

More public servants running for office in 2015 than ever before

37 bureaucrats approved to run for office in 2015

By Julie Ireton, CBC News, August 27, 2015

Discontent appears to be motivating a number of public servants to seek nominations in this federal election campaign.

According to the Public Service Commission of Canada — the agency that oversees the bureaucracy — 37 bureaucrats have sought and received permission to run in this election campaign.

Debi Daviau, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, said it's a record-high number.

In the 2011 campaign, just 11 public servants were given permission to campaign for public office.

Chris Rodgers, the Liberal party candidate in the Ottawa riding of Carleton, has taken leave from his job as a policy analyst at Public Safety Canada to run in his home riding.

He admits it's a risky move.

'My career goal is not to get a pension'

"I have an indeterminate position with the public service, and my career goal is not to get a pension," said Rodgers. "It's to do something meaningful with my life. Sometimes risks are necessary."

Some former or retired public servants are also running, including government lawyer Emilie Taman, who left her job to run for the NDP in Ottawa-Vanier.

Both Rodgers and Taman said they're hearing from government workers in their ridings.

"I have had a surprising number of people reach out to me by email mostly with an opening line that says, I've never been involved with politics before, but I just have to get involved and when I heard about your candidacy," said Taman.

But Rodgers said there's a real chill amongst some bureaucrats when it comes to getting involved in campaigns.

"They don't feel they can put a sign on their yard. They're concerned whether they can go and knock on some doors in the evening," said Rodgers. "These are people who can and should be able to separate their private political activities from their professional work."

Right to volunteer

Public servants won the right to engage in political activities in a Supreme Court ruling in 1991. They can volunteer, post political lawn signs, make calls, deliver flyers without any special permission.

But according to the Public Service Commission, a public servant cannot do anything to impair their ability to do their job in a politically impartial manner.

"I think that has inspired people to say, yes, we are not partisan ... but we don't serve Stephen Harper, we serve the government of Canada and we're entitled as public servants and as citizens of this country to do what we feel we can to effect change if we feel that's what we need," said Taman.

But this partisan move by some bureaucrats doesn't sit well with professor Donald Savoie, the Canada Research Chair in public administration and governance at the University of Moncton. He's spoken and written extensively about the inner workings of the public service.

He said the traditional bargain was that public servants would be non-partisan and anonymous and in turn the politicians would protect the bureaucracy.

"So that traditional bargain that has glued the relationship is becoming unglued. If you want to find fault I think you can go back and point the finger at politicians and I understand the frustration of public servants," said Savoie.

Bureaucracy feels misunderstood, research chair says

Two National Capital Region candidates left government roles to run for the Conservative party.

David Piccini is running in Ottawa-Vanier. He's worked at Agriculture Canada and was a policy advisor at Service Canada. Most recently, Piccini worked with the minister of international trade, helping negotiate the Canada-European Union Trade deal.

Another Conservative candidate, Benjamin Woodman in Pontiac, comes from a job with the veterans affairs minister and formerly worked in the Prime Minister's Office.

Neither Conservative candidate agreed to an interview.

Savoie said what is really needed is a proper debate about the role of the public service in this country. He said that right now, the bureaucracy feels misunderstood, undervalued and basically pushed around.

"We made them part of the blame game," said Savoie. "Should something change? Yes. Should they be running for Parliament? I don't think that's the main issue. I think there's a deeper issue in the public service that needs to be addressed."