Humans of the House Episode 2: Show Up and Glow Up

Episode Transcript

[uplifting music]

[sound of an audience clapping and cheering]

Sabreena Delhon: Imagine you’re a newly elected MP. You’ve won an election.

…Now what?

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: You’ve been door knocking for ages. Fundraisers, speeches, so many late nights. You’ve been running on adrenaline, day to day, hour to hour, right to the last minute. It’s been awhile since you’ve seen your loved ones.

But here you are. You won. Your community has chosen you to represent them in Ottawa.

You’ve got a new job. One that might have you traveling across the country every few days. One that has you helping to run a country of almost 40 million people.

And you start now.

How are you feeling? Elated? Exhausted?

What’s the first thing you need to do? How does this all work?

[THEME MUSIC]

Sabreena Delhon: I’m Sabreena Delhon. And this is Humans of the House.

We’re taking you inside the House of Commons, through real stories from former Members of Parliament.

At the Samara Centre, we’ve been doing exit interviews with former MPs for a long time. Because an exit interview happens after someone leaves a job – so they can really share what’s on their minds.

In our first episode, we met the 12 former MPs you’ll hear in this series...
Catherine McKenna: I’m Catherine McKenna.

Kennedy Stewart: Kennedy Stewart.

Scott Brison: Scott Brison.

Lisa Raitt: Lisa Raitt.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: Celina Caesar-Chavannes.

Sabreena Delhon: This episode, we’re going to introduce you to Parliament Hill through their eyes. Here they’ll walk you through those first days in office.

[music ends]

Sabreena Delhon: In this podcast, we’re talking to former MPs who served at some point in the last two parliaments, so people who left office between 2015 and 2021. For many of them, especially the Liberals…

[SOUND CLIP: Justin Trudeau in his victory speech: “Sunny ways, my friends. Sunny ways.”]

Sabreena Delhon: …this was their introduction to Ottawa.

[SOUND CLIP: Justin Trudeau in his victory speech: “It’s time for a change in this country my friends, a real change!”]

Sabreena Delhon: From Global News, that’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau giving his victory speech in October 2015. The promise of change was in the air. Remember the slogans?

[SOUND CLIP: Justin Trudeau says “…because it’s 2015.”]

Sabreena Delhon: Well, you probably remember that one, captured here by The Canadian Press.

Earlier, we heard why all these MPs made the leap into politics…a field that most of us can be pretty skeptical about.

And honestly? A lot of these MPs were initially skeptical, too.

That’s why the idea of doing politics differently really appealed to Celina Caesar-Chavannes.
Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I was running with a government that said they were bold, transformative. Um, diversity is our strength, add women, change politics. This is going to be transformative for Canada. Right?

Sabreena Delhon: When she was sworn in as the Liberal MP for Whitby, Ontario, she was determined to represent bold change.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I come to Ottawa with the family. We're staying at the Delta and I have a suitcase with stuff that I brought. And then I started thinking, I need to be Celina here. Everybody's gonna take their picture. Like the class photo in the suits, in the gray or the black or the blue, they're going to be very structured, very sort of similar.

And I already knew that I was gonna stand out. I was the only Black woman elected out of 338 people. So I Celina-fied the first picture and came in, in a leather Karl Lagerfeld dress and, uh, a faux fur gilet, my BCBG stilettos. It was snowing so hard, in Ottawa that day and I just didn't understand it, it was so cold! [laughs]

But I Celina-fied it...I was like, this is it like, this is how you represent for the class of 2015.

I had some challenges, but I was running with a bold transformative government who said diversity is our strength. Add women, change politics. Not dressed like it's business as usual.

So I was like, you gotta show them that you are ready to go. You gotta, you gotta show up and glow up.

Now this room is totally packed. People are sitting and I'm at the front of the room. The reading room has this massive framed picture of the fathers of Confederation. And my uncle looks at it and he looks at, you know, he'll always see me as a little girl, Black girl, from Grenada, in her leather and her stilettos, and totally looking not like a politician under this very, very specific picture. And he just said like, you know, the audacity of this young woman to be here. And when he said it at the time, I was kind of like, yeah, you know, that's kind of cool, but when I reflected back on it, I said, yeah, like you really have to be audacious. You really have to be bold to step into a space in a very specific way, knowing, you have a sort of this, it sort of sets the tone for the entire four years.

