interview project is complete, and will do so. This project is among the largest-ever inquiries into Members of Parliament in Canada, and we would like to ensure that its educational value is available to future generations. ^