Humans of the House Episode 5:
I’m Going to Say the F Word

Episode Transcript

Sabreena Delhon: The most momentous elections are always about change. Try and think of any campaign slogan you’ve ever heard in your life. It's never like: “Elect me to keep things exactly the same!”

[plucky music]

Sabreena Delhon: The promise of political change, change that will make a real difference in people’s lives, plays a huge role in inspiring us to take action.

[ominous music]

SOUND CLIPS:

News anchor, ABC News: According to a new United Nations report, the devastating impacts of human-caused climate change are happening now…

News anchor, Global News: Canadians are making their voices heard in a powerful display of unity against police brutality and systemic racism.


News anchor, CNN: Stay at home, that is the order tonight as the coronavirus pandemic spreads…


[horns honking]

Protestors protesting against Justin Trudeau chant “Lock him up! Lock him up!”

Sabreena Delhon: Those headlines and sounds are from ABC News, Global News, CNN, Bloomberg and the Ottawa Citizen.
As you can hear, Canadians are passionate about many issues – from housing, to climate, to the cost of living. These are just some examples of what could make someone want to vote, or contact their political representative or even volunteer for a party in their riding.

But when the promise of change doesn’t translate into something meaningful, it can make us feel disempowered and excluded from the political process entirely. And once that connection is broken, it’s tough to repair.


[Protestors protesting against Justin Trudeau chant “Lock him up! Lock him up!”]
[music fades out]

People need to feel that their actions matter and will produce tangible results. Standing in line for the polls, calling your representative, talking politics with your neighbours and volunteering for candidates – this is the practice of democracy and it takes work.

That work feels worthwhile when citizens see it making a difference – in policies, in legislation and in who represents them. When we don’t see a difference it can feel like it’s not worth it. And this feeling is a real threat to democracy.

**SOUND CLIP:**

*News anchor, PBS NewsHour: …and democracy advocates admit freedoms are eroding, and authoritarianism is rising.*

**Sabreena Delhon:** That’s from the PBS NewsHour, and it can feel really frustrating when you want to see change after an election…but it doesn’t actually happen. Well…it might surprise you to know that many MPs feel the same way…

I’m Sabreena Delhon. Welcome to Humans of the House.

*[theme music begins and ends]*

*[music]*

At the Samara Centre for Democracy, we’ve been doing exit interviews with former MPs for over a decade. In this show we hear from a dozen former MPs who served between 2015 and 2021.

And in today’s episode, we’re asking them: how hard is it, really, for an MP to make change?
When MPs are elected, we say that they come “into power” – but MPs often find themselves struggling to make their promised changes happen. A lesson that many MPs learn the hard way is that getting things done in Parliament can be…complicated.

[music ends]

We are going to hear in this episode about the different ways MPs have worked to make meaningful change while in Parliament. We will hear about wins, but also the barriers and the strategies MPs use to navigate the structure of Canadian government.

One tactic we heard a lot about? [light chuckle] Well, say what you will about politicians being all talk, but it does pay if an MP is a powerful public speaker.

**SOUND CLIP:** Romeo Saganash speaks in the House of Commons.

**Romeo Saganash:** Mr. Speaker when the Prime Minister insists that this pipeline expansion will be done no matter what…

**Sabreena Delhon:** In 2018, former NDP MP Romeo Saganash gave a speech aimed squarely at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

**Romeo Saganash:** He had been elected in 2015 with many promises to Indigenous peoples. Which never materialized. And at that point, I was exasperated, listening to him and his ministers saying one thing and doing the opposite. And, one morning, my partner, who’s now the Member of Parliament for Winnipeg Centre, and I were walking towards the House.

And I said to her, I think I'm gonna say the f-word today in the House.

**Sabreena Delhon:** In case you didn’t catch that, Romeo told his partner, “I think I’m gonna say the f-word.”

**Romeo Saganash:** Cause I'm, I'm pretty fed up. And she said, okay, have a good day! [laughs]

**Sabreena Delhon:** That morning, his party, the NDP, let him know he would get speaking time in the House.

**Romeo Saganash:** They informed me, at around 10 o’clock, 10:30, that I had a question. And usually our team or my office assistants would draft a question that I
would modify. But nobody had prepared anything for me that day. So I said, it's alright, I'll, I'll write my own question today.