Sabreena Delhon: Hold on to that audacity in your mind. Think about what it takes to make an impact when you come in fresh to an age-old institution like this.

We'll hear more from Celina later.

[music]
Sabreena Delhon: MPs arrive ready to work. They’re taken around on tours, go to lots of seminars with former Ministers and MPs, and there’s an orientation program organized by the House Administration.

Kennedy Stewart: …you get to go over the Governor General's, uh, residence, be welcome there.

Sabreena Delhon: That’s Kennedy Stewart. He was the NDP MP for Burnaby South and until recently served as Mayor of Vancouver.

Sabreena Delhon: What’s the training like when you first arrive, what’s the first thing they show you, tell you, how are you received?

Kennedy Stewart: Yeah, I mean, on the parliamentary side, they do a really good job. However, that’s a very small part of the job. Party doesn’t do a lot of onboarding, a few events where you might meet people. But not really, how do I manage my new staff? How do I hire them? How do I open an office? How not, not really much of that at all.

Sabreena Delhon: How do you open an office? Good question! Because every MP needs at least two. One in Ottawa, and one in their riding.

Thankfully, the first one is taken care of. Every MP is assigned their Parliament Hill office. But before you can start serving your community, you have to find and lease an office space in your riding. It’s like starting a small business…when you already have a desk job in Ottawa.

And if you’re wondering: well, what about that last MP? Can’t they just pass their office on to the new one? That’s not standard practice.

Kennedy Stewart: The biggest problem I had was opening an office. I couldn’t find office space in North Burnaby that was suitable. So it actually took me about eight months to get my office open. And I had to work out of another MP’s office, uh, Peter Julian, who was in Burnaby as well.

And then constituents are kind of wondering, well, where’s your office and [laughs], and you still haven’t had it open.

Plus dealing with your parliamentary duties, so there was a lot going on at that time.

Sabreena Delhon: On top of finding office space, you have to find the people. You need a handful of staff for both offices. That’s where experience with hiring comes in handy.
MPs come from lots of different career backgrounds. In this podcast alone you’re hearing from entrepreneurs, artists, professors, activists, journalists…

And this is a great thing! Representing all Canadians takes all types.

But this also means MPs are coming to their jobs with wildly different skillsets. Some MPs we spoke to had been bosses and managers. And some were hiring people for the first time.

And an MP’s training doesn’t tend to make up for these gaps.

Catherine McKenna was a human rights lawyer when she entered politics. In 2015, when she was elected to represent Ottawa Centre, she also was named Minister of the Environment and Climate Change.

**Catherine McKenna:** …and I was thrust into a very high profile role where I had to immediately go off, um, for the negotiations around the Paris Agreement. So I had to staff three offices, um, and I had literally no idea how to do it.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Oh yeah. If you’re a cabinet minister…you need a third office.

**Catherine McKenna:** Maybe I missed some of the training, but I think a lot of it was very functional. It was like, how do you use a computer?

It seemed very old school, that kind of stuff. And not particularly helpful, just very bureaucratic, but very little time spent on how to be a very good MP.

I felt that there certainly could be a lot more training. I found it very hard and it took a very long time to get into a rhythm with both being a minister, of course, but actually even putting that aside, being a Member of Parliament and then also being a parliamentarian and figuring that out and also figuring out the staffing, and how to properly serve the community.

**Sabreena Delhon:** The Samara Centre surveyed MPs about these early days on the job. These are people on our team reading real comments from MPs.

**Voice 1:** …it was all fascinating but it felt like we were being prepared to "be important" instead of on how to do the nuts and bolts of our job.

**Voice 2:** It was a lot of information at once.

**Voice 3:** Worst part of my political career.
Voice 4: I really needed a mentor and someone to share with me the pitfalls of bad staffing choices – and where and when to hire good staff.

