Humans of the House Episode 4: Unwritten Rules
Episode Transcript

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** I’m Sabreena Delhon. You’re listening to Humans of the House.

In this podcast, we pull back the curtain on what it’s like to be a Member of Parliament in Canada. We get unique access to 12 former MPs. Their stories tell us a lot about how our federal government really works.

I want you to take a listen to Celina Caesar-Chavannes. When I spoke with her, she told me what it was like to campaign as a Liberal candidate in her Ontario riding of Whitby.

**Celina Caesar-Chavannes:** For decades, it had been like this, this Conservative stronghold. So I knew that I needed to get Conservatives, Liberals, NDPs. I needed to just, I needed to get people to vote for me. I did not paint them blue or red or whatever. I showed up at the door and they would, you know, open it and say, and I'd say, hi, I'm Celina, I'm the Liberal candidate. And, and they would, if they were Liberal, very easy, check. “Oh, thank God. It's good, so good to see you.” It was a great conversation.

Others were very ambiguous and would be like, “Oh, you know, I'm so glad you're at my door.” And they would start to talk about policy. But the Conservative ones would be like, “You know, I don't like the liberal policy on X, Y, or Z.” And sometimes I'd be at the door and say, yeah, I don’t like that policy either. And then their eyes would open up wide and be like, “What do you mean, aren't you supposed to be selling this stuff?” I said, no, I'm not supposed to be selling anything. I'm supposed to make sure that you know that you could trust me. I want you to know that if there’s something that I don't like, that you possibly do like, that I'm voting for it in the best interest of all of us, or that you like that I don't like, that we could have this conversation about it. And I could have that same conversation when I get to Ottawa.

And I was as authentic as possible at the door. And people saw that when I went to their house, when I went to events, when I was like in a pie eating contest, they thought that I would be this…most of them said when I left, “Politics is gonna change you Celina. You’re not gonna come out the same way that you came in.” And I just said, like, watch me.
[theme music plays, then ends]

**Sabreena Delhon:** “Politics is going to change you.” Sit with that for a second.

When you think of “politics,” are you picturing an arena where people are authentic? Where they can stand up for themselves and the people they’re in Parliament to represent? Without performing?

In our first episode we asked people on the streets of Toronto if they would run for office. Nine out of ten said no. And a lot of them echoed this belief that Celina’s former constituents had: that politics corrupts good, honest people.

- **Speaker 1:** It seems like you wanna go in there making a change, and then you get there and you realize you can’t.
- **Speaker 2:** They tell you nice things but when they go in, they sing a different song.
- **Speaker 3:** People just say things and promise things just to get elected and then they never fulfill these promises, so it’s just very corrupt.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** Now, there’s a lot going on there. But you can totally see where our passers-by are coming from. It’s always been hard not to be disenchanted when, say, someone you voted for breaks a campaign promise. Or when their public statements and voting records just don’t match up.

What we know so far from speaking to our former MPs is that so many of them came to Ottawa on a mission for change.

- **Adam Vaughan:** And I said, you know what, I’ll run for you on one condition: that housing is the centrepiece of the next government, and that you create a new national housing strategy and that you let me help write that.

- **Celina Caesar-Chavannes:** My expectation getting into politics was that I was going to advocate for a national brain strategy.

- **James Cumming:** My belief was that what Edmonton Centre needed was strong advocacy for a more robust economy with more employment opportunities, because a lot of that will fuel some of the social programs that we definitely need to try and support people.
Sabreena Delhon: But at the end of the day an MP has responsibilities to different groups. They have to balance what constituents need with their own values, and their political parties.

So what happens when all these priorities clash?

This episode we’re asking: who is an MP’s real boss?

[music ends]

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: …my name is Robert-Falcon Ouellette. I am not in a political party, but I was a Liberal and I represented Winnipeg Centre from 2015 to 2019.

Sabreena Delhon: During this time, Robert was one of the MPs most likely to vote differently from his party colleagues.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Well, the very first time I voted against the party, uh, was actually extremely difficult. Because in Canadian politics, apparently you don't do this. This is a very conformist type of political system, uh, with a hierarchy.

Sabreena Delhon: Even the biggest dissenters in Parliament vote along party lines for the vast majority of votes. In his first two years, Robert voted with the Liberals 91% of the time.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I stood up, I remember it was the euthanasia bill, and it's, and I still believe I was right on that.

Sabreena Delhon: The government calls this medical assistance in dying, or MAID.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I think the Canadian government has made a terrible decision and I don't think they followed through on what they're supposed to be doing in supporting people with mental health challenges.