**SOUND CLIP:** Romeo Saganash speaks in the House of Commons.

**Romeo Saganash:** Mr. Speaker when the Prime Minister insists that this pipeline expansion will be done no matter what, and his minister adds that Canada will not be able to accommodate all Indigenous concerns, what that means is that they have decided to wilfully violate their constitutional duties and obligations. Mr. Minister, Mr. Speaker, sounds like a most important relationship, doesn’t it?

Why doesn’t the Prime Minister just say the truth and tell the Indigenous peoples that he doesn’t give a f*** [bleeped] about Indigenous rights?

[commotion, voices, clapping]

**Sabreena Delhon:** This speech had exactly the effect you’d think. It was all over the news. And Romeo wants to make something clear –

**Romeo Saganash:** I really, really, put much effort in trying to find another word that day, but I realized today there was no other word.

So there we go.

That's how that, that moment came to be. It was out of exasperation. I was totally fed up.

**SOUND CLIP:** in the House of Commons

**Speaker, Hon. Geoff Regan:** The honourable member for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou is an experienced member and knows that that is unparliamentary language and I’d ask him to withdraw the word and apologize.

**Romeo Saganash:** Monsieur Président, c’est tellement insultant ce qui ce passe maintenant. Ça me met hors de moi. Alors, je m’en excuse, je retire le mot, et vraiment désolé.

[TRANSLATION: Mr. Speaker, it’s really insulting what is happening now. It makes me angry. So I apologize, I withdraw the word, and I’m very sorry.]

**Sabreena Delhon:** You just heard Romeo say in French that he apologizes and withdraws the word.
So, it's not just people at protests who get angry. Or people who write letters to their MPs. MPs themselves get fed up, too.

In theory our elected representatives have so many more tools at their fingertips than the average citizen. Isn't that the point?

Well, it's no secret that striving for change and delivering on it are two very different things.

[music]

Let's go to former Liberal MP Robert-Falcon Ouellette of Winnipeg Centre, who talked to us about what was happening with Bill S-3 during the summer of 2016. This Bill was meant to address the sex-based discrimination within the Indian Act.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: So the Indigenous, the status of Indigenous women is a longstanding issue in Canadian politics.

Sabreena Delhon: Let's just make sure we're all on the same page about the word “status.” According to Indigenous Services Canada, “Indian status is the legal standing of a person who is registered under the Indian Act.” A registered person can access certain benefits, rights and programs. This is a very simple explanation of something complex, so we've provided some links with background on the Indian Act in our show notes. Please check that out.

What's key for Robert is that once someone loses their status, they can't pass it down to their children. This means entitlements and links to community are lost.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Indigenous women had lost their status when marrying a non-Indigenous man, and they would be removed from the reserves, kicked off the reserves and lose all benefits. And a lot of times access to their family and their culture. Not only for themselves, but also for their children. And even if they broke up or divorced that gentleman, they would still be unable to regain status as would their children.

Sabreena Delhon: BILL S-3 was meant to address sexist discrimination in the Indian Act by making sure Indigenous women could pass down status to their children just like Indigenous men. Robert didn't think the Bill went far enough.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: The government once again, just wanted to move the goalpost, just a tiny little bit, a few inches, and not really deal with the discrimination against women and their descendants.

And I said, no. And I'm not going to, you know, give my “yea” to this discrimination going on because we're supposed to be the party that votes for the Charter. We're supposed to
be the party that stands up for equality, gender equality. We are supposed to have gender analysis that goes on, and here we are discriminating against Indigenous women.

And I get told by ministers, oh, uh, you know what? You have to wait your time. Then you can deal with this appropriately.

**Sabreena Delhon:** “Wait your time.” Usually, this means waiting to gain leverage…build power…strengthen relationships. At this point, Robert had been an MP for less than a year.

**Robert-Falcon Ouellette:** And I was like, I am not here to wait my time. I am here for people. So, you know, we started this long, uh, campaign, and actually the day the government voted to continue the discrimination, uh, of Bill S-3, it was on June 21st, which was National Indigenous People's Day, uh, incredibly enough. And, you know, I could not vote for it. I couldn't even stomach the thought of even being in Parliament on that day. So I actually went back to the riding where we have a, you know, 30,000 Indigenous people in Winnipeg Centre, and to spend time with them and, uh, kind of rethink.

