

# Crossing the floor: Principle or Opportunism?

BY HERSHELL EZRIN

SENIOR COUNSEL GLOBAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS, AND DISTINGUISHED  
VISITING PROFESSOR, RYERSON'S TED ROGERS SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

JESSE FREEDMAN

INTERN GLOBAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND POLITICS  
AND PHILOSOPHY MAJOR, BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY



In the run up to the October federal election, politicians of all stripes continue to emphasize trust and values as one of the motivating factors affecting voter decisions. In the Parliamentary system, nothing appears more likely to relate to voters' views about these ethical intangibles than the issue of loyalty – to a constituency, a party and a platform.

**D**espite running as individuals, politicians understand that they represent a team and their ultimate success or failure depends upon the team's performance.

When a politician crosses the floor, either to another party or to sit as an Independent, pundits often comment upon the relative rarity of such a move. That reasoning is explained by an outpouring of analysis, usually criticism, highlighting the crass and unprincipled political motives of the individual for leaving a party, as well as reflecting on the party they are joining. And some high profile cases have certainly underscored this thesis.

When Belinda Stronach switched parties in 2005, a year after she had run for her party leadership, thereby preserving the delicate voting balance in

Parliament, she cited worries about blind partisanship and Conservatives allying themselves with the Bloc Québécois in a budget vote. When asked about the impact of Stronach's switch on the future of his minority government facing a critical budget vote, Paul Martin's succinct response as a leader who had instantly appointed Ms. Stronach to a Cabinet position was "I can count".

In 2006, a scant two weeks after being elected as a Liberal in the general election, David Emerson shocked constituents by crossing the floor to sit as a Conservative and to serve in Cabinet again.

Who can forget the public reaction to the sight of the Wildrose leadership jumping ship to the provincial Progressive Conservatives in Alberta just a few short months ago? The Globe and Mail reported in mid-

December, 2014 that the defections “cemented a partnership that could change Alberta’s politics for the next generation.” It did, but not the way the Globe reporter expected.

Eve Adams serves as the latest example when she moved from being persona non grata for re-nomination as a Conservative to seeking a federal Liberal nomination in Toronto. Here Justin Trudeau’s pledge to keep open party nominations has been put under a microscope.

How common are such changes? What can we learn about the reasons for them? Is there a balance between principle and opportunism in such choices? And how much impact do these so-called anomalies have on the public’s perception of political ethics as well as the electability of those who move? Are the politicians viewed as betraying the electors who put them in office swiftly punished in the next election?

Going back thirty years, some 165 sitting members have left their initial party at either the federal or provincial level (not counting the PC/Alliance merger); some have moved between those levels of government. Roughly half of the changes occurred at the federal level. But in doing a detailed analysis for why these politicians switched, there emerges a lengthy list of complex reasons why these changes occurred. Crass opportunism (a promise of getting rewarded quickly on the government side or enhanced electoral prospects) seems much less an incentive than principle, leadership and policy concern.

The first factual misconception is that most members cross the floor to gain political rewards from the government. In fact, just over a quarter went to government from the other parties. About 25% went from government to one of the opposition parties while another 30% sat as independents at least initially. 15% (a third from government) left to form new parties including the Bloc Québécois, Action Démocratique, and the Saskatchewan Party for example. Alberta, Québec and Saskatchewan exhibited the most provincial movement, with Ontario and BC not too far behind.

Sometimes members (around 5% of the total) were dismissed by their old party for some real or perceived moral failing; but over half of the total kicked out had been critical of the leader, the party or a particular

policy. This number does not include 13 members of the Canadian Alliance who had been critical of the direction taken by Stockwell Day and were either suspended or resigned to sit as Independent Alliance members but who subsequently returned to the merged new Conservative party. Of the 40% who left their party voluntarily, a third disagreed on policy, another third over concerns with the leader, while almost 25% left either because they lost their party’s nomination race or had lost the party leadership nomination.

The irony is the Westminster system the public bemoans as making backbenchers no more than trained seals under the thumb of a central authority also sees principled individuals choosing to make difficult decisions at the expense of their original political position.

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Do these floor crossings help or harm public trust in the ethics of the current political office holders? Were those who switched rewarded or punished in the next election? No single hypothesis appears sufficient. Of all those running for re-election, more than 50% of those who switched were re-elected. That includes two politicians who had previously switched parties and then became Premier leading a different party (Quebec and the Yukon). Of the others who decided to run for re-election, around 5% did not even win their nomination bid. So it is fair to say that

the electorate has displayed discernment on whether unique circumstances applied in virtually every case. Comfort to both those who feel they were switching for principled reasons as well as reinforcement for those who believed the lack of loyalty would evoke quick punishment. There remains a need for more research about the impact on the public’s ethical perspectives in this area.

This issue of floor crossing and ethical leadership of politicians also has to be judged in a broader public opinion context. Here the ethical challenge is much clearer. In a recent study by the Jim Pattison Ethical Leadership Program at Ryerson’s Ted Rogers School of Management, over half of Canadians surveyed do not trust politicians to behave ethically in their roles as compared with 13% who believe they do.

The source of this paucity of ethical leadership is also clear. According to the latest Pattison study in

October 2014, 63% of the Canadian public agree with the statement that politics is corrupting rather than believing that only unethical people go into politics. That is why by a large majority, Canadians believe that politicians frequently engage in unethical acts, break election promises, lie to Parliament and the media or spend tax dollars to buy votes.

In this context, why would floor crossing be any different in its perceived impact on public trust? The flurry of public attention promoted by negative media coverage colours what the public thinks about floor crossing and exacerbates their already negative opinions about political ethics. And there are certainly enough cases of self-promotion and self-interest to fuel those opinions. 🍁



**HERSHELL EZRIN**  
Senior Counsel Global Public Affairs, and  
Distinguished Visiting Professor, Ryerson's  
Ted Rogers School of Management

**JESSE FREEDMAN**  
Intern Global Public Affairs and Politics  
and Philosophy Major, Brandeis University