

# Why Don't (More) Good People Enter Politics?

UBC: Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions | November 24-25, 2011

Politicians don't often publicly and candidly share personal opinions on their lives in office, perhaps with good reason. Unforgiving media scrutiny and intense internal party pressure can convince members not to speak out when their views clash with the need for caucus solidarity. Politicians who freely offer highly personal opinions on matters of public interest may face stern rebukes rather than rewards.

Concerned about a perceived lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the politicians they've elected to represent them, members of the voting public are often cynical, and sometimes downright hostile towards those who hold public office. Citizens often label politicians as liars or cheats, and believe politicians willingly trade their values for votes.

But those who hold seats in municipal, provincial, and federal governments can have a profound influence on the lives of Canadians. Asked why they entered political life, most politicians respond that they sincerely want to make a difference in their community.

When we consider the important role of politicians alongside conflicting public sentiment surrounding their performance, two questions arise: "Why don't more good people enter politics? And what might be done about it?"

The University of British Columbia's Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions (CSDI) convened a conference to explore the possibilities. "Why Don't More Good People Enter Politics? And what might be

## The Agenda

### ***Thursday, November 24***

A conversation with former Prime Minister Paul Martin moderated by Ian Hanomansing

### ***Friday, November 25***

#### ***Panel 1***

***"Why don't (more) good people enter politics?"***

Moderated by Ian Hanomansing  
Carole Taylor, Vaughn Palmer, Sam Sullivan,  
Mike Harcourt

#### ***Panel 2***

***The Media and Partisanship***

Moderator: Kathryn Gretsinger  
Fazil Mihlar, Anne McLellan, Pamela  
Goldsmith-Jones, Winnie Hwo

#### ***Panel 3***

***Entering Political Life: Incentives and Disincentives***

Moderated by Doug McArthur  
Gordon Gibson, Dawn Black, Jennifer Clarke,  
Rick Anderson

#### ***Wrap up & Next Steps***

Anne McLellan, Rick Anderson

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done about it?” took place in Vancouver on November 24 and 25, 2011, one week after British Columbia’s municipal elections.

The conference brought together a diverse, multi-partisan roster of current and former municipal, provincial, and federal politicians, along with a number of journalists and editors. Panelists offered thoughtful personal insight on the functions—and dysfunctions—of political life in Canada. Discussion touched on motivations and disincentives for running, life in office, relationships with the media, and how the culture of political life might be improved.

The CSDI conference was inspired in part by interviews with former members of parliament conducted by the Samara Foundation, an independent organization dedicated to the study of citizen engagement with Canadian democracy.

The interviews, conducted with 65 former MPs who left public life after serving in the Parliaments that sat between 2004 and 2008, offered a behind-the-scenes look at how people entered political life, why they stayed, and what it took to survive—and even thrive—during their time in office.

The results were often surprising. Many interviewees said they were unprepared for their new jobs as politicians, and received little training or mentoring. They also complained about the opaque and manipulative nature of the nomination process by which they were selected by their parties.

For some, the top-down and heavy-handed discipline imposed by party leaders, and the exaggerated partisanship displayed in parliamentary debates,

especially under the spotlight of the media, contributed to a dysfunctional parliament. They also varied widely in how they described their roles, rarely focusing on the central job of making laws. These themes were echoed during the CSDI conference.

The opening event was a public conversation between CBC journalist Ian Hanomansing and The Right Honourable Paul Martin, who served as Canada’s Liberal Prime Minister between 2003 and 2006.

Martin challenged the premise that good people don’t enter political life: “I think we make a mistake in judging some people as whether they’re good or bad depending on where they stand on issues.”

Rather, he said politicians make a sincere effort to make decisions that will best serve the public interest. Citizens’ agreement or disagreement with those decisions ultimately lead to categorizing politicians as “good” or “bad.”

“Fundamentally, most governments try to make the right decisions,” Martin said. “They are aware of the political ramifications around each issue, but most of all, they try to make the right decisions.”

## Renew focus on Parliament’s role

Most media coverage of government activity deals more with an issue’s political ramifications than with the policy at work, Martin said. “I think there could be fairer reporting on the policy issues, as opposed to who wins.”

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He was careful to distinguish the fractious ruckus of question period—covered extensively by media—from the actual work of government, which receives less media coverage and by extension, less public discussion.

“The problem is that question period is not government at work,” Martin said. “Government work is much different. If people saw that happening, they would have a much better perspective.”