Sabreena Delhon: Kennedy Stewart learned to dodge these staffing pitfalls early.

Kennedy Stewart: What happened was, uh, and I'd have new MPs watch out for this...some of the senior MPs that have troublesome staff, they'll try to offload them onto your offices.

That wasn't great. They didn't end up working with my office, but that is actually something I saw happen quite regularly. If there was a troublesome staff person that either, you know, wasn't doing their job or was problematic, sometimes the senior MPs would say, oh, take this staff person to work for you. And then you're kind of saddled with them.

Sabreena Delhon: Ideally, you want staff who can show you the ropes, who know how Ottawa works, or have roots in the riding that you're serving.

Here’s Robert-Falcon Ouellette on what he learned about hiring as a new MP for Winnipeg Centre.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I know some MPs had difficulty in some of the hiring that goes on in the office because sometimes you hire, and someone will say, oh, don't hire your campaign staff.

They might not be good in a constituency office, but why? What are they exactly dealing with? And it depends, every riding's a little bit different obviously, but my riding has huge issues with immigration, poverty, uh, welfare issues, um, people who are looking for pardons, drug addiction issues...I could have used someone who is a counselor, mediation techniques, someone who has experience dealing with immigration.

You know, you have to hire, hire for that. And you kind of want someone who's also political, that they're always kind of thinking of it from a political perspective. Like, uh, does it fit within what we're able to accomplish? Like the needs of the riding and the needs of Ottawa are two very different things.

And as an example, one of my staff, you know, a political scientist, loves politics, studied all the books. Associations, the lobby groups want to meet with you to talk to you about, you know, cattle farming, grains, fish markets, you know, aerospace. To be honest, very important industries in Manitoba. But I have no cattle farms in Winnipeg Centre. It's an urban, urban riding. There's no fish farming.
We have other issues which are far more important. And so my staff was setting up all these meetings with these people, the Dairy Farmers of Canada. You know, I'm sitting across from the dairy farmers and they're telling me about their problems. And I'm thinking to myself, not that I don't care, but I have, like, I'm going to have like a limited amount of time today to deal with issues.

And I had to go back to the staff and say, hey, you know, I don't think we're doing this well.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** While all this setting up is happening, MPs go from the frying pan, into the fire.

New MPs get some serious wake-up calls. Welcome to running a G7 country where decisions can have international ramifications. Big ones.

**Adam Vaughan:** I remember the first day I was sworn into Parliament and we had a vote that day. And the vote was whether or not to send troops into Syria.

**Sabreena Delhon:** This is Adam Vaughan from Spadina-Fort York, a riding in downtown Toronto.

**Adam Vaughan:** As I was walking to Parliament Hill, I got a call from my, my teenage son at the point, only about 13 or 14. He said, “Papa, don't go to war.” And I suddenly realized I'd, I'd been so focused on delivering an, an urban strategy with housing and, and, and advancing the needs of cities that I hadn't really turned my attention to, you know, the full range of issues you get up in Ottawa.

And I hadn't really contemplated what would happen when, you know, an issue like a pipeline for sale came up, or the decision of whether or not to send troops and Canadians to war. And it suddenly dawned to me that I had a bit of learning to do. Um, but then I, it became equally apparent to me that I didn't know which way the party was actually gonna vote on this issue.

In fact, the caucus didn't know...

**Sabreena Delhon:** When Adam says “caucus,” he means a meeting of all his Liberal colleagues.

**Adam Vaughan:** …that decision had been mulled over by the Leader's office for a couple of weeks as the issue emerged. And we were finding out that day in caucus, what
we were gonna be doing that afternoon in parliament. And I was gonna have to cast a vote and was I gonna on my very first vote, defy the Leader or not?

Luckily, the decision we reached was the one my son advocated for. And I got to say, don't worry kid, I'm not, I'm not sending you off to war. But it was, it was a learning curve around party discipline, around how caucuses worked, around how parliament worked, around the range of issues that you have to be up to speed on.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Three years earlier in 2011, Kennedy Stewart had the same kind of welcome-to-Ottawa.