And so it passes, it goes to the Senate, and they decided to delay it. They were gonna review it. And so now the fun begins over the course of the summer. Talked to the Parliamentary Budget Office, because the current government officials in their talking points said, we don't know how much this would cost.

Well, why not? Let's do a costing. So I asked the PBO, can you get a costing analysis done?

**Sabreena Delhon:** “PBO” stands for Parliamentary Budget Officer, which provides independent number crunching and analysis about how much something will cost the government.

**Robert-Falcon Ouellette:** No one's requested this, but we can see what, how much it would cost to extend status to all the descendants of all Indigenous women who have been discriminated against.

**Sabreena Delhon:** How much would it cost to give back status, retroactively, to Indigenous women and their descendants? Everything has a cost associated, and Parliament needs to know that dollar amount. So, Robert aligned with a Senator, Marilou McPhedran, to request this cost analysis.

The House of Commons and the Senate have to pass a bill for it to become law. So it’s smart to try to work together.
Robert-Falcon Ouellette: The government said it's gonna cost billions and billions. It wasn't gonna cost that.

Sabreena Delhon: The analysis actually said it would cost $407 million dollars.

Robert-Falcon Ouellette: And then the government, you know, looking at it and they're humming and hawing over it. And, you know, I think they amended it a couple more times, and back into committee. And then the Senate said they're still not going to approve it...

Sabreena Delhon: Ultimately, the version that passed was one that Robert was happy with. And he credits two Senators in particular.

[ulifting music]


These really great allies, strong women, one who's Indigenous, one who is not Indigenous, but nonetheless, they kept up this good fight. And, they were able to ensure that, this was, this was, you know, we ended discrimination and we didn't sit around, wait our turn for another generation.

[music ends]

[creeping string music]

Sabreena Delhon: Robert talks about amending, hemming and hawing, back and forth to committees – change on the Hill doesn't usually occur in a straight line. Back and forth wrangling, dodging certain barriers and criticisms, while threading together different interests to assemble the needed support – these are themes that crop up over and over again in our conversations with former MPs. All this takes time!

Here's Matt DeCourcey of Fredericton.

Matt DeCourcey: Very rarely are there home runs in politics, right? Like often it's, you know, you're trying to hit a single, you get a runner on first, try and bunt them over to second, steal third...like these are the sorts of, this is the way things get moved along. It's a big machinery you've got, you've got, you've got politics and you've got, you know, your inter-party dynamics. You've got the cross partisan dynamics. You've got the bureaucracy, which is massive and moves at its own pace with its own intention. If you can move things down the line a little bit, like we should celebrate that! Right?
[music ends]

**Sabreena Delhon:** Matt had this realization early – based on advice he got to make relationships. He thought:

**Matt DeCourcey:** Okay, I've gotta go and demonstrate to people in Ottawa that I can be trusted, that I have credibility in my community and that I can help advance the agenda of the government.

And I say that because I ran on a platform that I believed in, right? I believed in helping move some of these things forward.

Now, I think, you know, that we may have been naive to think we could accomplish everything in there without the landmines that appear in the way, without all the different interests that you have to balance.

But my goal was really, can I go there, you know, gain relationships where people who have more influence and more decision making authority than me will listen to me, will, will take what I have to offer on behalf of my community to heart. And can I, you know, help my community by moving up stature within, within, within, the circles of the party.

**Sabreena Delhon:** So Matt went into the job understanding that as a new MP he would have to build up influence and authority.

*[up-tempo music]*

Part of the work of representing his constituents would lie in building relationships and demonstrating that he could advance the agenda of his party. Those relationships, that value to his caucus and committees, those were the levers he could eventually pull to create change for his community.

You might assume that as soon as a Member of Parliament steps into the House of Commons, they have all the mechanisms needed to deliver on their platform. But as a rookie backbench MP, Matt had to work to develop networks and connections with more powerful colleagues in the House. Making change meant building up his stature within the party – it meant paying close attention to power dynamics.

