

Transcript

Episode 1: This Group Chat Will Surprise You



Group
Chat

[00:00:00] **Sabreena Delhon:** Hi, I'm Sabreena Delhon, CEO of the Samara Centre for Democracy. Welcome to our new podcast Group Chat, where we make sense of what's happening in our democracy with a few friends.

[00:00:17] I don't know about you, but group chats are one of the more positive ways technology is keeping me connected. And so I wanted to kick off the series with someone who I believe felt this in her bones.

[00:00:30] **Annamie Paul:** I think some of my friends said, okay, we need to figure out a way to, if we can't physically lay hands on her to help her through this, then we have to find a way to virtually lay hands on her.

[00:00:42] **Sabreena Delhon:** If you need a refresher, Annamie Paul was the leader of the Green Party of Canada for a year, starting in 2020. She faced a pandemic party and fighting, a revolt against her leadership, and she lost the race for Toronto Center in the 2021 federal election. She then resigned. Annamie hasn't done many interviews since then, but she sat down with me and she shared something I've always wondered about what helped her get through such a difficult year in the public eye.

[00:01:14] Turns out it was a group chat, a secret one, and one she didn't ask for, but that her friends knew she needed. Annamie's group chat is what inspired this new podcast. Who doesn't need a human space right now to talk about politics and democracy? Hi Annamie.

[00:01:37] **Annamie Paul:** Hi. How are you?

[00:01:40] **Sabreena Delhon:** I'm good. You know we talked about this before, but you are in a way, the inspiration behind this whole project that we're doing. We had a coffee together a while back and you told me about a group chat that you were a part of, more of a professional group chat. It really got me thinking about how support and community can come in surprising ways. It can be in the palm of your hand, it can be on the screen. And you know, we hear so much about how terrible technology is these days. But this kind of gave me pause when you told me about it, and it's really stuck in my head. Can you tell me a little about this group chat?

[00:02:16] **Annamie Paul:** Absolutely. It was in, I would say, 2020. The experience that I went through was unusual and

unprecedented in so many different ways. Unusual because my entire political career, the most prominent part of it, took place during the pandemic.



[00:02:37] And figuring out how to maintain human connection during the pandemic was incredibly difficult. It was also unusual and unprecedented because there hadn't been anyone like me in the sense of a Black woman who had been elected to lead a major party, and so that was unusual as well. So figuring out a way, not even so much me, I think some of my friends said, okay, we need to figure out a way to, if we can't physically lay hands on her, as we sometimes say in the church you talk about laying hands on people and without any involvement on my part. I just woke up one day and one of my friends said, we have done this thing for you. And they created and okay created, they agreed amongst themselves that we would convene online and they would just check in with me and, and see how I was doing. And some were close friends, some I really didn't know at all. But were trusted by others and they came from across the political spectrum, many different walks of lives. All they had in common was they wanted to see me succeed and they knew I was going to need emotional support to do that. It wasn't even so much about the strategic support and the political support, it was really about that kind of emotional and psychological support and it really, I, I can't, I, I will never forget or be able to thank those women enough for having reached out to me in that way.

[00:04:09] **Sabreena Delhon:** So it was all women?

[00:04:10] **Annamie Paul:** It was all women, all women across the political spectrum. Some were actively involved in politics. Some had been actively involved. Everyone understood politics. I think that was an important part of it. Even if they had moved on to other careers, they were people who had been deeply engaged in the political parties that they chose to support, whether as staffers, or elected members, or members of the executives of their parties at some point or another. All of that, I mean, that was important because it meant they really understood what it took and what it was taking from me to be involved in politics. And, but at the same time, all of that, all of the partisanship was very secondary and I didn't feel any of that when it came to, supporting me.

[00:05:03] None of them were members of the Green Party. Some of them may have ultimately joined to support me, but none of them had been members previous to my involvement with the party, which I think is really important, you know, and, and for them being partisan was less important in that context than being there to support me, even though as I said, some of them really did not know me at all before we started.

[00:05:32] And what was remarkable is that even though I did not know them, and you quickly become very reserved in politics, and you measure your words very carefully. It became almost immediately a place where I felt completely comfortable being very vulnerable, very transparent, honest, and that was why it worked so well.



[00:05:56] **Sabreena Delhon:** So my initial reaction when you described this to me was like an all woman cross partisan group, like I had no idea. I was shocked. And then I felt so naive, like, of course, right? Like of course to have this group rooting for you, supporting you, helping you in a private way like that is, is crucial. So did you get it right away? Like what was your initial reaction when they were like, this is happening to you. We're here.