And people are making decisions on euthanasia because they are in poverty.

And, uh, you know, you stand up in the House and when you vote against the government, the opposition cheers.

[rhythmic music]

And it's kind of like a knife in your heart because you're supposed to be fighting with and working with your colleagues to, you know, advance the causes. You're supposed to believe in the same stuff yet you're on the opposite side. After, you know, you do that over and over again, you kind of get used to it.
Sabreena Delhon: Robert got used to it. But how did his party react?

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: There is actually a punishment that goes on within the political parties. I know when I was on the finance committee, I voted differently a few times. And I was punished. I was not allowed to speak in the House for about eight months. I could not get speaking time from the government.

I had to physically go ask a speaker to be able to give a speech at the end of the night on a subject before debate was closed and we had this tug of war. I was not permitted to travel. I was not permitted to do other things. It was all behind closed doors, you know, very gentlemanly and ladylike. Uh...

Sabreena Delhon: So it wasn't, it wasn't presented as a reprimand. These are just things that followed...

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Oh, no, it's just like, the finance committee would travel somewhere. I'm not scheduled to travel. Ah, okay. Uh, lovely!

Sabreena Delhon: So how would that affect your, your sense of self, uh, and your identity and how you are feeling in this space?

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Uh, for myself, I, I feel very good about it, 'cause I know at the end of the day I can look myself in the mirror and say I stood up, uh, for the people of my riding and I was their voice in Ottawa. And it's not that I was standing up to be oppositional, to be oppositional. It's because the people in my riding had come to see me and I had used to do, uh, town halls, um, monthly, and meet and greets and talk to them, and I was, you know, talking to them constantly, not just a few people that are my supporters, but people who are not my supporters, trying to get a sense of what people want on a different policy and saying, you know what? This is not how people in my riding would vote.

[lively music]

Sabreena Delhon: At this time the Liberals were in government with a majority. And they weren't the only party sending the message to fall in line. Kennedy Stewart was an NDP MP for Burnaby South.

Kennedy Stewart: I was kind of labeled as an independent thinker right through my nomination and my election experience. And so the unwritten rules is if, if you wanna get on the front bench, you have to say yes, you know, you have to kind of follow what the leader wants all the time. Especially when the party's going through so much turmoil.
with, with leadership changes and stuff, if you’re independently minded or venturesome, that can affect your advancement within the party, um, and within the party structure.

Uh, I realized I didn’t really care about that so much. I was okay being a, you know, I was on the third bench, my, my entire time which was fine with me because still I got to do interesting things. And I could interact a lot more with members from other parties.

Most of the hostility towards me was within my own party. I think the big split came on the, on the Kinder Morgan pipeline where I, I suspect really that, um, you know, the executive of the party really wanted that pipeline to go forward.

**Sabreena Delhon:** The Kinder Morgan pipeline might be better known to you today as the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion. It’s set to run through Kennedy’s old riding in Burnaby. If you’ve heard of people saying, “the Liberal government bought a pipeline,” this is the one they’re talking about.

**Kennedy Stewart:** My constituents didn’t want it, the Indigenous peoples of British Columbia didn’t want it. So standing up against that was really kind of the final straw for them.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Meaning the NDP.

**Kennedy Stewart:** That was kind of like okay, this guy’s…you know [laughs]. We wanna get elected, so he’ll have a seat and we’ll have a vote, but we’re not going to give him any kind of ability to do larger things within the party.

**Sabreena Delhon:** While he was still an MP, Kennedy joined protests against the pipeline and was even arrested.

**Kennedy Stewart:** Defying a court injunction and being arrested while I’m standing with my constituents was a pretty memorable moment.

**Sabreena Delhon:** It’s not every day you would see your Member of Parliament being arrested. And by this point in 2018, he had already announced his plan to step down, with a year still to go before the next general election.

**Kennedy Stewart:** I don’t want to make it sound like sour grapes, but it was pretty clear I’d hit my ceiling in that organization.

In the end I said, you know, I’ve tried this out. I’ve moved as far as I can within my party. So I’ll run for mayor of Vancouver.
**Sabreena Delhon:** Which he won. He served as Mayor of Vancouver from 2018 to 2021.