When MPs can figure out a way to mobilize their relationships with their colleagues, draw on their knowledge of Parliamentary bureaucracy and link up with public sentiment then they can make a real, tangible impact. And that was an incredibly rewarding experience for many of the MPs we spoke to.
[music fades]

When I asked Lisa Raitt, what was enjoyable, or fun, about the job, she said this:

Lisa Raitt: Fun. The fun is different. Uh, satisfying would be the word I would use more so than anything else. And satisfying for me was making sure that the DOT-111 oil tankers that exploded and killed 47 people in Lac-Mégantic will never, ever be used again on a North American railroad. Period, full stop.

SOUND CLIP: a jingle announces the beginning of a Global News evening news show.

News Anchor: Good evening, and thanks for joining us. It was such an inferno it caused so much agony in one Quebec town, that nothing can ever undo the tragedy of the train disaster in Lac-Mégantic. Finally, though, there are criminal charges…

[sombre music]

Sabreena Delhon: Lisa was the Minister of Transport in 2013 when, as you can hear in this report from Global News, safety failures led to a runaway train that exploded and destroyed a Quebec town. This type of tank car was banned from carrying crude oil and phased out altogether.

Lisa Raitt: That is a remarkable feat that we were able to pull that off and I give full credit to the, the mayor of Lac-Mégantic, Colette Roy-Laroche, and I give full credit to the then-Secretary of Transport in the US who listened to these two crazy Canadian women that he needed to make the change in the United-States as well as in Canada. For me, that was very satisfying, very gratifying.

[upbeat music]

Sabreena Delhon: Creating change, making an impact – it can be incredibly satisfying, as Lisa said. Sure, there are many different opinions on what kind of change we need in Canadian society. But like I said, you rarely hear a politician campaigning like, “I won't do anything differently,” or “I'll just keep on keepin' on.”

And our MPs tell us – making change is what they set out to do. So how does it feel when you actually have a win? Here’s Celina Caesar-Chavannes, former MP for Whitby, Ontario.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I would say the biggest one was in the 2017 budget. I asked Jane Philpott, what, who was Minister of Health at the time, what do you need? To get mental health in the budget. And earlier in 2016, I had a, a what's classically termed
as a nervous breakdown. My mental health was at its worst and it was really important for me to, if I couldn't get a national brain strategy, to at least get something related to mental health.

And she said, we need three billion dollars to get that. And I was just like, three billion dollars is such a, like, it's not a bold number. Again, I'm going over this bold transformative government. It's not even a bold number! I said, let's go for five, five billion, and make sure everybody has access, especially those who need it the most, right?

The people who don't have the access that we think access means. And so I got up in caucus, others got up in caucus and told our stories, and there was five billion dollars, in the 2017 budget, it’s amazing.

[bright string music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** That is amazing. Because the budget spells out what the government will do. The government’s budget is a financial plan, telling us how the government intends to spend our tax dollars. And a federal budget comes down every year as a reflection of what the government’s priorities are.

But sometimes it takes many years just to plant a seed.

More on that, next.

**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:** We started today’s episode with Romeo Saganash dropping an f-bomb in the House of Commons. He was deeply frustrated. But...don’t think that he doesn’t have patience. Before he was an MP, he –

**Romeo Saganash:** Worked internationally for my people at the United Nations to negotiate the UN Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There are very few people on this planet that can say, I was there for the 23 years that negotiations lasted. I can say that.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Romeo went to negotiate every summer for 23 years. And by 2007, the United Nations finally had a Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or UNDRIP, a document of human rights. That year, 143 countries voted in favour. Four countries voted against it...including Canada. So Romeo’s work wasn’t done.

After becoming an MP, Romeo put forward a bill in 2016 to ensure Canada’s laws would comply with UNDRIP.

This finally came to fruition, through a different bill, in 2021.

Romeo was fighting for the recognition of Indigenous rights for decades.

Remember his ability to give a memorable speech? Let’s go back to the House of Commons here:

**SOUND CLIP:** Romeo speaks in the House.

**Romeo Saganash:** Let me tell you a little story, Mr. Speaker, about a little boy named Jonnish, who was sent to residential school in 1954. He was 5 years old. Never came back. Apparently died the first year he arrived in residential school. His mom, Mr. Speaker, his mom never knew until after 2 years, of his death. His mom, my mom, for 40 years, never knew where Jonnish was buried. For 40 years, Mr. Speaker. And it’s only by coincidence one day that one of my sisters happened to be in the area, and someone told her, “I know where your little brother is buried.” So after 40 years, my sister filmed the site where he was buried, brought the film back to my mom to show her. Can you imagine…
[applause]

Sabreena Delhon: Romeo is visibly emotional here and his colleagues are clapping to support him.