This call to focus the public eye on the work of government beyond the boxing ring of question period was echoed by a number of conference panelists the next day.

“Why is it so partisan, so adversarial, with so much bashing, so many dumbed-down talking points?” asked veteran political strategist and public affairs commentator Rick Anderson. “I think it happens because we lack an understanding, in Canada, of what the role of parliament actually is.” Anderson, who began his career in the 1970s working on campaigns for Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal party, noted that a lack of public understanding of parliament’s role contributes to and rewards an adversarial, politically charged environment in the House of Commons.

“Historically, parliament was supposed to be a serious check on the power of the executive, of the cabinet, and of the Crown,” Anderson said. These bodies couldn’t make laws autonomously, as they knew parliament could reject them. But “now we expect parliament to do the government’s bidding.”

Stressing the separation of powers, Anderson argued that the role of parliament is not to pass the

government’s legislation or their budgets. Rather, “it’s to decide what they should be.”

Rick Anderson emphasized Paul Martin’s point that media focus on political controversy blurs public knowledge of the work of government.

“The flame-throwers, the name-callers, the people with something controversial to say get all the attention. The people slugging it out there doing the hard work get almost no attention,” Anderson said. “We have to figure out how to right this balance. We have to figure out how to have an intelligent discussion.”

But intelligent discussion of government requires moving beyond today’s highly polarized debate between political parties. “Modern parties have become basically campaign vehicles in their instincts,” said Anderson, noting that issues tend to be divided into “swords and shields.”

When parties can only either attack one another or defend themselves, a polarizing, oppositional environment is created, in which major policies get trapped in a gridlock that fails to reflect the realities

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of a diverse, pluralistic contemporary Canadian society.

Forming governments that reflect the diversity of the citizens they are elected to represent persists as an ongoing concern across all levels of government. Only citizen involvement will change this, said The Honourable Anne McLellan, former Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal MP for Edmonton East. She pointed out that citizen disengagement and cynicism stem from ongoing failures—on the part of both citizens and political parties—to nominate and elect people who accurately represent the lived realities of Canadian life.

“I believe that we, as citizens, get the government and the politics we deserve,” she said. “As citizens, what is it we expect of our political parties? And if we’re not delivering it, what can we do, as citizens, to change? Our politics, therefore our political parties, must represent, in a meaningful way, the country they claim to be part of. We need more female, ethnic, and urban representation.”

Many panelists expressed concern about persistent gender inequality in government: men continue to hold the most seats in the House of Commons, provincial legislatures, and city halls. Panelists acknowledged that little progress has been made to improve gender equality in politics.

Dawn Black, New Democratic Party Member of the BC Legislative Assembly for New Westminster, shared her perspective, noting that she’s spent many years encouraging women to run in politics.

Perceptions of public life—that it erodes reputations, that it ruthlessly puts families of candidates under the microscope, that life in office is characterized by highly adversarial, combative work environments—tend to prevent women, more than men, from seeking political party nomination and running for office, Black said.

“Currently, the percentage of women in the BC legislature is verging on 30 percent. In Ottawa, it’s 23 or 24 percent,” she pointed out. “We’re not making progress the way that we should make progress.” Meanwhile, Nordic countries, new democracies, and governments that have adopted the proportional representation voting system tend to have more equal gender representation in government.

Canada currently uses the first-past-the-post model, in which the candidate, and the party that wins the most votes is elected. Proponents of electoral reform argue that proportional representation promotes more equal representation of voter opinion, since the number of votes a party or candidate receives is reflected in a proportionate number of seats in government.

As long as Canada’s first-past-the-post system remains, though, the problem of unequal female representation in politics will persist. The option of quotas was debated in one panel. Gordon Gibson noted that the BC Citizen’s Assembly on electoral reform selected one man and one woman from each riding.

McLellan recalled travelling across Canada in 2006 as part of the Liberal party’s renewal efforts. She had

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recently lost what would be her final election, and she spent the tour speaking with women about political involvement. She identified work-life balance, the culture of politics, and media scrutiny as the primary disincentives for women to run for office.

"Women told me over and over again, it wasn't primarily about them. Their concern was for their children," McLellan said. "What I found interesting was they seemed to have very little concern for partners or spouses, but in terms of children, 'I don't want my children to have to see what the press have to say about Belinda Stronach and Christy Clark's cleavage.'"

