

Reconnecting people to politics

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For 30 years, the Canadian government, under both Liberals and Conservatives, has been indulging in a practice that bewilders and alienates citizens.

Ottawa pushes responsibilities down to the provincial level (usually without enough money to carry them out). The provinces, in turn, push responsibilities down to the municipal level (again with insufficient funding.)

Taxpayers end up with shoddy services and no one to hold accountable. Voters end up with political representatives who point fingers rather than solve problems. Citizens end up with a system they can neither understand nor fix.

In theory, devolution makes sense. Services should be delivered by the level of government closest to the people.

In fact, it has made government more complicated, more unwieldy and more inaccessible.

The trouble is, no one seems to know how to reverse the process.

The Liberals talk about restoring a strong central government as if they could turn back the clock, wrest power from the provinces and reconnect with a cynical populace. That amounts to political fantasy.

The Conservatives talk about correcting the "fiscal imbalance" as if depositing \$3 billion in provincial coffers would undo the damage left by decades of downloading, cost-cutting and blame-shifting. That amounts to wilful blindness.

Tom Axworthy, who headed the Liberal Renewal Commission, asked its task force on civic engagement to come up with a better approach.

The 20-member panel didn't produce a tidy formula to revitalize democracy and get federalism working again.

But it tells the Liberals how to start earning the credibility they need to effect change. Its first piece of advice: Start with people, not structures.

Worthy as ideas such as proportional representation might be, they won't solve the problem. "In fact," said Peter McLeod, the 28-year-old chair of the task force, "I worry that the debate over electoral, Senate and constitutional reform frequently trumps other important discussions."

What the Liberals need to do is show Canadians that government can work for them. Only then will citizens have a stake in contributing.

Lesson two: Use the networks that already exist.

One of the most effective is Parliament's "root system" of constituency offices, the task force says. "Constituency assistants spend a high proportion of their time acting as interlocutors to government departments and helping to explain arcane procedures to frustrated citizens."

Unfortunately, many MPs treat their constituency offices as insignificant satellites. They are understaffed and their budgets are stretched. The message this sends is that citizens' concerns are of secondary importance.

Lesson three: Poll Canadians less and listen to them more.

"Government by numbers is the poorest kind of democratic practice," the task force says. "It does little to improve the public's understanding of an issue or engage the respondent in a meaningful discussion."

If the Liberals are serious about giving Canadians a voice in national decision-making, they need to develop new tools and dust off some of the old ones. That means rediscovering the value of unscripted conversation. It means making better use of email and the Internet. It means switching from perfunctory consultations and focus groups to two-way dialogue.

Lesson four: Don't blame citizens for the current political malaise.

It's not their fault Ottawa has become remote and impenetrable. It's not their fault political debate has become vacuous. It's not their fault governments have shifted from solving problems to handing out tax cuts, saying: Here, buy your own solution.

"Neither stronger leadership nor tighter, more sophisticated messaging will keep the system alive," the task force says. "It will require no less than the most fundamental rethink of the ways we design our public systems."

McLeod, a doctoral candidate who has already established a reputation for overhauling calcified institutions, said the goal of his panel was not to spell

out specific remedies, but to get Liberals thinking differently.

Nonetheless, it did offer a few preliminary suggestions:

Begin with a citizens' assembly on climate change. Canadians are clearly ahead of their politicians on this issue. They deserve the chance to get their ideas on the public agenda.

Ensure that every government program is designed for the ease of citizens, not the convenience of bureaucrats. If it isn't, revamp it.

Strengthen federal constituency offices. They do the kind of citizen-centred problem solving that belongs at the core, not the periphery, of politics.

Offer civic micro-grants of between \$100 and \$500 to individuals or groups with an innovative project to improve their community.

Launch a Royal Commission on Canada in 2067 to set goals for the nation's bicentenary.

"It's going to be messy and we're going to get it wrong a lot of the time, but let's start opening doors," McLeod said.

That attitude, more than any policy prescription, is what the Liberal party needs.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.