

THE ACCIDENTAL CITIZEN?

**What we can learn about
diversity from exit interviews
with our Members of Parliament**

By Alison Loat

WHAT WE'LL TALK ABOUT TODAY

- Introduce you to Samara and describe our MP exit interview project
- Share the findings from our first report, *The Accidental Citizen?*
- Outline three provocations suggested by the report
- Raise and discuss four sets of questions on increasing diversity in our politics

WHAT IS SAMARA?

STRENGTHENING THE CANADIAN DEMOCRACY

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

PUBLIC AFFAIRS JOURNALISM

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

**WHAT IS THE MP EXIT
INTERVIEW PROJECT?**

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

- A series of “exit interviews” with MPs who left public life during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments (2004-2008)
- An opportunity for MPs to:
 - Reflect on their time in public life
 - Provide insight into the factors that helped them be effective and the barriers they faced
 - Share advice on how the Parliamentary experience can be improved
- The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians are partners; the interviews are being done largely in person by Samara
- The first time this has ever been done in our country

WHO WAS INVOLVED?

- 65 of the 139 living former MPs from the two Parliaments (57% retired, 43% were defeated)
- MPs from all regions of the country and from all four political parties represented in the House
- 22% female; 11% immigrants; 18% French speaking
- Very educated: 86% had at least one university degree, and half had more than one
- Overall, an experienced group:
 - Average tenure was 10.3 years (median 12.3 years)
 - 31% served as Ministers, 35% as Parliamentary Secretaries
 - 58% chaired at least one committee

WHAT ARE WE ASKING?

- Motivations
- Experiences being an MP
- Engagement with civil society (constituents, citizens' groups and associations, media)
- Recommendations, advice and feedback on ideas suggested by others

OUR FIRST REPORT



WHAT WERE THE REPORT'S MAJOR FINDINGS?

1. MPs come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and most said they did not plan for a political life
2. Nearly all said they were asked to run
3. Their described motivations were extremely varied
4. Most MPs described themselves as “outsiders”
5. The nomination process was confusing and among the less engaging elements of politics

1. MOST MPs SAID THEY DID NOT PLAN FOR A POLITICAL LIFE

- Their backgrounds were varied
- Contrary to stereotypes, MPs are not just lawyers and political scientists

“I saw an ad in a local magazine on why you might consider supporting the Reform Party. I submitted my application and became a member, not intending to run.”

“I was looking for a career change, and a mentor told me politics would suit my personality.”

2. NEARLY ALL SAID THEY WERE ASKED TO RUN

- By a friend or colleague, often someone involved in the party
- When they failed to find a candidate
- By the party's leader

“I would not have run for political office if this woman had not shown up at my door and said, ‘We’d like you to try to do this.’”

“One of my friends said, ‘We want you to run as our candidate.’ I laughed. ‘You’ve got to be kidding. That’s really not in the cards.’”

3. THEY SAID YES FOR ALL KINDS OF REASONS

- Politics considered a way to solve complex problems, or a way to learn and grow
- Some felt the system was moving in the wrong direction: link between government and citizens was broken or PMs acted like dictators
- Others had specific reform ideas in mind (e.g., electoral system, separatism)
- Some were more obvious contenders, liked the challenge or felt a sense of service
- Others were intrigued, or light-hearted

4. MOST DESCRIBED THEMSELVES (PARADOXICALLY) AS “OUTSIDERS”

- Personal identity
- Part of the immigrant experience
- Geography, particularly for those from Reform
- Matter of political philosophy or policy perspective
- Education, socio-economic background or career choice

“I remember walking up to Centre Block and thinking, ‘Okay Daddy, what’s the daughter of a lousy immigrant tailor doing here?’”

“The system isn’t working for Western Canada. We’re going to opt in and change the system itself.”

“Since when is the busboy supposed to become an MP?”

“I was motivated to be a voice for the small guy. I always put my riding and my province first, sometimes to my own peril.”

5. AND VIEWED THE NOMINATION AS A 'BLACK BOX'

- Not a transparent process
- Unclear who was in charge, if anyone – some set up their own association, others saw party leaders intervene
- Rules were pliable and differently applied, timing varied
- Identity and category politics often exploited

“There’s too much power in the central committees. They interfere, get their person nominated, and wonder why people don’t care.”

“I sold enough memberships to scare people off. I didn’t ask permission. I just did it.”

“My nomination was confirmed four days before the general election. It was a very messy situation.”

“It was terrible. Just horrendous. The worst political experience of my life.”

“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.”

The Accidental Citizen?

The first of a series exploring political leadership in Canada

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Life Before Parliament
- 3 Deciding to Run
- 4 The Nomination: A Stack Six
- 5 Conclusion
- 6 Acknowledgements
- Participating MPs
- Research Methodology

THREE PROVOCATIONS AND FOUR SETS OF QUESTIONS

**1. OUR POLITICS ARE MUCH
MORE DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE
THEN WE NORMALLY GIVE THEM
CREDIT FOR**

**2. ACCEPTED POLITICAL
NARRATIVES ARE HIGHLY
CONDUSIVE TO INCREASING
DIVERSITY**

**3. THE WAY WE ORGANIZE OUR
POLITICS LOCALLY IS A MAJOR
IMPEDIMENT TO INCREASED
PARTICIPATION, AND BY
EXTENSION, INCREASED
DIVERSITY**

THAT SAID, THE PICTURE IS FAR FROM PERFECT (40th PARLIAMENT)

- Of the 308 MPs in our current Parliament:
 - 22% female (vs 51% of Cdns)
 - 8% visible minority (vs 16% of Cdns)
 - 12% immigrants (vs 20% of Cdns)
 - ~70% have university or college degree (vs 50% of Cdns)
 - Most from “white collar jobs,” and most (90%) were in the service sector (vs 78% of Cdns)
 - Average age is 53
- The picture varies by party and by province (e.g., Manitoba)

SO WHAT CAN WE DO? SOME QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- Debate **what we want in our political representation**, e.g., what personal or professional experiences should they have? Should these match those in the Cdn population?
- Be clear **what kind of diversity we seek** and why, e.g., Symbolic? Descriptive? Substantive?
- Over time, our system is **responsive to those who participate**. What kinds of organizations should we encourage to support greater diversity? Or should we simply encourage people to vote?
- Remember **institutions matter too**, as well as the individuals within them. How do we make our Parliament more open and responsive?

THANK YOU

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