**Kennedy Stewart:** [laughs] So, you know, I do think though, parties really control really all political life in Ottawa. They want to control all aspects of what you do. And I can understand it in some ways, uh, votes are important, especially say you're in a minority situation, which I never experienced, but, uh, you can imagine if important policies actually hinge on your individual vote, then the pressure would be even more, even greater.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** For these "rogue" MPs, straying from what their party wanted came with a clear cost. So they had to weigh the consequences of prioritizing their values and sense of self.

But looking back, Robert-Falcon Ouellette has no regrets.

[music ends]

**Robert-Falcon Ouellette:** …if I was telling my younger self, what would I tell him? Uh, and I think, do you want to be that guy that just goes along and tries to play the game to advance their own career? Or do you wanna stand up for things which are important to you?

So why not focus on the things that are really important to you and make the changes that you see around you. And force those who are in positions of authority to make those changes for you, and help them make those changes, never accept and be able to look yourself in the mirror at the end of the day, and know that you, uh, were successful.

[thoughtful music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** These stories are far from isolated. The unspoken rules of party loyalty are something MPs have to learn early on.

Peter Kent was a veteran journalist before politics. He had covered Parliament Hill, so he knew more about party politics than some of his peers. But even he struggled to learn the ropes.

**Peter Kent:** Politics is a team sport, and it's hard for a new Member of Parliament, I think, again, in any party who arrives with dreams of changing the country, changing the policy makeup of the country, to realize that it's a team sport and that there's going to be quite a bit of policy that you don't necessarily agree entirely with.
**Sabreena Delhon:** Back when he was a journalist, there were times when Peter's point of view naturally shaped his reporting.

**Peter Kent:** Objectivity is almost impossible to achieve absolutely because we're all human after all. And some reports do end up having a certain colour to them, that it's not absolutely flat line objective.

But in politics, it's quite a different story. You tow the party line. Again, you can, in a variety of ways, defend a position that might be slightly different or seriously different, but once the decision is taken, it's a member's duty to make that policy theirs.

You can say what you want in caucus or in cabinet...

**Sabreena Delhon:** It's kind of like saying, keep it in the family, don't air your dirty laundry.

**Peter Kent:** Once a decision is taken, that's your position too. And I think a lot of politicians when they first experience that with, not necessarily the most important issue of the day, but an issue that they don't agree with, they have to learn that scar tissue develops on the tongue.

And in expressing oneself to the media, one also has to realize that you can't be a maverick. You can't go out there and say, well, I thought the Prime Minister did a good job here, but I don't agree with what he wants to do in this case. Um, so one has to learn a certain amount of restraint.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Now funny enough, Peter was no stranger to voting against his party. He broke party ranks almost as much as Robert-Falcon Ouellette between 2015 and 2017. But it seems his style was to pick his battles and keep some disagreements private.

Why is a united front so important here, anyway? Why make so many compromises?

Maybe by this point, you're even thinking: why have parties in the first place?

Parties serve a purpose. Here’s just a few reasons why:

Number one: parties are helpful for voters. Even if you don’t recognize the names on your ballot, you probably know what their parties stand for. That makes it easier to figure out who to vote for.

['ding’ sound]
Reason number two: parties help candidates get elected. Think about the last election: the lawn signs, the pamphlets in your door. That all costs money. A political party that is firmly behind their candidate writes those cheques.

[cash register cha-ching sound]

An independent candidate just doesn't have that kind of backing and that can be a huge disadvantage.

Reason three: parties set the agenda. They’re an organizing force. Parties come up with policy ideas. And a party that’s united can turn these ideas into something tangible much more easily. You know the saying, “there’s strength in numbers.”

[ambiance of a crowded convention room]

And lastly, number four: being an independent can be isolating.

[sound of crickets chirping]

Independents don’t have a party apparatus to guide them and give them opportunities, like committee appointments.

So parties do have a purpose…but they’re also cause for division…

SOUND CLIP: in the House of Commons, MPs yell and heckle. The Speaker calls “Order! Order!”

The past few groups of MPs we’ve spoken to at the Samara Centre have talked a lot about polarization. We’ve seen the shifts in our society at large reflected on Parliament Hill.

Partisanship is a consistent theme. Civility in the House of Commons has been on the decline. Manners are out the window, heckling during Question Period is meaner and more common. And MPs are working together less often across party lines.

A little bit of partisanship keeps everyone on their toes. But what we’re seeing now is hyper-partisanship.

In our survey of former MPs we asked what skills were most valuable on the job.

What skill was under-appreciated?

[sounds of typing]
Voice 1: Independence…
Voice 2: Independent thought is greatly undervalued…
Voice 3: Independence and brutal honesty.

