

# BELINDA STRONACH

## Politics as a Tour of Duty, not a Career

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Despite the apparent stability of a majority government, Canadian politics is in ferment.

In the case of the Liberal Party, it has actually been liberated by circumstance to think about the state of politics and the future of the country in a way the government just can't do. This is a time of flowing creativity, a free and humming marketplace of proposals. Not every idea from inside this incubator will come to pass, but the process is long overdue.

I left elected politics with a range of feelings – appreciative of the numerous talented people from all political parties who enter public life and, at the same time, despairing of the toxic partisanship of the system that's one of the obstacles to making progress on matters of national interest.

I also concluded that we have political institutions created in the 19th century that are ill-suited to seeking constructive solutions to the complex problems of the 21st century. The body politic needs an MRI and a treatment plan for what ails it, but that's a long-term and multifaceted project that requires national will to modernize our ways of governing ourselves.

In a most immediate and concrete way, I think the time has come in Canada for limits on the number of consecutive terms that a parliamentarian can serve.

The role of parliamentarians should be to work for the best interests of the country in a constant and postpartisan search for solutions. In the way our current electoral system is structured, the focus is almost entirely on the mechanics of getting re-elected once elected, and the time horizon for assessing the impact of decisions tends to be the immediate electoral cycle rather than what's good for future generations of Canadians. The emphasis must be on public service where politics isn't seen as a career but rather as a tour of duty. Terms limits could encourage this fundamental shift.

One can always find reasons not to make change, principal among which is the negative impact on the ability of parties to operate effectively in Parliament with the loss of experienced legislators who get termed out. Application of term limits is not a panacea for fixing all the problems in our political institutions, but it would encourage more decision-making for reasons of the national good rather than political expediency.

There are about 15 U.S. states with different forms of term limits. What that experience has shown us so far is that there's no one-size-fits-all approach and, while there've been some significant changes in the way legislatures with term limits do business, they find ways to adapt and adjust.

For example, to help cope with the challenge of having higher-than-normal turnover and numbers of new members, much better orientation, training and mentoring programs for new MPs could be put in place. Some might argue that party discipline will suffer with term limits in place, but is that such a bad thing? Term limits could create dynamic new conditions in the House of Commons where parliamentarians would feel freer to collaborate and make decisions based on what's good for the country.

My proposal would be to limit the number of consecutive terms that an MP could serve to two, and have a roster by lottery, to ensure a turnover of 50 per cent of members in each election cycle.

To make such a change would require specific legislation and, in the current political construct, the support at minimum of the government. But there's no need to wait for that elusive moment. I would urge the Liberal Party to adopt term limits unilaterally and internally in the way it treats its own approach to presenting candidates for election, becoming the Party of Public Service. And why couldn't other parties adopt term limits as a matter of practice?

This could be a modest but powerful step in injecting the oxygen of public service back into the federal political scene in Canada.

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