[00:06:24] **Annamie Paul:** I don't even know if I had the time to process it that way. It just became, it was just a fact. It just became a fact, a very happy fact of life for me. As I said, that really, there was no set schedule. It was really as needed, and I never once asked for convening. There were just different members that I don't know if, I don't know if they saw the desperation or the quiet screams in my eyes while I was doing interviews or what not, and said, okay, we need a call. She clearly needs a call tonight. It's time.

[00:07:02] But I never instigated any of those calls. But you know, again, the comfort of knowing that it was there even at the time, so maybe we hadn't had a call for a few weeks or so was, was really tremendous. And as you said, you know, the, just the symbolism, just the power of that idea, the recognition that there are still people that are not willing to forfeit their underlying humanity. That there are just moments where you want to and need to and understand how important it is to be a human being reaching out to another human being, and that politics, et cetera. All these things are incredibly important but they're not worth sacrificing your humanity for. And I think more and more we see people that seem to have forgotten that. But at the same time, in a world that is increasingly polarized, it was just a really heartwarming thing for, for me to be a part of.

[00:08:11] **Sabreena Delhon:** Have you since come to learn about other equivalent chats like that? Like does everyone in politics have this group chat?

[00:08:17] **Annamie Paul:** You know, I have come to learn of some, I'm guessing there are, are many more than we think. Politics, even with a group like that, particularly at the upper levels is incredibly lonely and I think some, in some ways that is inevitable in the sense that to lead, even if you're an inclusive leader, still requires a certain amount of decision making and holding, you know, holding water for others that makes it, can make it lonely. Certainly, people turn to you as the final, final person to be accountable on behalf of a much larger group, so it can be lonely. There's a certain element of, of separation from, from others. It's incredibly intense. I don't think anyone can really understand how intense it is until they're in it. And so being in something so lonely and so intense, I think it's only natural for most humans to seek out or for others to seek to support those people.

[00:09:26] And certainly there are others that receive support, solidarity across party lines. Absolutely.

From people who are between elected officials even, definitely there are those. Is there as much as there should be? Probably not, but is there more than we think? I think absolutely there, there is, yeah.



[00:09:46] **Sabreena Delhon:** Hmm. And like trust is such a big component. So I'm just wondering, like what types of things came through the group chat? Like what kinds of things would get discussed or what would they like be saying to you? Or is it, you know, like was it, just give us like a sense if you can.

[00:10:05] **Annamie Paul:** Sure. Well, I would say that it would probably depend on where in the cycle of, of the group chats that we, you know, we were talking about. And I mean, I had, that was, you know, one of the most important. But certainly there were others. I mean, my family was a, my extended family, was a tremendous source of support as well. And again, mostly virtually, because this was during the pandemic. In terms of this group of women earlier on, it's mostly cheerleading. It's mostly, you know, just the general cheerleading and, and helping you keep your energy up. When things got tough for me the group was really certainly by the second quarter of, or third quarter, second quarter of 2021. They were mostly just telling me to hold on. You know, there were definitely moments when I thought I couldn't go any further, that I was just too exhausted, that those who were determined to see me out of politics had just their voices had become too loud that it was taking too great a toll on me and on my family. And they really came through encouraging me just to take it day by day and to hold on for one more day. And so the group evolved and, and their role evolved, but they were always what they needed to be at the moment I needed it.

[00:11:39] **Sabreena Delhon:** Is there a particular moment that comes to mind where you were really relying on this group?

[00:11:44] **Annamie Paul:** The election absolutely was, was one of those moments. It was very difficult. I knew we wouldn't do well. I knew that I wasn't going to win my seat from the very beginning. I knew we weren't going to be running candidates.

[00:12:04] **Sabreena Delhon:** Hey, Group Chat listeners. A few things to explain here. When Annamie says she wasn't going to win her seat, it's because she was the leader of the Green Party of Canada without a seat in the legislature. A rare experience for a party leader. And when she says she knew they weren't going to run candidates, she's referring to her party not having many in the 2021 federal election. Anonymous sources back then told the media that a lack of support and resources from party executives were partially to blame.