The risk of damage to one's personal reputation affects women differently than men, said Jennifer Clarke. The former journalist and three-term Vancouver city councillor most recently ran unsuccessfully to represent Vancouver Centre for the Conservatives in the 2011 federal election.

"During my political career, the media variously called me too pretty, too smart, too well-educated, too strong, and I think my labels were 'Head Girl' and 'Lady Macbeth,'" Clarke said. "I was also called a hussy in a red dress at one point." She added that the media seldom uses this kind of language to describe men.

West Vancouver mayor Pamela Goldsmith-Jones agreed: "I was picking up my dry cleaning once and the woman said, 'You actually look kind of fat on TV.' I said, 'Do you say that to the men who are fat?'"

"Democracy is war without bullets"  
—Mike Harcourt, former B.C.  
Premier

Goldsmith-Jones acknowledged that the media has begun to show leadership in the language they use to describe male and female politicians. Ultimately, more inclusiveness—regardless of gender—is needed in political life. "It's not just about gender," she said. "It's about inclusion."

Anderson agreed that the nasty, ruthless name-calling that has become the norm in politics must be rectified to improve gender equality among elected officials. He called for improving the workspace, "making it more meaningful, but also less mean," and he deplored the "name calling, the rude remarks going on in the House of Commons." Alluding to the nasty things that have been said about leaders like Michael Ignatieff and Stephen Harper, Anderson concluded there "are a lot of people—more often women than men—but some men, who are not interested in going into that arena."

For Winnie Hwo, the challenge for women entering politics is two-fold: "When the children are too young, they simply do not have time for politics. But when the children are older, it becomes an image problem for their children. And mothers are usually the last people on earth to want to embarrass their teenage kids."

## Politics as a "boxing ring"

While panelists pointed to the combative culture of politics as a major barrier to more diverse political involvement, some politicians maintained that the adversarial



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environment is simply part of the job.

"I remember my poor mother being so upset when people would bash me," said former Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan, who insists that adversarial politics are central to democracy. "I always had to phone her and explain: 'You're a boxer. When you get in the ring, and when someone smacks you in the face, you shouldn't be surprised; you're a boxer. That's your job.'"

Arguing that no one has found a better alternative to adversarial politics, Sullivan noted "when everyone loves each other and moves ahead together, it's called a dictatorship. And it's terrifying."

"Public interest or not, we have to hold politicians accountable because they've got legalized power in their hands."

-Fazil Mihar,  
editor, Vancouver Sun

Former British Columbia Premier Mike Harcourt agreed: "Democracy is war without bullets," he

said. However, while "there's nothing wrong with partisanship....It's a problem when it becomes thuggery. It's when it becomes a grotesque sideshow, as question period has become."

But Carole Taylor, a former BC Liberal Minister of Finance, argued that the current head-to-head, party-against-party model fails to foster individualism and diversity among elected officials.

"I don't think it should be a bash-bash kind of thing," she said. "It should be about the arguments of ideas and different approaches to things."

Taylor said that if she were starting her political career over, she would only run for office on the condition that she would be free, on "very important issues," not to vote the party line. Parties rightly make policies to vote together on matters of confidence or finance, she said. "But it's important that if there's some issue that's important to you, express it. If you can't express it in caucus, why are you there? What is the point?"

Taylor said she would rather see sincere, individual debate about issues than the current system, in which politicians must continually toe the party line on issues close to their hearts. "That's what really bothered me about the party system."

Dawn Black suggested that while more free votes in the House would not be a bad thing, "we need to be careful when suggesting less partisanship and freedom to deviate from the 'party line' that we don't encourage a system without accountability to an electoral platform."

## Strong democracies, strong media

Reflecting the media's key role as a public educator on political issues, the conference included several local and national journalists. But as economic and technological shifts challenge news outlets, democratic processes can also suffer, panelists said.

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Fazil Mihlar, editorial pages editor at the Vancouver Sun, described a common public perception: “There’s a presumption out there that the media, they are people who wait from the bleachers, wait ‘til the contest is over, and we are happy to come down and kick you in the chin or the groin. I think that view is mistaken.”

A strong media holds politicians accountable, but recent challenges like media workplace changes, declining resources, and new technologies have placed new strains on Canadian media—and Canadian democracy.

“Our teeth [as media] are not as sharp as they were 20 years ago,” Mihlar said, but “governments and politicians’ teeth have become longer and sharper.” Currently, he said, the public relations and communications branches of governments may rival, if not exceed, the capacity of many news outlets.