Romeo Saganash: What I told in Parliament was that I've seen my mom cry many, many times in my life, never the way she cried that day.

That's closure, that's closure.

SOUND CLIP: speech continues

Romeo Saganash: That's what we call closure. That's how, closest she could get to final closure for her son…

Where is the Canada we used to know, Mr. Speaker? Where is it? The one that has a history of upholding high standards of humans rights and social democratic values in this country? Where is it?

[applause, colleagues call “Bravo!”]

Sabreena Delhon: Remember what I said earlier, about how complicated change can be with power dynamics in play?

Back to UNDRIP and Romeo's bill on making Canadian law comply with it –

Romeo Saganash: While I was fighting for my legislation on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Bill C-262, in the Senate, it had passed the Parliament, third reading. So it went to the Senate, and five unelected, unaccountable Conservative senators had decided to block it in the Senate.

I don't know how many times I met with those five. But at one point I understood that these people did not want to be convinced.

So it was a difficult time because she was, my mom was dying and, and I knew she was gonna leave pretty soon, and my bill was dying on the other hand, in the Senate. And I asked her, I asked her if she would like to, us, to bring back the remains of Jonnish…and she didn't even hesitate in her answer. She said, no, it's not necessary. I'll see him again.

So the bill died, one week after she passed. [pause] But now we have Bill C-15. So, which is, which is good. That was the, that was the attempt. That was the objective.
**Sabreena Delhon:** Bill C-15 is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, and it was passed in 2021.

**Romeo Saganash:** And I hope that from that basis, we can achieve this reconciliation that everybody talks about. And that's essentially what we do in this country. We talk about it, without doing very concrete stuff to, to make sure that we are able to reconcile our rights and our interests in this country.

*sombre music fades in and out*

**Sabreena Delhon:** Romeo can give a good speech, *and* he knows the tough work of making true legislative change.

*upbeat music*

Let's drill down to understand how MPs make the leap from talking to *doing*.

**Kennedy Stewart:** I had a great time working on bringing electronic petitions to the House of Commons.

**Sabreena Delhon:** NDP MP Kennedy Stewart set his sights on a small but concrete win.

**Kennedy Stewart:** What I was really looking for is something I, I could actually achieve.

So, I thought if I did any kind of grandiose democratic reform, it would never happen. So I took a, I thought of a small thing and thought, maybe I can make this work.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Petitions get presented and read out loud in the House of Commons. It's a pretty direct way to raise your concern about an issue to all MPs. But *before* Kennedy helped bring e-petitions to the House of Commons in 2015, every petition presented to the House...was on *paper*.

If the House was going to go digital with petitions, Kennedy would need the support of MPs who were *not* in his party.

**Kennedy Stewart:** And it allowed me to have a, kind of a genuine dialogue with many Conservatives who *[chuckles]* wouldn't talk to me about a whole bunch of issues. But when I said, look, this allows your constituents too, especially in northern or rural ridings where it's very hard to circulate paper petitions. And they thought, oh, this guy's being genuine. He’s presented very good information.
I, I went to Britain and I, and I talked to their, at that point, Conservative government about how electronic petitioning is working for them and came back with, with evidence and, and was able to present this to them and, and make my case.

There was a Harper majority still, but I, you know, and everybody said, well, you know, you'll never get a Private Member's Bill passed because, you know, the government will shut it down.

**Sabreena Delhon:** That's just the math, if every MP votes with their party. And by the way, a Private Member’s Bill is a bill proposed by a backbencher MP – anyone not in cabinet.

**Kennedy Stewart:** I ended up winning the, a vote, in the House of Commons [*laughing*] by, by two votes! I split off a number of Conservative MPs, who voted, along with my NDP and Liberal and Green, Bloc colleagues. And, ended up winning that vote in the House, which really kind of made me feel like my time in Ottawa was worthwhile, even though I, I didn't have one of the top jobs.