**Kennedy Stewart:** I remember one of the first votes that I had, was on Libya, intervening in Libya, and whether or not we were gonna send, you know, fighter jets, I think, and, uh, bombers to Libya.

**Sabreena Delhon:** This concerned Canada's involvement in a NATO-led mission.

**Kennedy Stewart:** It was like one of our first or second votes in the house and it needed to be unanimous. I was asked by our defense critic, like how I was gonna vote. And I said, well, I'm gonna vote against it. I don't, I don't agree with this, which I didn't realize was really offside with what everybody was going to do.

So then later in the evening, the MP came back to me and said, well, what would it take for you to vote yes? And I said, well, if there was more medical aid on the ground from Canada then I would think about supporting it and then it happened! [laughs] So I couldn't believe that. Oh, I see. So if you kind of stand your, well, what I, what was great is we were able to get, uh you know, more aid on the ground, the thing I believed in. But I didn't realize that would also cause ripples in my party and kind of tag me as a problem, as, you know, maybe somebody who was independently minded, let's say. Um, so there was all of that going on at the same time where you're trying to hire staff and trying to understand your portfolios.

**Sabreena Delhon:** So not only are you dealing with huge decisions right from the get go – you also have to learn the rules of your party. It's only orientation, and already your Leader and peers are forming an impression of you. This is especially important because reputation and relationships have strong currency in parliament.

Adam Vaughan again:

**Adam Vaughan:** I suddenly found myself inside a caucus for the first time.

And it was something which I had covered politically, and I'd been a journalist on the Hill. I'd been a journalist at Queen's Park. Um, it's something which I'd seen, conversations
with politicians who privately said one thing while their party said something else. But now I was actually navigating that space and I was navigating that space as an outsider and a newcomer to the party, not as someone who had had, you know, five elections under my belt and gone through leadership campaigns and, you know, been in caucus, Liberal clubs and built relationships all my time.

I was alone in that environment. But I'd also come into the party, uh, as sort of a ray of hope. So it was a very interesting moment in time. That walk to Parliament Hill that morning was a real wake up call, a real bell ringing moment.

**Sabreena Delhon:** So that's just a taste of how intense your first few weeks in office can be. No one waits for you to figure things out. As an MP in our survey put it:

**Voice 1:** The life of a Parliamentarian and her team is life in the fast lane. Once you get going, it's hard to slow down. Best to over-prepare us for the journey before we get going. Treat this seriously, if you want to strengthen democratic resilience and enhance the retention and attraction of diverse candidates.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Research shows that for any workplace, a bad onboarding experience is terrible for retention. On the flip side, a good process for new hires keeps people around, improving retention by 82% and productivity by over 70%. For MPs, the sooner they know the ropes, the more effective they can be at their jobs, representing us and navigating policy decisions.

This is where MPs have some very suggestions for improving training. Here’s Kennedy again:

**Kennedy Stewart:** I would definitely have, uh, more management training. You know, if you've never directly hired or managed people, which is often the case with lots of MPs, you know, I would make sure that folks get that kind of training before they start hiring. Because we had some people hire family members, for example, which ended up being hugely problematic. There needs to be training right at the beginning for that. And I would think that all parties structure their offices differently. So it might have to be custom made, depending on the party that you're in.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Here are more thoughts from our survey.

**Voice 2:** Onboarding needs to be an ongoing activity, not a 7-day firehose of information in the first week. For many new MPs with no political experience, people are not even sure what questions it is they are supposed to ask.

**Voice 1:** Treat it like Frosh Week. A window of opportunity to give practical, diverse guidance. Offer multiple opportunities for dialogue with former parliamentarians. Offer certification courses on HR, Finance, Self-Care, Indigenous Relations, Diversity, Equity,
Inclusion, offer sessions on “how to get shit done,” and follow up biweekly or weekly for the first six months until MP’s feel settled.