[00:12:38] **Annamie Paul:** I knew I didn't have and wouldn't be given the support I needed to succeed. And I knew that no one was gonna care about any of that, and that really I was going to be the face of all of these failures. And so waking

up every day knowing that you are really walking toward a catastrophe is a horrible feeling. I mean, it is just a terrible feeling. And so there were days and I thought that, I thought, I just can't do this anymore. I just simply can't do this anymore. And throughout the election, I mean, really I, as a group and certainly members of those groups, I was speaking with them every single day because every single day the open question was, am I going to finish this day as the leader of a party or am I going to resign? So that was a very active support. And again, very nonjudgmental support and it wasn't even strategic. I mean, no one was saying, okay, do this, here's what you need to say. They were just saying, just hold on. That it was really important that they felt it would be important for me to look back and know that I had made it through the election, whatever the outcome. And also for so many other people that I couldn't see, but would want to know that someone like me could at least make it to the debate stage, make it through, make it through the election. So they were very, very important to me during that sort of five, six week period of the election.

[00:14:15] **Sabreena Delhon:** I'm wondering about, you know, like you understand our intentions with this project and other similar work. Why does it matter to have conversations like this, that are about the humanity in politics and you know, what it means to just be a person navigating the political path? Why do casual conversations around that sort of thing matter?

[00:14:38] **Annamie Paul:** Well, it's, you know, anything that reminds us that people with different points of view, different ideologies, different political standpoints can still sit down and still recognize the humanity in the other person is incredibly important and has become increasingly important. I mean, certainly for me, I grew up at a time and was exposed to politics, not as a partisan but exposed to politics at a time when it was really understood that you could be a Liberal, a Conservative, an NDP or whatever, a communist, an animal rights party person, and strongly disagree with a member of the other party or the party's policy, another party's policies. But at the same time, you could be friends with someone from the other parties, that you could make all kinds of noise in the House of Commons or in the legislature during question period. But then you would sit down, in respect and in a spirit of wanting to work for Canadians in committees, and actually get work done with people that came from other parties.

[00:15:56] And the more that we move away from that, the less good our policies are going to be. The more we move away from that, the more polarized our society is going to be. So I think anything that helps us to remember that at the end of the day we are all humans, that to disagree with someone doesn't mean that you have to disassociate yourself with them altogether.

[00:16:22] I think that that's really, really important and I think if we leave too much space for the very cynical people who are involved, particularly in politics, then what we will end up with is a hyperpolarized society. And,

but to me what hyperpolarization means is that you have ceased to recognize the humanity in those that do not share your worldview. And that is not somewhere we want to end up as a country.



[00:16:55] **Sabreena Delhon:** Mm-hmm. Yeah.

[00:17:06] You know, you mentioned polarization and, during that election we were tracking abusive tweets received by candidates, and about 20% of what you received on Twitter, now X, was abusive and in, in terms of proportion, you had the second highest rate of abuse of any party leader. How did you handle this negativity and how do you look back on that now?

[00:17:31] **Annamie Paul:** I, at the time, I didn't read, I I was, again, I'm curmudgeony so I was a very late adopter of all of the social media. I only joined Twitter in, or let's, we'll just call it Twitter because again, I'm a curmudgeon. So I only joined Twitter in 2019, when I was selected to run for the Greens in Toronto Center. And only because of that.

[00:18:03] And then I kept the account and used it, of course, when I ran to become the leader and when I became the leader. And then as soon as I stepped down, I stopped. I mean, I think my last tweet is from November of 2021. And the same applies to Facebook and Instagram.

[00:18:24] These were all only extensions of my political life, not my social life. So for me, because of that, it wasn't very difficult. Well, it was much easier than for many others to just simply not read the online comments. I mean, I did not spend time reading those comments, generally speaking. And the couple of times that I did go down that rabbit hole, it was clear that it was going to be so toxic that I was just better off. That being said, even with that, it was, it was just an aura, and a weight around me at all times. It was very hard to understand 'cause I just simply didn't understand, you know, what was the origin, what was the source of the thing that I had done that would have unleashed such vitriol, I couldn't understand what it was. I was not someone then or now that believes in attacking people on social media, and I never did that. Not during and not after. So that was a weight and there were times that that weight felt quite unbearable. But again, the group chats came to the rescue and they were absolutely right. They were right that sitting here today with you, had I stepped down prior to the end of the election, as difficult as that period was, I would definitely have regretted it. So you know, that's it. I mean, I, that statistic that you give is always quite shocking to me. And it's a reminder of just how bad it got.