[music]

I think it was important to try to make some changes. [*chuckles*] And the clerks told me now that a third of the web traffic to our, the House of Commons website is e-petitioning now. So it's…

**Sabreena Delhon:** Amazing!

**Kennedy Stewart:** Yeah! Hundreds of thousands of people have, like, taken these things up and I think, well, that was worth it. You know, like to get somebody that had never been engaged before, who, like, starts an e-petition and then gets it read in Parliament, like that's, that's where you kind of start to rekindle the flame of, of, belief in democracy.

So that, that's why it was important to me, 'cause I thought it was worthwhile doing, but I also thought that I could win it. And I did. I'm really happy about that.

[music ends]

**Sabreena Delhon:** Hundreds of thousands of Canadians have started or signed petitions online, petitions that can be read out loud in Parliament. That's a very real change to the way we are doing things. It's a win-win-win.

But change doesn’t always work out as a win for everyone. There can be backlash.
Addressing inequity means acknowledging power and privilege.

In 2018, the Liberal government’s federal budget included nineteen million dollars for Black youth and mental health, over thirty million dollars for racialized newcomer women and other types of anti-racism funding.

Maxime Bernier was an MP for the Conservative party then. He critiqued the Liberal government, saying we should have a colour-blind society.

[music]

Celina Caesar-Chavannes pushed back.

**Celina Caesar-Chavannes:** I tweeted back at him and said something along the lines of “Be quiet and check your privilege.”

And what ended up happening was a lot of right-wing media picked up on it and started saying…basically they were saying that I was the most racist MP in Canada because I was calling things out. And then it was, you know, Celina sees racism everywhere.

And at that point, it was just so debilitating. Again, you're talking about years of having these little instances where there is this sense of un-belonging.

This happens. And for three weeks I am in the boiler. I am getting publicly, publicly just roasted. And then Adam Vaughan, who I considered, like the world's greatest political ally, sends out a tweet that says, here are the reasons why Celina’s right, and puts #HereForCelina. And Canadians, international media start picking up on this Here For Celina hashtag to support this Black woman who's being completely gaslit for talking about race and calling out racism at a federal level.

So #HereForCelina was bittersweet because while I was buoyed by that reality, that Canadians understood, the people internally, who didn't say anything for three weeks, all of a sudden were #HereforCelina-ing. And it dawned on me that it was very easy for them to stand with me when it was convenient and leave me when it was not convenient.

It was like the straw that broke the camel's back for me. Like it was at that point that I just decided, after #HereForCelina, that I wasn't running again, I wasn't gonna run Liberal, again.

**Sabreena Delhon:** In that moment, during that hashtag.
Celina Caesar-Chavannes: It was at, it was so at about six o'clock that night. I got a call from PMO saying that the Prime Minister wanted, oh, asking me first, is everything okay? Am I okay? And that the Prime Minister wanted to meet with me the next day. [chuckles] And I was like, y'all trippin. I was like, you know, I'll meet with him. But in my mind, I was like, this relationship is done.

Sabreena Delhon: PMO is the Prime Minister’s Office, and for Celina, this phone call was too little too late. She wasn't happy with the lack of support while she was being harassed online before the hashtag started trending. And this was years into an unsatisfying relationship between Celina and the Prime Minister, for whom she was the parliamentary secretary.

When she made the decision she would not run again as a Liberal, she didn’t tell the Prime Minister until a year later.

Sabreena Delhon: So tell me how you told the Prime Minister you were not going to run again.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: So I was in Whitby, I'm in the home that I'm currently in, just, just bought my home and, you know, feeling, for security reasons, 'cause I've had death threats and been sued and all kinds of stuff.

So I buy this home. It's really secluded. I'm feeling like my life is gonna finally get back together. I'm not gonna run again...for a number of reasons, but having a death threat against yourself and your children is reason enough for me.

I say, I'm not gonna run again. The PMO calls and says, oh, the Prime Minister would like to speak to you.

So I say, okay, fine. And that evening about nine o'clock or nine thirty, I get a call from the Prime Minister's switchboard. And he comes on and I'm like, Hey, you know, how's it going? And you know, a little bit of small talk and I say, I'm not, you know, running again.

Sabreena Delhon: Does it feel tense? Or is it, is there…

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: There was always tension, 'cause since, when I left as Parliamentary Secretary to International Development, again, all these positions that I left, as Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Parliamentary Secretary for International Development, all of them came with very valid reasons that I spoke to the Prime Minister about, all were related to the way I was treated.