**Voice 3:** The more that is put into better equipping MPs, the better overall results we will get.

[music]

**Elena (producer):** Sabreena, can we back up a second?

**Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah sure Elena, what’s up?

**Elena:** So those MPs, Adam Vaughan, Kennedy Stewart, they were talking about voting on Canada’s actions in Libya and Syria, but I’m not sure what that means. What are they voting on?

**Sabreena Delhon:** Glad you asked! Let’s call in our team. Hey Beatrice!

**Beatrice Wayne (Research Manager):** Hi Sabreena!

[music]

**Elena:** Beatrice, fill me in here. What is a vote?

[laughs]

How do votes work? What are MPs voting on?

**Beatrice:** So in the case of Adam and Kennedy, they’re voting on motions, um, which are proposals or requests that if they’re adopted, they guide the business of the House. They get the House to either take an action or express a stance on an issue.

So Adam was taking an action in terms of whether or not to have troops in Syria, but it could be something as basic as a particular stance that the House of Commons is taking.

**Elena:** So is this the same thing as when the house votes on a bill?

**Beatrice:** No. Okay. So bills are proposals for laws, a new law or an amendment to an existing law.

**Elena:** Hmm.
Beatrice: Motions direct the business of the House, but they're not the law of the land like a bill. The process for a bill is more complicated because of that, because it becomes the law. So it can start in either the House or the Senate. Um, but then there's a three stage process that it has to go through for it to be approved and become the law.

Elena: Okay, so more intensive process, it involves not just the House of Commons and it becomes law of the land, whereas motions, that's just a House thing.

Beatrice: Yeah. It's typically a lot simpler than what has to happen to pass a bill, but. It's the House of Commons, so nothing is really simple.

Elena: So with that in mind, how does the process work exactly?

Beatrice: A motion comes to a vote, which means that sometimes MPs have to be summoned to the chamber of the house to vote. It's kind of cool. Lights in the Parliament building blink on and off, and these division bells ring...

Elena: That sounds like the end of recess at school or something. And do you have to line up?

Beatrice: I don't think you have to line up, but you do have to stand up when you get there. And then you get counted either as a yay or a nay.

Elena: And then from there they basically figure out whether the motion is, uh, passed?

Beatrice: It is either carried or it's negated!

Elena: That's a Transformers word there if I've ever heard one.

[laughs]

[SOUND CLIP: Clerk announces the vote: “Yays/Pour, 258. Nays/Contre, zero/aucun.” The Speaker announces the result: “I declare the motion carried.”]

Elena: Alrighty. Well, I think I know about motions now. Thanks, Beatrice.

Beatrice: Thank you.

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: Okay, put yourself back in an MP’s shoes for a second. Let's say, against all odds, you did it. You have your office in Ottawa with a brilliant team of staff.

[Distant Voices: Hi!]
Sabreena Delhon: And you’ve found an office in your riding, and your riding staff -

[Distant Voices: Hi!]

Sabreena Delhon: – are already hard at work. They’re helping your constituents with things like immigration, getting passports, settling loved ones, accessing employment insurance and veterans’ benefits…

It’s Monday. So…what’s your week looking like? Where are you supposed to be?

[sounds of a ticking clock, whistling kettle and alarm clock]

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: When parliament is in session, Monday morning usually finds MPs en route to Ottawa. While in Ottawa, MPs follow a routine schedule called the Daily Order of Business.

From Monday to Thursday they’re all in the House of Commons at 2 pm. There’s Members’ Statements. Basically, MPs can give short speeches to the House.

That’s followed by Question Period, QP. This is probably the part of an MP’s duties you’re most familiar with because we see it all the time on the news.

[SOUND CLIP from Question Period:

Pierre Poilievre: …inflation in four decades. When will the government realize that Canadians are out of money, and the party’s over?

[applause]

Speaker: The Honourable Minister for Families…

Karina Gould: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the opposition seems to have amnesia, because over the past two and a half years, it has been this government that has supported Canadians…]

Sabreena Delhon: Outside of Question Period, the rest of an MP’s time in Ottawa is spent on House Duty, in committees, and in their offices.