Sabreena Delhon: And what was prized?

Voice 1: Partisanship is overvalued.
Voice 2: …being a partisan fighter is greatly overvalued.
Voice 4: Overvalued is blind loyalty to a party or leader.

Sabreena Delhon: And who enforces this loyalty?

Voice 4: Way too much control by the boys and girls in the leader’s office who really do not respect MPs. Same with the staff around ministers.

Sabreena Delhon: It’s coming from a party leader’s office. Whether it’s the leader, or their unelected staff.

[tense music]

Over the last half-decade, we’ve really seen the power of party leadership grow, relative to the rest of the party.

With more power comes more retribution for MPs who step out of line. If you’re not with us, you’re against us.

So the hyper-partisanship is coming from every direction. Outside-in, and top-down.

And hyper-partisanship is a threat to the essence of good government. MPs are supposed to hold the government accountable. They’re supposed to come together to make progress.

[pause]

It’s often the cross-party friendship you wouldn’t expect that gets things done.

Yes, it is time for a segment on friendship. Bet you didn’t see that coming!

[lively music]

Sabreena Delhon: If you think you’ve got a long commute, Robert-Falcon Ouellette made a regular 2100 kilometre trek to get to work on Parliament Hill.
Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I remember I used to get on the, uh, plane ride from Winnipeg to Ottawa weekly and I'd sit next to often with Candice Bergen, who is the Conservative leader now but she was the house leader at the time.

Sabreena Delhon: You might remember Candice Bergen as interim leader of the Conservative Party. If you only watched Question Period you might assume she’d want nothing to do with any member of the Liberal Party.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: And we would talk actually, uh, quite often, and I'd listen to her and talk about our lives. You know what we're doing. And even though she's on the opposition, we'd have this opportunity of like just, you know, building up a bit of a personal relationship.

Sabreena Delhon: So while this budding friendship was growing, Robert was working on a problem in the House of Commons.

Previously we heard about how MPs could not speak in Indigenous languages during most parliamentary proceedings.

In 2017, Robert-Falcon Ouellette wanted to make a speech in Cree.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: And so I stand up in the house to give this, uh, speech and it's the first time I think anyone had ever done an entire speech in the, you know, Cree language. Usually you'd say a few words and then you'd move on. But I decided to do it entirely in the Cree language.

**SOUND CLIP: Robert giving a speech in Cree**

And I had supplied the interpretative services with a copy of what I was gonna say in English and in French. And, they said, well, we can't do it. 'Cause we can't assure that what you're saying is actually what's being said, so we can't translate. I said, well, you know what, I'm still gonna say it. I'm still gonna get up. Very nervous, uh, cause I'm obviously contravening the rules here. And so I stand up, give the speech...

You know, this is one of the original languages of Canada, and yet, no one was able to understand what was being said and why it was important.

The next couple days later, I rose and said, I had not been understood. I believe my parliamentary rights were violated.
I worked with a, a law professor from Western University and we wrote a long point of privilege and submitted it to the Speaker.

And so it was submitted to this, this kind of committee that looks at rules. And then they started about 18 months of review of this question. Actually it was one of the most amazing experiences I had because I saw people who are not Indigenous fight very hard to change the rules and to get a good ruling.

Now, the rules can give an advantage to the government or to the opposition, if they're changed. And people are very nervous about changing those roles, 'cause it changes an ecosystem. It changes a whole organization, an organism, which is the House of Commons.

Sabreena Delhon: But Robert-Falcon Ouellette strongly believed in changing the ecosystem to include Indigenous languages.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: It came up for a vote and it needs unanimous consent.

So the NDP said, yes, the Greens, I've talked to Elizabeth, she says, yes. The Liberals are gonna support it. And then it comes up for the Conservatives to say yes or no. And Candice Bergen, you know, stands up and, you know, like was she gonna say yes or no, and she says yes. And afterwards she comes to see me and says, Robert, just because it was you, I've said yes.

[somber music]

So relationship is very, very important and it doesn't always have to be hyperpartisan, sometimes you can actually build a fun relationship with people, uh, that can actually get things done for people. And it's not, uh, you know, I know a lot of, lot of, there's not a lot of MPs using the interpretive services and Indigenous languages all the time in the house, but now it's there and it can be used.

This is not an institution, which is only for the colonizers, the settlers, but this is actually an institution which speaks to each and every one of us. And we all have a place in that institution that, that place, it's the people's place.

