Hyperbole and a Half is a slyly brilliant web comic in which author Allie Brosh uses manic, deliberately crude drawings to dismantle ordinary human experiences into shards of genius and madness.

In one, she laid out the “sneaky hate spiral,” a toddler-level total meltdown that otherwise reasonable adults fall into from time to time. “Sneaky hate spirals begin simply enough. That is one of the hallmarks—they are merely the confluence of many unremarkable annoyances,” Brosh wrote, accompanied by chicken-scratch drawings of her characters, still in bed in the morning, assaulted by a neighbour’s car alarm, by a cat, by La Bamba braying from the alarm. More small annoyances pile up as the day goes on: a paper cut; a lost wallet; La Bamba, again. “The little frustrations start to happen more quickly,” she wrote. “They ping against your psyche like hundreds of tiny pebbles.”

And then: the thing that sends you over the edge. “The turning point is usually a minor but slightly jarring incident, initiated by some force of nature that cannot be blamed or scolded—like gravity or sleeplessness or wind,” Brosh wrote. “In order to send you into truly bats--t crazy hysteric, the final straw must cause anger that cannot rationally be directed outward in any way.” Her characters are battered by the weather, or lie sleepless and wild-eyed in their beds until, finally, they absolutely lose their minds. The final set of illustrations depicts Brosh’s main character—eyes transformed into lunatic dinner plates, mouth a gaping feral crescent—gazing skyward and screaming at a bird that wronged her.

In this story, Justin Trudeau is the bird. Or maybe the federal election is the bird. But anyway, the point stands.
Everyone has spent the last 19 months living through endless sneaky hate spirals, little indignities and frustrations piling on top of other burdens too heavy to bear. The grocery store is out of toilet paper, Zoom meetings are janky, you have a new baby whose grandparents have never inhaled him. A kid woke up with a sore throat so everyone has to stay home and there goes your workday; someone in your family dies and there is no funeral, no gathering, no comfort to be had; dentist appointments are impossible to find; every day you must go into a workplace where you are in peril. And, for far too many families and circles of friends, the ultimate toll of the pandemic: an empty chair and a deck of memories in place of someone beloved who is never coming back.

Then, into everyone’s midst, near the end of another summer that felt near-normal, a smiling man in a nice suit strode to a podium. The fourth wave of the pandemic was already gathering itself, and at that precise moment, the Afghans who had helped Canadians were scrambling onto planes at a Kabul airport if they were lucky, or being left behind in a sewage canal to try their luck with the Taliban if they were not. Justin Trudeau, having dissolved Parliament to trigger an election, purred to a bedraggled country, “We’ve had your back, and now it’s time to hear your voice.”

It was like someone wandering out of the forest with sticks in their hair, dried blood on their face and eyes like lumps of coal, only to find a tidily dressed Canada Revenue Agency employee waiting to audit them: you want what from me? Are you serious? Now?

An assignment. A further demand on the personal bandwidth most people ran out of months ago. And something more pointedly insulting, too. Canadians have spent the last year and a half watching political leaders at various levels flail about like one of those inflatable tube men at a car lot, in many cases with about as much foresight and judgment. And suddenly we had to vote for more of them? This election pushed an already bowed public to the snapping point, and in the process revealed some unpleasant things about the state of this country and the problems that will still be staring at us when COVID-19 is over.

**FEDERALISM HAS AFFORDED gloriously convenient buck-passing opportunities for leaders—who didn’t feel like leading over the last year and a half and instead stepped onto the press conference dias each day sporting a rhetorical “I’m with stupid” shirt pointing to the next level of government.**

In closing the borders, and a national vaccination passport for travel is unlikely to be a reality until next year.

Worst of all, the second, third and fourth waves rolled over the country as though the ones that preceded them had never happened, as though no one at any level had learned one single thing. So with his field trip to Rideau Hall, Trudeau was compelling the country to re-up its supply of a commodity that hadn’t exactly covered itself in glory of late.

Even Trudeau’s close friend and former principal secretary, Gerald Butts, highlighted in an interview with me the unwanted nature of the election, and how it appeared to have caught the government off guard. “I think if you were to summarize this election in one sentence, it would be: I’m really annoyed we’re having this election, but do I want to change the government because I’m annoyed we’re having an election?” he said.

The final outcome—a minority Liberal government and a House of Commons eerily identical to its composition at dissolution—was difficult not to interpret as the electorate sending everyone to sit in a corner and think about what they’d done.