I know that’s a lot to take in – so let’s break those down.
Your average MP is a part of at least one parliamentary committee. These are where members from across party lines come together to study bills and different issues. Then they report back to the House of Commons.

A lot of MPs say that committee work is one of the best parts of the job. We’ll find out why in a future episode.

As for House Duty, here’s how Kennedy Stewart explains it:

**Kennedy Stewart:** …all MPs have house duty where you actually have to go sit in the House of Commons because they have to have a minimum number of MPs in the house. Um, so you sit there for, I can’t remember what the shift is, but it’s something like, six hours or something. So you are sitting in the House of Commons, often with, uh, very long winded speeches that are totally scripted. There’s no chance for dialogue. So you use that opportunity to answer emails from constituents or like in my case, write books.

**Sabreena Delhon:** So when people accuse politicians of just…sitting around, they should know that this is literally a requirement of the job! The speeches that take place while MPs are on House Duty can cover a huge range of topics – from supplying weapons to foreign governments to debates about the mountain pine beetle in BC.

And one last thing while we’re still in Ottawa: caucus meetings. Every Wednesday morning, parties gather all their members to meet, talk strategy and come up with ideas for laws. This includes the party Leader, all of the MPs and all of the Senators from that party.

The typical work day for an MP is supposed to be 10 hours long, 8:30 am to 6:30 pm. But it’s pretty common to have a 12 hour day while parliament is in session.

*sounds of a ticking clock*

And it doesn’t stop there.

The work week is done, MPs have made it to Friday. TGIF, right?

Well…

*sounds of a plane taking off, in-flight chime*

Thursday night is usually when MPs make the trek back to their ridings. Some MPs stay in Ottawa most of Friday. If your riding is in Ottawa, or somewhere nearby, that’s no problem. But Canada has six time zones. There’s no direct flight from Ottawa to Whitehorse. If you’re lucky, with the connections you can maybe get there in nine hours, but most trips will take you closer to 12 and have two stops along the way.
Here’s Kennedy Stewart breaking down what it would take for him to get back to the Vancouver area.

**Kennedy Stewart:** Coming from British Columbia, I was flying probably 15 hours a week for nine months of the year.

That kind of takes a toll on you after a while. You’re away from your family a lot. Especially if you’re from the west coast or the north it’s especially taxing in terms of the travel. You have lots of time to do work or get to know people on the plane, cause you’re, you’re on there for five or six hours during your flight, and did a lot of writing on the plane too.

**Sabreena Delhon:** So great news if you’re an aspiring MP and also an aspiring author! But otherwise…

Think back to your last long trip and the journey itself. You’re tired. You feel gross. And then there’s the jet lag…

Picture that, but twice a week.

This schedule varies depending on your role. If an MP only has one role in Parliament, they are called a backbench MP or backbencher. And their travel routine is largely going between Ottawa and their riding.

But some MPs are also cabinet ministers, or parliamentary secretaries. We’ll break down what they do next episode. But for now, know that they have additional duties that can up their travel…and work hours.

For example: here’s Matt DeCourcey describing a typical Friday when he was the MP for Fredericton.

**Matt DeCourcey…** it was routine for me to get home Friday around seven, eight o’clock like through my time in office, because I eventually ended up being a parliamentary secretary, had to stick around Friday mornings, then I’d race to fly from Ottawa to Toronto, Toronto to Fredericton, get in my car, and I’d go right to my folks’ place and kind of debrief the week with them, around the kitchen table. Right. That, uh, that was always the way that I got reconnected to my community because my mother would have lots to share about what was going on in the local community.

*[sounds of a community barbecue]*
Sabreena Delhon: Speaking of connecting with community, that’s how MPs spend their weekends. A typical Saturday can be packed full of local events. If you’ve met your MP, I’m guessing you met at a local barbecue, street fair, charity event, business opening…

MPs also use the weekends to meet with local organizations and hear their constituents’ concerns.

[sounds of a ticking clock, whistling kettle and alarm clock]

[music]

And then, it’s Monday again. And they’re back on the plane to Ottawa.