[00:19:59] But, yeah, I really don't think that there's anyone who is fully equipped. There's no way to fully equip yourself to be impermeable to all of that. You just bear as much of it as you can, and some people decide it's unbearable.



And honestly, I think it's one of the reasons that we have so many extraordinary civic-minded people who absolutely would never run anymore.

[00:20:27] I mean, it's just simply anathema to them to consider running. And that is a tragedy, both at a personal level, but also for all of us who don't get access to their, their collective wisdom.

[00:20:40] **Sabreena Delhon:** And that, that's just getting on the path in the first place. Headlines now all the time are about people leaving because of the toxicity, so people aren't even staying even if they're in it already.

[00:20:51] **Annamie Paul:** Exactly. No, it really, it's always been a, as much as many in politics love it. You know, I mean, I, I loved. I loved the work. When I had the chance just to do the work, and it's really why I entered politics. I mean, I was in my mid to late forties. I mean, it wasn't, you know, I hadn't been a political growing up. I had never joined a political party. I hadn't been, you know, one of those young staffers. You know, I really felt that you enter politics when you feel that you have something meaningful to contribute when you have acquired enough knowledge and experience for it to mean that you can sit at a committee table and offer some insights that can help craft better policy. And I loved doing that kind of work. And there's no doubt there are many others who love doing that kind of work. So you can enter politics and love it. It's not all horrible.

[00:21:50] But that being said, for so many politicians in a large country like ours, you're leaving your family and your friends for most of the week, you're traveling at all times of year. The days are very long. The demands are very intense. The pressure of the knowledge, especially these days, I mean really every day you're presented with a new set of issues and facts that you have to absorb and then communicate to others.

[00:22:16] So you add all the sacrifices that are inherent to politics, without the toxicity, and then you add on top of it that you're doing all this and no one cares. Very few people care. They, they are going to criticize you. It's not going to be enough. They are going to doubt your motives for doing it. You add all that together and really, and again, and relative to other things, it doesn't even pay that well.

[00:22:41] I know that depending on what you do, that is going to sound outlandish. But again, if you're in the senior part of your career, this is going to be a major pay cut for you. And so adding all of that, it's, it's just definitely not the package that it used to be. And we can see that, as you said, in people exiting and then also the difficulty in recruiting the caliber of candidate that parties used to be able to.

[00:23:09] **Sabreena Delhon:** So you're not currently in politics. You had a unique experience as a leader of a federal

party. You had a group chat saying, just, just one more day. One more day, get to election day. Take me to the moment when you decided that that political chapter was done for you.

[00:23:27] **Annamie Paul:** For me it was, I think that when I announced I was stepping down, I think, what I said, and certainly that was the reason. I mean, for me, I knew I was stepping down when, I think the day of the election or the day prior to the election, the council of the party had announced or sent out a notice to the whole party that they were going to be holding a leadership vote immediately, I mean, immediately after the election. Now we've had them, I mean, it's part of our constitution. It's something we've done several times prior, but it is never earlier than six months out or a year out. And, you know, it was just, I just thought, I can't finish this.

[00:24:14] I mean, if, instead of wishing me well, and wishing all of the candidates well who had worked so hard and invested so much time in running because it really takes so much, even when you know, your chances are slim, you still invest as much as someone who knows that they're going to win maybe more, and I thought if this is all that is ahead for me, more internal struggles, and more drama related to that, and if really they don't wish me well today, then for me it just wasn't worth it. You know? It wasn't worth it. I looked ahead and I thought, it's just going to be like this maybe forever, and it simply wasn't worth it. So that's when I decided that, for me it was the best decision, and it was very hard because, as I said, I loved the work and I had hoped to do it for at least several years, and I did not want to go, but I didn't see any kind of viable pathway forward.

[00:25:14] **Sabreena Delhon:** Well, let's go back to the group chat in that moment. How did they respond to you at that time? How did activity in that group kinda shift and change at this point?

[00:25:27] **Annamie Paul:** Well, I think that they, not I think, I know that they knew I had gone as far as I could go, and for them, as I said, it was important for them to help me see it through to the milestone. And the milestone in all of our minds was the French language and the English language leadership debates. And then, you know that at least I could prepare for that, at least was my opportunity to. Relatively directly speak to people in Canada who had only known me through all of the articles and the drama surrounding the party.

[00:26:06] And so that was the milestone, and they were very supportive. It was really always about supporting me, you know, if I had told them, look, I know we said one more day, but that was my last day. I know that they would have been there to support me then as well, which is wonderful. It's wonderful to know you have a nonjudgmental support that doesn't have any underlying agenda beyond the support.