And I left Parliamentary Secretary to International Development because the party didn't support me with Max, you left me out on a limb, and you have people calling me the
most racist MP in the country. And you don't say anything? Clearly, you're not on my team, so I'm not gonna be on yours.

So it was already tense. SNC is happening at the same time, Jody Wilson-Raybould is leaving, or has just stepped down that morning, or something’s happening...

**Sabreena Delhon:** Jody Wilson-Raybould was the first Indigenous Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada. She left the Liberal Party during a political scandal known as the SNC-Lavalin affair. At this time it’s 2019 and the Prime Minister’s actions were under scrutiny.

**Celina Caesar-Chavannes:** And he says, I can't have two powerful women of colour leave at the same time.

And then goes on about how much he helped me during the by-election. How his family has also had threats. And in my mind, I'm going, my family has threats, your family has threats, yes. But you have RCMP protecting you for the rest of your life. I don't. So these, these kinds of comparisons that you're making as a, as a white man named Trudeau to a Black woman named Celina, are ridiculous.

And I'm getting heated. Like I am, I'm walking through my house. And I'm saying, I hope you recognize what you're asking me to do. You're asking me to hold onto you. to support you. When I, I know that you don't recognize how this has impacted me.

The amount of times I had been disrespected in that place, and then to get this phone call – if we extrapolate this to a larger picture, this man holds the pen on policy that impacts 37 million people. If he could treat me, me, an elected official, the way he did for four years, that phone call was nothing, ‘cause we gave it for tat, we went round for round on that one. But for four years, what does it say about the people who don't have the privilege that I have? What does it say about our democracy? And I wish, I wish if you take nothing from this exit interview, that you take the fact that if you could treat someone, you could tokenize them for a year, you could exclude them, you could make them feel like they're worthless in your government. What does that say about how you treat people who don't have privilege that I have? Because they can never stand in their power, because they're poor, and they're vulnerable, and they're marginalized.

What does it say about how you treat them?

**Sabreena Delhon:** Over the course of four years, Celina, um, I'm thinking about the accumulation of disrespect you felt. Like, the extra emotional labor that's put upon the people who are the first and the only, as if they're supposed to do extra things to survive. Can you talk about that?
Celina Caesar-Chavannes: Well we have to do extra things to survive. And so yes, we have to navigate those systems, and yes, I had to ask and re-ask for repeals of mandatory minimums, and expungements of criminal records for people who have cannabis possessions instead of a pardon. But you hear these outrageous stories of why we can't do that. Like the system doesn't work by one person pushing. Right?

At some point you just say, you know what, I'm tired of beating my head against this wall.

Sabreena Delhon: Yeah.

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: I'm good. I'm out.

[soft, tense music]

Sabreena Delhon: Today, the government of Canada recognizes the systemic racism of the criminal justice system. The Liberal Party introduced a bill to repeal many mandatory minimum sentences, which disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous people. Celina had been pushing for repeals of mandatory minimums for people convicted of cannabis possession but those changes didn’t happen while she was there.

[music fades out]

She left the Liberal Party in 2019. The Liberal government introduced this bill in 2021.

Pushing for change can come at a high cost, as it did for Celina.

[thoughtful music]

The playing field isn’t even for all Members of Parliament. This came up a lot in our conversations.

Matt DeCourcey: You know, I said Sabreena, like, that, that place was built for people like me. Right? Like I, you know, I was a guy, I'm white. I was still young, but approaching middle age. Not a lawyer. So, you know…

Sabreena Delhon: [chuckles]

Matt DeCourcey: Like that, not, not exactly the same, not, you know, with the big gray beards and the gray hair. Didn't come from an elite family but came from a very comfortable middle class family, right? With all the support in the world, and had been exposed to politics and encouraged towards it. I had every advantage going into that
place. And I'm still proud of how I navigated it, but I know you're going to speak to a number of other colleagues who had vastly different experiences.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Matt wasn't the only person to point out their own privilege.

Privilege goes hand in hand with power, and power is often what we're grappling with when we talk about political change. Here's Kennedy Stewart again:

**Kennedy Stewart:** I'm kind of the walking embodiment of privilege. I'm a, you know, six foot, blue eyed, straight white guy, like, you know. And it took me a, really, it was not until I got to Ottawa that I realized how privileged I am. I know from my colleagues who, who have different characteristics or backgrounds, that life is more difficult for them in politics. And I think we've gotta change that.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Can you give an example, what's something you observed that really, really struck you?