Journalists should not act as politicians’ note-takers. “We are watchdogs,” Mihlar said. This watchdog role can leave some politicians feeling that they have little choice but to maintain an adversarial relationship with reporters. Others, though, see the politician-media relationship as more symbiotic.

Pamela Goldsmith-Jones recalled a trial by media fire during her first days in office. She was elected just two days before a scandal involving her local police department—which she now led—became public.

The local media “beat the crap out of me and it wasn’t fun,” Goldsmith-Jones said. But this close early scrutiny spurred her to strive for a more open, transparent mayoral term. “As soon as I decided ‘the

media is here to stay and let’s work together,’ it completely changed my frame of mind,” she said.

## The ideal candidate

Reflecting on the qualities of the ideal strong political candidate, conference panelists agreed that motivation is critical: those who enter public life for the sake of power, publicity, and headlines are in it for the wrong reasons.

“I’ve often said if you really, really, really want to become a politician, you should be barred from ever becoming one,” said Sullivan. “Those are the most dangerous people. They do things they probably shouldn’t because they want to continue being a politician.”

He cited poor candidate recruitment efforts as part of the “good people in politics” problem, noting that “the way we choose leaders in political life is quite amazing.” Unlike the business world, where recruiting the best possible candidate can be an exhaustive process, political parties don’t typically put as much effort into recruiting as they do into getting people elected. One of the barriers for many candidates who parties may wish to recruit is the nomination process. Both the Samara report interviewees and conference participants—across party lines—noted that this is a disincentive to seeking office. According to Jennifer Clarke, the nomination process is often “an unregulated brawl, with party rules honoured in the breach.”

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Those who do get recruited, nominated, and elected, can fly in with high hopes, which quickly deflate, said Gordon Gibson. The former BC Liberal leader said new politicians come into office sincerely hoping to effect positive change. But those hopes are quickly deflated amidst the chaotic, often unforgiving realities of political life, and the exigencies of acting as a “good foot soldier” for their party.

“You watch [new legislators] for the first six months and you see the air go out of the balloon,” Gibson said. “What do you do about this? Empower the ordinary member of parliament. That’s what will make this job more attractive.”

Describing who should be in politics, Carole Taylor emphasized the need for diversity. “You don’t want someone who wants the glory or the name recognition,” she said. “You want someone with good ideas.”

“Our political parties will probably only meaningfully change when the public gets involved and says ‘enough is enough.’

“We really need to work a lot harder, both as citizens and political parties, to ensure we are nominating people who look like our communities and our workplaces.”

—Honourable Anne McLellan,  
former Deputy Prime Minister

Conference panelists agreed that plenty of good people are already in politics. They emphasized that parties must recruit and maintain candidates who intelligently represent the electorate, and the electorate must support them with votes.

“For me, it has nothing to do with ideology,” Anne McLellan said. “For me, a good person, on whatever team they may choose to participate, is a person who handles complexity well.”

She pointed out that a good political candidate should have a highly tuned cultural awareness, and should understand the nuances of the world. “It’s someone who understands most issues in our communities, our nation, our world, are not straight-line, and feels comfortable working in a milieu with highly complex issues.

People with these qualities—as well as people who lack them—can be found in every political party in Canada.

“Our political parties will probably only meaningfully change when the public gets involved and says ‘enough is enough,’” McLellan said, noting that democracy becomes truly vibrant when politicians represent the lived realities of citizens’ lives.

“We really need to work a lot harder, both as citizens and political parties, to ensure we are nominating people who look like our communities and our workplaces.”

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## The road map

The wrap up session with Rick Anderson and Anne McLellan provided elements for imagining a compelling agenda for democratic reform in Canada.

The purpose and role of parliament and parliamentarians in our constitutional system needs to be re-examined, with an eye to strengthening our understanding of its essential function in the separation of powers as a check on the executive.

The culture of politics needs to be cleaned up. Independence should be rewarded and celebrated, not punished; leaders should expect less deference from their caucus members.

With the caveat that disciplined parties are essential in a parliamentary democracy, there is scope within the political process for more free votes, stronger committees, and less centralized decision-making. Canada's constitutional conventions have evolved in ways that strengthen leaders at the expense of MPs.

The confidence convention should be used to reinforce parliamentary power over the executive; it should not be a bludgeon used by the executive to subordinate the parliament.

Finally, the nomination process needs to be better regulated and should be less controlled by the party leadership so that individual MPs may be freer to act as powerful and responsive representatives of their constituencies.

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