[music fades out]

MIDROLL AD:

HANNAH SUNG: This is a midroll ad. So you might be expecting us to sell you a mattress or some accounting software.
Well, listen. We wish you good sleep and fiscal organization – but no. We’re not going to sell you anything. This minute is for us. You and me.

I’m Hannah, one of the producers of this show, and we want to tell you why we made this podcast.

See, the Samara Centre for Democracy is on a mission to secure a resilient democracy with an engaged public and responsive institutions.

What does that mean? Well the Samara Centre wants to make it easier for you to talk about Canada’s democracy and participate in it.

So…talk to us. Tell us why you’re listening to this show. It’s simple to do. I know you’ve got your phone in your hand right now.

Post about Humans of the House and tag us on Instagram and Twitter: @samaracentre. That’s @ T-H-E-S-A-M-A-R-A-C-E-N-T-R-E.

We know why we’re doing this work. Tell us why you’re listening! Hashtag Humans of the House.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** Ideas can become real, tangible achievements when MPs connect across all parties. How do we bottle that energy? How do we make collaboration the norm?

**Adam Vaughan:** It's a shame because I think that if Canadians could see us working across party lines, they would also be less partisan and less judgemental.

**Sabreena Delhon:** This is Adam Vaughan, former MP for Spadina-Fort York in Toronto.

**Adam Vaughan:** The regional differences of the country require you to see the country through other people's eyes continuously in Parliament, and the real skill sets that make Parliament work are the ability to empathize with one another and to reimagine a position you may have been elected on and to modify it.

There's no real space where that's nurtured on Parliament Hill, in fact, party leadership and hyper-partisan politicians drum it out of you.

When MPs go off to a conference together and hang out together and talk together, they get to see a part of each other's existence, which they don't get to see normally sitting 40 feet away across the aisle in the House of Commons. And when you start to understand the community that someone comes from, or the, the life story, that's brought somebody to Parliament, you start to understand them as people, and you start to work with them.
as community, and you start to get more things done because you're not arguing, you're having a conversation.

And the space for conversations was, was, really hard to find in Parliament, and COVID made it even more impossible. It was one of the reasons I left was I, I, I just didn't see a way of that ever coming back and, and I didn't see myself comfortable in a take no prisoners, beat the opposition, constant campaign footing kind of scenario.

It just was taking too much outta me psychologically let alone emotionally. Um, and it was hurting my politics and I, I, I didn't like it anymore. And that's one of the reasons I left.

Sabreena Delhon: MPs are telling us the key to getting things done is informal time together. It's when they can relate to each other, which makes sense – it's kind of the whole job to communicate and connect. So how can the system foster more collaboration and less competition?

According to Romeo Saganash, there's one place in the House of Commons that can be a bit of a haven for coming together across party lines.

Romeo Saganash: The camaraderie in committee is nice.

Committees in the House of Commons play an important role in the development of the legislation in this country.

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: So, what's a committee? Let's have our researcher Vijai and producer Elena fill us in.

Elena: Okay. Vijai, what is a committee?

Vijai: I'm glad you asked. A parliamentary committee is a group of MPs, backbench MPs, so no cabinet ministers. They include MPs from across different parties.

Elena: Hmm.

Vijai: They get together, they look at a particular area of policy, or they might look at House business, like the procedure of the House itself.

Elena: Okay, gotcha.
Vijai: There’s a committee for almost everything. Health, defence, justice, human rights. For example, Romeo sat on a whole bunch of committees:

Romeo Saganash: I did natural resources, foreign affairs, Indigenous affairs. I sat on that special committee on languages, Indigenous languages…

Elena: Okay. Tell me more about what these committees actually do.

Vijai: A committee might study one piece of proposed legislation and recommend some changes. That's often part of the process of a bill becoming law. A bill can get referred to a committee for further study.

Elena: Okay.

Vijai: Or they might conduct a study on an issue to see what could be done to address it. So with a few exceptions, committees are trying to hold government to account and just make it run better.

Elena: Okay. This is a glorified study group, basically. [laughs]

Vijai: That's pretty accurate actually. Yeah.

Elena: It's a bunch of nerds trying to make government better. Ideally.

Vijai: Yeah, it's super nerdy, but it's also super fun. People make friends across party lines. It's kind of nice.

Elena: That sounds really nice. What is it about committees that makes it that kind of place?