…I feel tired just recapping all of that.

[somber music]

Sabreena Delhon: Now, stop me if you’ve heard this one before…everything changed once the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Some of the MPs we spoke to had their time in office dominated by COVID. They were learning how things worked as everything was changing around them.

James Cumming was elected in Edmonton Centre in 2019. He only had a few months of pre-pandemic MP life before it all went online.

James Cumming:…very little of my time in the House of Commons was in the House of Commons. You know, initially after being elected, we went to, you know, full sittings for a few months and then COVID hit.

So it became the culture of Zoom. And, uh, so you, you really didn’t have that interaction.

Um, but, um, you know, it would’ve been good to have a better sense of how to build those relationships and particularly with opposition members and I, and I started to build some of them while I sat on committees and when I was vice chair to try and, you know, um, get some things done. Uh, but it was predominantly a zoom environment.

Sabreena Delhon: How do MPs get things done? A key way is by collaborating. And with COVID, James and many others missed out on building those crucial relationships face to face.

They missed out on connecting with constituents, too.
**James Cumming:** That was incredibly difficult, because you weren’t doing events. Constituents aren’t going to sign up to a Zoom call. They’ll come out to a community event that’s something that, you know, they enjoy to do, bring their families out and you’d be able to see them and, and do things with them and meet their entire family.

But the impression is that everybody thinks everybody’s on social media and they’re not, you know, that they’re, they’re spending most of their time, uh, with their families and doing what they want to do.

Whereas those interactions you would have, whether they be with, um, community leagues or at business events, you know, that’s where you get to hear a lot more and have a lot more interactions. So it was hard to stay in touch with them. You would certainly stay in touch with them if they had a specific issue that you’re working with. And then you’d have that one on one, but the majority of your constituents are not engaged with government every day. You know, they’re not, they’re living their lives and trying to get things done. Um, they don’t wake up in the morning saying, “You know, I better call James Cumming today because he’s gonna make the world move.”

Those events pre-COVID were, uh, very important. And, um, and it’s good to see that we’re back to some semblance of that again, because I think people are starting to get their lives back.

*music*

**Sabreena Delhon:** We are just at the start of our journey with these dozen MPs but already so much has happened. Let’s take stock.

MP life is non-stop. There’s tons of travel. There’s ten or twelve hour days. A lot to read. So much pressure. National, sometimes global stakes. And not enough training.

And for some, once they had a handle on it, it didn’t matter because a global pandemic made them have to learn a whole new way to do the job.

On top of all that…many MPs struggled with belonging. A persistent feeling that the House of Commons wasn’t meant for them. Here’s Celina. You may remember her uncle describing her audacity…

**Celina Caesar-Chavannes:** …and he looks at…this little Black girl from Grenada in her leather and her stilettos…

**Sabreena Delhon:** After her swearing in ceremony, Celina’s first few weeks on Parliament Hill were tough.
Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I walked through this space and didn't see anything that represented our contribution as Black communities to the country, you know, no physical representation that we had ever been there or made any political, social, economic, contribution to the development of this land. And that for me was very stark. I mean, the concrete structure itself is very cold and uninviting, but to not see yourself, to not see any representation of who you are, knowing that you've been here for over 400 years...not to see nothing was almost intentional. And so I internalized that right from the beginning.

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: While adjusting to this new home, new lifestyle, new responsibilities, there was also a sense of being an outsider.

Celina was the only Black woman there.

Being an “only” at your workplace – at such a big and crucial workplace – can be incredibly lonely.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: And in fact, I often joke about the fact that when I see Kim Campbell's picture, because she's, she's the only person that kind of represented part of my intersecting identities...

Sabreena Delhon: Kim Campbell was Canada’s first and only woman Prime Minister.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I'd walk by the picture and be like, Hey Kim, how's it going? Are you hanging okay? I kind of joke about it, but I really took that in. I really took in the intentionality around the omission of us.

Sabreena Delhon: Chances are if you didn’t want to run for office before you started listening you probably still don’t. Especially if your community is underrepresented in politics already. It’s understandable to ask: why would someone do this?