**SIX DAYS BEFORE** that begrudging answer arrived, Ottawa-area Liberal MP Anita Vandenbeld set out on an afternoon canvas, with Central Park as her destination. It’s a curious neighbourhood within her Ottawa West–Nepean riding because the houses and streets look like new builds from the distant suburbs—the streets have names like Bloomingdale, Staten and Trump, the latter of which has been the subject of a failed renaming attempt—but it’s well within the Greenbelt, a 10-minute drive from Parliament Hill.

The vast majority of the voters she encountered were pleasant and polite,
sometimes to a dishonest degree. At one door, Vandenbeld—who was first elected in 2015 with a wave of Liberal MPs who gave Trudeau a majority—asked a man in his 30s if he would vote for her. “Yeah,” he said with a shy grin. The moment Vandenbeld walked away, she directed a volunteer to classify the household in her tracking app. “That was an undecided,” she said. “Maybe even a no.”

Others were quite comfortable telling her what they didn’t like about her party. One woman identified herself as a federal public servant who didn’t see why her employer required her to be vaccinated if she works from home. “So you’re not going to get vaccinated?” Vandenbeld asked. “Doesn’t matter,” the woman said. She agreed the vaccines are helping but believes people have to make their own choices, and argued concerns around the Delta variant are overblown. “I wanted to let you know why I’m closing the door in your face,” she said, very calm.

On one street corner, a nurse who had finished a night shift was waiting for her kids to get off the school bus. Vandenbeld thanked her profusely for her work and commented with disgust on the hospital protesters. “The patients find it really upsetting,” the nurse said, caught off guard by her own sudden tears. As she and Vandenbeld were talking, a man in his 50s driving a black BMW pulled up, his face set in the look of someone who badly wanted to get into a fight before they closed the bar. “Why does your leader hate women so much?” he shouted at Vandenbeld. She disputed the premise, before trying to resume her conversation with the nurse. “You’re on the wrong team. Look at you all,” he said, giving the group a thorough once-over before snarling “F--king losers” as he drove off.

At several houses, people apologized that they hadn’t really thought about the election. Others brought up childcare and climate change as their big issues; one woman told Vandenbeld that she was happy with the government’s vaccine efforts, but displeased about its approach to Indigenous issues. Sometimes you could see the trail of disinformation breadcrumbs littered in someone’s web browser, as when a man in his late 60s said freedom of conscience for doctors was his concern, before primly citing the completely untrue statistic that 6,000 people in the Netherlands were euthanized against their will last year.

On her way to another house, Vandenbeld (who would convincingly win the riding) spotted a couple who looked like they were returning from a run, but the moment she trotted over, the man unleashed a torrent of abuse about how everyone who works on Parliament Hill should be ashamed of themselves. His wife moved further up the driveway and made a noise that might have been exasperation or empathy, but either way was the noise of someone who had seen this show before. The man’s vitriol didn’t seem partisan-specific, just an all-encompassing cloud of resentment. “You’re selfish, elitist scum. You go there and take a paycheque for doing absolutely nothing for society,” he snarled. “You’re disgusting.” Vandenbeld tried to interject, but he spat, “No, shut up, you guys talk enough.”

These aggressive encounters were the exception but were rattling, and they fit the widely reported trend of a surly, destructive campaign: signs destroyed or stolen faster than teams could repair or replace them, racist and anti-Semitic graffiti, paranoid...
insults about lockdown Nazis and protesters swarming Trudeau’s events.

But in the same week as Vandenbeld’s canvas, another exchange of political ideas among citizens suggested how things might be different, and also hinted at more dark currents beneath the surface. Ipsos convened an online focus group for Maclean’s of six Canadians from across the country and the political spectrum, and with first names and real faces, this discussion was calm and outright genial.

There was pervasive frustration with what Patrick from Quebec called “a small minority that are angry and very loud” in protesting vaccines and public health measures, and with the fact that they draw so much attention. Julie from Vancouver backed apologetically into her opinion, but nearly the whole group nodded and grinned in agreement. “This might be a bit petty, but people on the bus complaining about having to wear masks drive me a bit crazy,” she said. “I wish people could understand that we’re all in it together and we have to just work toward keeping each other safe.”

But it was the inherent selfishness of people that was the enduring lesson for several others. “They’re asked to do something for the greater good and they feel that everything’s been taken away from them,” said Terry from Toronto. “You can tell that if we got into a war or something like that, there’s no way the majority of people would be able to handle that.”