Vijai: Well MPs work closely with other MPs from different parties in a really small group. It's a lot easier to get to know 10 people than it is to get to know 300. Lots of MPs we've spoken to in our research really enjoy this aspect of committee work. Here's some of the things that they said in our written survey:

[typing sounds]

Voice 5: I enjoyed the committee work.

Voice 2: I also enjoyed committee work, both as a chair and opposition member

Voice 4: Committee work, as well as the priorities of my community, helped me focus on specific topics.
**Voice 3:** It was the only place I could work on real issues and have real debates with very little, but not no, partisanship.

**Vijai:** However, MPs have told us about the hyper-partisanship that’s creeping into all areas of Parliament and committees are no exception. They’ve reported more party control over committees and more pushing of party agendas.

**Elena:** Right. Is there anything that can help take the hyper-partisanship out of committees?

**Vijai:** Well, I mean, we spoke to some MPs who had recommendations. Scott Brison was the longest-serving MP that we spoke to. He had a number of cabinet positions and in between, he worked on a bunch of different committees.

Here’s what he has to say.

**Scott Brison:** I would make committees totally independent and I would also increase committee budgets, commensurate with the kind of budgets we see in U.S. congressional committees, including the opposition parties and the governing parties having their independent research budgets for that committee for them.

[music]

So instead of drawing from the Liberal or Conservative research bureaus, or from minister’s offices and PMO and everything like that, you actually have your own people advising you. So that committees actually play a challenge function to the executive branch government, prime minister’s office and, and cabinet.

**Vijai:** So in a nutshell, give committees more resources and separate them from party power.

**Elena:** Right, because if they’re more separate, they can better do that job of holding the government to account.

**Vijai:** Yeah, pretty much. So Elena, that’s the gist of what a committee is. You’re all caught up.

**Elena:** Thank you for this primer, Vijai.

[music ends]

**Sabreena Delhon:** Thanks team. And thanks for introducing Scott Brison, because his experience of crossing the floor – moving from being a Conservative to a member of the Liberal
Party – is all about striking a balance between party, personal values and serving his constituency.

[music]

Scott Brison: So I actually grew up in the PC Party. Uh, ended up, uh, becoming president of the Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative Youth Association while I was a university student at Dalhousie in Halifax.

I ran for the leadership of that party 2002-2003. And, uh, didn't win that, but had a good, you know, I think a decent campaign, and was very much committed to the continued rebuilding of that party.

Sabreena Delhon: In 2003 the PC Party led by Peter McKay, and the Canadian Alliance, another right-leaning party led by Stephen Harper, were in the midst of a merger. A bid to create a party that leaned even further right than the existing PC Party. It would be called the Conservative Party of Canada.

Scott Brison: I was in a position where I could understand intellectually why conservative voters in one tent made some sense politically and strategically, if the end result was a party that was centrist and looked a lot more like the Progressive Conservative Party than the old Reform Party.

My personal concerns with that direction, the question is whether or not a, an enfeebled Progressive Conservative Party, that did not endorse that merger would be able to survive. Hence my reluctant, and tepid support for ultimately that merger at that time.

But then the second question is whether or not I would feel comfortable as an individual. One of them being the issue of same-sex marriage, which was becoming more of an issue in Canadian politics at that time. I was an openly gay Member of Parliament having come out publicly in 2002. And for me, these issues were pretty significant from a principal perspective.

Sabreena Delhon: Around that time Scott went to dinner with Stephen Harper, the leader of the Canadian Alliance Party, to discuss his potential role in what would be the new Conservative Party of Canada.

Scott Brison: He was transparent with me in telling me that, first of all, that he very much wanted me to continue to play a role as a Member of Parliament and as part of the merged party.
He was committed to representing that voice within the new Conservative Party and that, I would be, you know, he would accept me and I would play a role, but that I had to accept that the party, he was leading, both in opposition and government would take positions on issues like this that might be different from mine.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Stephen Harper was alluding to the fact that when it came to social issues like marriage equality, Scott’s convictions and those of his party would be at odds. So he did what we all do when faced with big decisions. He called a friend.

**Scott Brison:** I was having a dinner with a friend of mine, Bruce Anderson, and basically, Bruce made the case that the Liberal Party when it came to the economy, was fiscally responsible at that time, tackling the deficit and putting Canada in structural surpluses and making our economy more competitive with tax changes and other sort of pro-growth, pro business, market-based economic initiatives that I largely agreed with.

But on social issues, you would find a more comfortable home in the Liberal Party. And I, I hadn't really thought about it until that point. And that led to a series of conversations, where ultimately I joined the Liberal Party in December of 2003.