[00:26:32] **Sabreena Delhon:** Hmm.



[00:26:33] **Annamie Paul:** Yeah.

[00:26:33] **Sabreena Delhon:** Did it kind of conclude? Or, you know, is it still kind of there?

[00:26:38] **Annamie Paul:** It's still there. It's still there. Yes. No, we've just become friends through that process. Those of us who weren't prior, you know, we don't have one person that we're concentrating all of our energy on the way that we initially were, but yes, no, it's definitely still there and ready to be deployed.

[00:27:02] **Sabreena Delhon:** Ready to be deployed. Annamie's lucky that group chat is still alive, but I wanted to know if there were other group chats that were bringing her that kind of support.

[00:27:12] **Annamie Paul:** I'm really fortunate to be part of the inaugural group of fellows of this global fellowship of Black women in executive leadership roles, and we come from everywhere. About a third of us are from Sub-Saharan Africa. A third are from North America and a third are from Latin America and the Caribbeans, so we're really from all over. And these are extraordinary women. And that has much to my surprise, because I really do not like communicating on WhatsApp and social media and whatnot. But much to my surprise, that has been a wonderful WhatsApp group to be a part of. And it's everything that you can imagine when you think of a group of Black women online, even though many of these women are CEOs and so forth. You know, there's laughter, there's tears, there's moments of frustration, you know, and we talk about politics. We talk about cooking, people send their outfits that they're gonna wear out to whatever gala that night. It has been a wonderful sisterhood. And, that has been a very unexpected one for me because again, I have been very resistant to that kind of thing in the past. But I think being with a group of women who come from very different places, but are like-minded in the understanding that we could all use support, every single one of us has really been fantastic. So, yeah.

[00:28:43] **Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah. So looking back a couple years out, would you make the same decision to enter political life?

[00:28:51] **Annamie Paul:** Yes. Yes. And you know, I definitely recognize that there are things that I could have done differently to prepare myself for some of it. Though, as I said, I don't think that any amount of preparation fully allows you to immunize yourself from the onslaught of pressure that you face as a politician, particularly a prominent politician. But you can still enter prepared. And I was prepared because I had been exposed, better prepared than most, but I don't think still particularly, because I had not really ever engaged with social media. I don't think that I fully understood how that is really its own ecosystem and it's one that never sleeps and never takes a rest, and is a self-reinforcing one.



[00:29:46] I think that also, again, these are just things that they really feel banal because again, it's not about the higher purpose of politics, but certainly for me, I think it was important, and particularly given the pandemic, the focus unfortunately, or fortunately, let's just say factually, needed to be on the internal politics of the the party, which never really, that was never really my focus. But yes, I mean, I think that it's important not to leave the arena simply to those that enter for cynical reasons, simply to those that have understood, as we all should understand, that it is a world in which you can cobble together a government without actually appealing to most people anymore, and that there are many votes to be had in pushing people apart and encouraging them to separate from each other.

[00:30:46] So if politics is left simply to that arena, then really it becomes just about power for power's sake. You know, it's easy for the loudest, most negative voices to own the conversation. But those moments, and those gestures of support at those unexpected moments are actually much brighter, the feeling lasts a lot longer. Those are the things that I have taken away. So I think that anyone in my position, if they can hang on to those moments of light when they appear and recognize that they really are more meaningful than the rest, then they have a shot. And then we all have a shot because, as I said, we have a system where we are dependent upon good people who are willing to make this investment of themselves making this a less hostile environment, one that people want to engage with, so that we can all have a framework to live our best lives.

[00:31:54] **Sabreena Delhon:** Thanks to Annamie Paul, and thank you for listening to Group Chat. I'm Sabreena Delhon, CEO of the Samara Center for Democracy. Group Chat is executive produced by Debbie Pacheco. The Group Chat team also includes Farha Akhtar, Andrea Mariko Grant, and Beatrice Wayne. Theme music is by Projectwhatever. The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity that produces groundbreaking research, dynamic events, and educational resources that advance a vibrant culture of civic engagement across Canada. Donate to support our work and check out our other podcasts @samaracentre.ca. If you like us, help spread the word about our show. Subscribe, rate, and review this podcast. If you teach, share it with your class. A special thanks to the Flanagan Foundation and the Rideau Hall Foundation for their support.