Romeo Saganash: I knew a bit about the culture already before I got there...

Sabreena Delhon: That’s Romeo Saganash. He represented the riding of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou in northern Quebec.

Romeo Saganash: But, um, one of the things I was adamant about, and this came from a very kind and generous wisdom and advice from my late mom, was that, well, you’re going there, but you need to focus on what you want to do. What do you want to achieve?
She understood that it was an important platform for anybody, as a matter of fact. It's an important platform because you have access to media, you're a public figure from there on – not that I wasn't before that. She advised me to use that platform well. For the better of not only my constituents, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but also, uh, for the better of Canada.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Romeo is Cree, and represented a huge number of Indigenous constituents. Part of being true to his mom's advice was speaking Cree in the House.

**Romeo Saganash:** Upon that advice, one of the first things I did when I, uh, on the first day of Parliament, was to walk into the house, I laid my computer and iPhone on, on my desk, did not take a seat right away, but I walked over to the Clerk's table, which is right in front of the Speaker’s chair.

And I asked the Clerk of the House whether or not I could ask my questions and do my speeches in Cree. We all knew what the answer was.

**Sabreena Delhon:** This was back in 2011 when the House of Commons only offered live interpretation in Canada’s two official languages. So basically, the answer was a flat no.

**Romeo Saganash:** She informed me, uh, by saying Romeo you're jurist. You know that the two official languages of this place are French and English.

I said, sure, I understand that. But, I mean, here’s a language that has been spoken for more than 7,000 years. And I can't even speak it in this place? I thought it was called a house, uh, of people, of the people of Canada, *[laughs]*, am I not part of that? Anyway, that was the initial discussion, but I had proposed over the years, different mechanisms, different avenues and ideas to allow that including for the Clerk in the House of Commons to ask for a legal, constitutional opinion on whether or not I had the right to speak my language in that place.

So that journey alone took almost eight years to finally arrive at a solution. And it's interesting because one of the things we found out through the committee that studied the possibility of this happening, PROC, which is the main committee of the House Procedures and House Affairs – we found out through that process that the Bureau of Interpretation of the House of Commons has a bank of over 225 indigenous interpreters in over 25 languages. So everything was already there. It was just a matter of accepting and how we can do it at that time. So now it's possible.

**Sabreena Delhon:** It took eight years of work for MPs to be able to use these languages in the House, some of the oldest languages spoken on this land.

Romeo can hear the legacy of this change today when he visits the House of Commons.
Romeo Saganash: I was at the House of Commons just on Wednesday. I went to the Question Period and Lori Idlout, who’s the MP for Nunavut, did her Member’s Statement, entirely in Inuktitut. That was a proud moment – a powerful and proud moment.

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: Are MPs being set up to succeed?

In our survey, a few MPs told us that they liked their onboarding. That there was joy in meeting new colleagues and getting advice from former parliamentarians. There was awe in taking in their new surroundings. A sense of accomplishment in finally achieving their dream.

But so many found their first days to be overwhelming and isolating.

From what we’ve heard, the average welcome to Parliament leaves a lot to be desired.

What would Parliament look like if our MPs were well supported and prepared to hit the ground running? How many more would stay in politics and how much more would get done?

And what if all MPs felt welcomed as they are?

We’ll explore this question more in our next episode, when we do a deep dive on the workplace culture of Parliament Hill.

Kennedy Stewart: The House of Commons is, like, the worst place I’ve ever worked.

Lisa Raitt: I still think it’s the best place I ever worked at.

Is it respectful? Is it safe? …And for who?

[THEME MUSIC]

Credits:

Big thanks to all the former MPs and thank you for listening to Humans of the House.

This podcast is produced by Media Girlfriends for the Samara Centre for Democracy.

I’m Sabreena Delhon, executive director of the Samara Centre.

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If you, like us, care about the human side of politics, help spread the word about our show. Rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, you’d be surprised how much it helps. Tell your friends. And if you teach, share this show with your class.

Thank you for listening.