**Sabreena Delhon:** In the House of Commons what Scott Brison did is called “crossing the floor.” Switching “political teams” – leaving the Conservative Party to join his new Liberal MP colleagues on the other side of the House. Crossing the floor can be sensational and dramatic. Or it can be done without a lot of fanfare. Either way it comes with controversy and risk.

Scott was voted in as a Progressive Conservative, in a historically Conservative riding. What would those voters, his constituents think?

**Scott Brison:** If I had gone along and continued to be part of a new Conservative Party, that was a new party, and so either way, I'd be asking my constituents to vote for me under a new party label, and to tell them that the new Conservative Party was basically similar to the old Progressive Conservative Party would've been a lie, because it wasn't.

It was a significant decision, but it was one that I communicated to my constituents authentically. And one that ultimately they endorsed not just in 2004, but in five elections, the last of which in 2015, I was given by them, 71% of the vote. And Kings—Hants is a riding that, uh, for a very, very long time was considered a bedrock Conservative riding, in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia, in a part of the province that used to be called the Bible Belt of Nova Scotia.

You know, when I joined the Liberals, it was not exactly a safe bet. I was jumping into a pool with no idea whether there was gonna be enough water in it. But, but I followed my
values and, uh, believed in what I was doing and ultimately was trusted by my constituents in the process.

I’m not a terribly partisan person, and I believe you shouldn't check your brain or your values at the door when you join a political party. Uh, you, you are there to, uh, bring to the table your views, your values, your um, beliefs and ideas, and fight for them within the party. And you have to determine whether or not a political party at a given time is the best place for you, uh, to make the maximum difference for Canadians. I'm entirely comfortable with the decision I made, and I'm comfortable with the course of history following it.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** When we’re talking about who an MP’s real boss is, there’s one last player we can’t forget: ourselves.

But that gets into another tricky balance for MPs. No riding is a monolith. And then you’ve got the needs of an entire country to think about, too.

This was a big adjustment for MPs who came from municipal or local politics, like Adam Vaughan.

**Adam Vaughan:** I represented a downtown riding and in particular, um, a couple of communities that had, um, had shouldered, um, gun violence. Um, and, and I was a fairly outspoken critic of lax Canadian gun policy and a very strong advocate of, of in particular a ban on handguns.

The day I got sworn in, there were four attack ads that went out across the country, um, about how I was coming to Ottawa to take people's guns away.

I'd never really been targeted personally and never really been targeted by people I'd never met and had never really felt the full weight of the federal process sort of land on me…and all of a sudden, two days in, I was being threatened by, everybody and anything, on social media, telephone calls, emails into the office. And I hadn't even said anything yet. And, but they'd gone through my past. And they'd found a few things that said on council, and a few positions I’d advocated for in public forums. And all of a sudden I was, I was, um, targeted by the gun lobby and through the Conservative attack ads. And that was a real wake up moment to say, okay, I get it. We’re now in the big leagues. If they can take me down at the knees, um, they will, they will take the party down.
And so I’d never been the subject of attack ads at City Hall. And you suddenly realize that, that you hide inside a party and behind a leader for good reason, personally you don’t get targeted. And you don’t get the threats.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon**: Adam was elected in 2014 in a by-election. That’s when a riding has to fill a vacancy, for example if the MP resigns or dies. Right after Adam won the by-election, a general election was called in 2015.

**Adam Vaughan**: The general election was a really interesting time because in the, in the by-election, they kinda let me frame the issue and create a campaign, which is very similar to the City Hall.

In the first general election, you suddenly have to fall into line and you’ve got the red tie on and the signs are up and your party’s been chosen. Um, and, and all of a sudden, they come out with a position on an issue that you hadn’t been talked to about, and wasn’t the position which you’d have arrived at, or the, the way of framing the issue.

And that became really weird to have your voice taken from you. And it also highlighted that you had a voice, and that you were gonna have to use it much more judiciously, if you’re gonna break party ranks, when to talk about it and how to talk about it. And also how to prepare your party to allow you to talk about things that you weren’t gonna back down on.

**Sabreena Delhon**: Sounds a lot like the calculus Peter Kent told us about earlier.

In this case, Adam saw too much at stake to back down.

**Adam Vaughan**: I’d been to more funerals in my riding for kids that have been shot then I’d been to funerals in my own family and, when you’re with a family in a hospital or with them in their front room, and there’s still windows broken and blood on the floor, it impacts you and, and I was not gonna be untrue to those experiences.