**Kennedy Stewart:** Uh, I, the racism, I mean, especially towards my Indigenous colleagues. I had one colleague who was of Chinese ancestry and the racism was, among MPs or, or in the community, was constant. Uh, and I think that, uh, it was so disappointing and, and to have it, you know, MPs that are kind of powerful people in their own right, it didn't really phase people to kind of make these, make these kind of comments or, or remarks. And then, like I said, harassment towards women, you know, it's not, it's like the place isn't built for them. You know, it's not... It's, it's built for a certain, you know, if you're a, an established straight white guy who's a lawyer, that's for you.

That's what that's built for. But if you are, you know, if you're my friend like Romeo Saganash, who went to, his family went through residential schools and, you know, from Northern Quebec and you're Cree and you're coming down to voice your community's opinions, it's not really the place for you. And, uh, that's a shame and that's not how legislatures are really supposed to work, but unfortunately that's how many of them do work.

[tense music]

**Sabreena Delhon:** Change doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. It doesn't have to be about a winner and a loser. But when hard-won changes get made, it can come at a cost to the changemaker.

I'm going to go back to Celina for a moment but not to our interview. Instead I'm taking you back to September 20th, 2017, to the House of Commons. Celina gave a speech, about representation that went viral, making headlines around the world:
SOUND CLIP: Celina speaking in the House of Commons

Celina Caesar-Chavannes: This week I have my hair in braids, much like I’ve had for most of my childhood. However Mr. Speaker, it has come to my attention that there are young girls here in Canada and other parts of the world, who are removed from school, or shamed because of their hairstyle. Mr. Speaker, body shaming of any woman, in any form, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet, is wrong, irrespective of her hairstyle, the size of her thighs, the size of her hips, the size of her baby bump, the size of her breasts, or the size of the size of her lips, what makes us different makes us unique and beautiful. So Mr. Speaker, I will continue to rock these braids, for three reasons. Number one, because I’m sure you will agree, they look pretty dope!

[laughter]

Number two, in solidarity with women who have been shamed based on their appearance, and number three, and most importantly, in solidarity with young girls and women who look like me and those who don’t. I want them to know their braids, their dreadlocks, their super curly afro puffs, their weaves, their hijabs and their head scarves, and all other variety of hairstyles, belong in school, in the workplace, in the boardroom and yes, even here on Parliament Hill. Thank you.

[clapping]

[music]

Sabreena Delhon: Finding your authentic voice in the House of Commons is a win.

Today, we heard about lots of wins, changes big and small: banning DOT-111 oil tankers, repeals of mandatory minimums, removing sex-based discrimination in the Indian Act, implementing e-petitions, adopting UNDRIP as Canadian law.

It’s a privilege to make change. It can also be a burden.

So back to the question driving our episode: how hard is it, really, to make change as an MP? Well, as we’ve heard, it’s not easy but it is satisfying. It is life-changing. It is possible – with determination, collaboration and strategy, like making unexpected alliances within and beyond the House of Commons. One big takeaway from these conversations? You can’t make meaningful change alone.

[music fades out]
[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.

Executive producers of this podcast are Hannah Sung and Garvia Bailey.

Associate producer is Elena Hudgins Lyle.

Research is by Manager Dr. Beatrice Wayne and Coordinator Vijai Kumar at the Samara Centre.

And our sound engineer is Gabbie Clarke.

Theme music was composed by Projectwhatever.

A special thanks goes to the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, Charlie Feldman, Bill Young, Michael MacMillan, Ruth Ostrower, Jennifer Giambanco, Alex Mclsaac, Braelyn Guppy, and Nana aba Duncan.

We are also grateful for funding from Heritage Canada and Rosamond Ivey.

This episode included clips from ABC News, Global News, CNN, Bloomberg, The Ottawa Citizen and PBS NewsHour.

The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan registered charity. Our mission is to realize a resilient democracy with an engaged public and responsive institutions. To support our work visit samaracentre.ca and click “Donate.”

This podcast is part of the MP Exit Interview project. To learn more about this work and other research visit our website, and follow us on Twitter and Instagram @thesamaracentre.

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.