And I certainly wasn’t gonna betray the trust the families had put in me. And I certainly wasn’t gonna see more children in my riding disappear, with what I thought and believe still to be a preventable reality. And yet you get to a caucus and all of a sudden some rural members of the party are saying, hey, we don’t wanna talk about guns.

I’m not gonna stop talking about guns. And you have to find a way to talk about it in a way that doesn’t threaten their electoral chances, ’cause you need to build a party to win, to get the housing done.
**Sabreena Delhon**: A national housing strategy was his number one priority.

**Adam Vaughan**: But you also can't be untrue to yourself and, and you have to negotiate within caucus and then stick to a common language so that things emerge, and that's where you'll see me talk much more about handguns than guns, because long guns and rifles are needed in rural Canada.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon**: So that was Adam's strategy. Not to stop talking about guns, but to adapt his message.

**Adam Vaughan**: Um, and you have to articulate in a way that, that speaks to Torontonians, doesn't offend the rest of the country, that builds a coalition and a coherent policy structure, and can be branded as, as Liberal, and, and don't undermine the leader when he speaks as a candidate from a podium, regardless of whether he's downtown Toronto or, or in Iqaluit or in rural Saskatchewan.

And so the matrix of figuring all of that out, is, is something you're kinda left to your own to figure out, and those who are good at it succeed, and those who, who can't quite find a way to do it either become iconoclastic sort of, you know, lone wolves or, or sort of contrarians in Parliament are in the, the party, or else they become very isolated in the party.

And they're not very happy and, and they, don't…not only do they not find their voice, they lose their voice.

[music ends, new music begins]

**Sabreena Delhon**: It seems, no matter how you slice it, MPs are always doing one hard balancing act.

If you don't please your party? You're a lone wolf. You lose out on valuable relationships. You lose your power. You hurt your career.

If you put your constituents on the back burner? You came here to serve them, right? So get ready to be called out or worse voted out.

And if you don't stick to your own values? It might get hard to sleep at night.
It's up to every MP to navigate this in their own way. We heard some of their different approaches.

But you know what would make this easier? Make it less of a trap, and politics more productive?

Ditch the toxic hyper-partisanship.

[music ends, new music begins]

Who is an MP’s real boss? More and more, it’s looking like party leaders and their direct, unelected staff are running the show behind the scenes.

For democracy to work in Canada, every MP needs to be empowered to say what they think, even if their party disagrees. And they should be encouraged to work together.

So, great…but how?

Let’s give the last word to MPs themselves, starting with Cheryl Hardcastle. She was the NDP MP for Windsor–Tecumseh in southern Ontario. She advocates for changing our electoral system.

Cheryl Hardcastle: …you have to look at this quite literally that, that there is only a first place prize, right. This winner-take-all.

Sabreena Delhon: Cheryl suggests that another electoral system, like proportional representation, would spread out the balance of power. That way parties might be forced to work together in coalitions.

[music ends]

Cheryl Hardcastle: I see things that happen in other countries. I’m not saying other countries are perfect, but I see that coalitions are formed based on issues. And that maybe what it does is it creates that space that I think that we crave and that we need so badly here in Canada right now, as our system has evolved to this really hyper, hyper, system where you shut each other down.

Sabreena Delhon: And Adam Vaughan thinks adding more ridings might shift who an MP’s boss really is.

Adam Vaughan: The seat count in the House hasn't kept up with population growth and we’re deathly afraid of doing that.
The ridings are gonna break down to smaller little groups, and you’re gonna have to contest ridings with people you know. And you behave differently in front of people you know, and you can’t rely on the popularity of the leader of the party to carry you across the finish line. Individuals with credentials and standing and, and roots in their communities are gonna do much better.

And then those voices will be in Parliament and that independence will be, will be supported because, you know, you’re gonna get reelected because you’re, you are standing with your neighbors on an issue and they’ll stand with you if you show some courage.

[music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** So…there are plenty of ideas out there. They might seem like big shifts. But it’s important to remember: as old as it is, Parliament isn’t stagnant. It evolves – just like our democracy itself.

We’ve been talking about the job of an MP for this whole series and today in particular, we’re asking you to imagine how hard it would be to do your job if you had many different bosses.

What do you think? Who should be an MP’s real boss? Think about it. Let us know. We’re on Twitter and Instagram @thesamaracentre

On the next episode of Humans of the House, you’ll hear all about what it takes to make positive change when you’re a Member of Parliament.

[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.

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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.