At another point, he articulated an idea that came up several times; viewed one way, it showed compassion toward political...
horses in the middle of a race,” she said. “Maybe we should have been concerned with finishing the race.”

Fifty minutes into the discussion, the moderator, Brad Griffin, president of Ipsos Qualitative, was finding it impossible to figure out where the group was at. One moment they sounded optimistic and hopeful, but the next they tumbled down some dark tunnel and were lost to him again.

The participants mentioned the tiniest of joys that fed their souls right now—one just saw her best friend for the first time in two years, two others had learned that online gatherings with loved ones at holidays are awkward but could be real sources of happiness and connection. Some were grateful the pandemic had pared their life down to what they now understood were the only things that matter, but there was an obvious sadness there; you only recognize the essentials when you’ve lost so much already.

What the group described, over and over, was a narrowing of their field of vision. What they had the capacity to care about, what they could muster energy for, what they could find a spirit of generosity for, and the time frame in which they knew what to expect or could plan something to look forward to had shrunken to a tiny porthole of protective selfishness and immediacy. They all seemed troubled by that creeping smallness, but how could it be any other way?

Listening to them, the colossal folly in asking an entire country of people who can’t look up from their anxiously gnawed fingernails to choose a new government was obvious.

It wasn’t until the end of the 90-minute session that Griffin figured them out. As they swung wildly between morose nihilism and the most tiptoeing sort of hope, he finally realized it was familiar because that’s the landscape inside his head, too.

“That’s any given day during this pandemic, right?” he said afterward. “I can’t get a bead on myself. I don’t think anyone can get a bead on anything.”

While Griffin hears people out on the qualitative side of things, his colleague Mike Colledge, president of Ipsos Public Affairs Canada, has a constant stock-ticker view of the public mood through the polling firm’s quantitative questions.
in the field. There have been dragons lurking for a long time.

One of the measures Ipsos produces is called the “disruption barometer,” which incorporates measures like how people feel about the overall direction of the country, the regional and national economy now and in the future, and their own job and economic security. When disruption is higher, people are more likely to vote for change, spend less, become more demanding in their interactions with government and business, and regional or demographic frictions tear at social cohesion. “You need to read the room,” says Colledge.

And the disruption barometer in Canada was looking to hell-in-a-handbasket-ish well before the pandemic. Near the end of 2018, sentiment tipped into the negative, which was puzzling for Colledge and his colleagues because unemployment was at a 40-year low and the economy was humming. But when they talked to people in focus groups like Griffin’s, they heard, sure there were plenty of jobs out there, but a lot of them are terrible and I have to work two of them just to survive. That feeling of being strapped to a treadmill where you are doomed to fall off lasted through 2019. “We were pretty beaten down,” Colledge says.

Then COVID hit, and everyone started grading on a curve, with the blind anxiety of March 2020 as their benchmark for how things were going at present. That is why earlier this summer, the disruption barometer was relatively buoyant, as Canada’s vaccination campaign roared along. “I would say we were up artificially, in anticipation that we were breaking the back of COVID,” Colledge says. Then it became obvious that the fourth wave was rising, so who knows when this is really over, sending our national mood into disarray yet again.

**A WEEK AND A HALF** before election day, I was downtown wandering through Major’s Hill Park, a green hilltop expanse with spectacular views in every direction of the National Gallery of Canada, the Ottawa River and Parliament Hill. The park is ringed by a black metal fence that protects people from the steep drop to the river below, and the area just beyond the fence is dotted with yellow-and-black warning signs. The signs show a little cartoon man tumbling off a stylized cliff, with the word “DANGER!” emblazoned below. Someone with a good sense of humour, a big Sharpie and no apparent fear of heights had meticulously erased the Ds, so that you had this gorgeous park in the nation’s capital framing a postcard view of Parliament, festooned with signs warning of “ANGER!”

A bit on the nose, but nice scripting.

I commented to a woman nearby that the image seemed appropriate for the moment, by which I meant the late-pandemic purgatory. She hooted and then bellowed, “Yeah, we coulda used those in 2019!” with the ferocious energy of someone who had either been waiting months for that opening, or who has this exact conversation 27 times every day.

Beneath the COVID shadow, there is something much more subtle and troubling that Colledge can foresee in the public mood. There was a clarifying and simplifying effect to the pandemic: the house is on fire and all that matters is that we put it out, so everyone please line up for the bucket brigade. But when that moment passes, all of those big, deep problems that had people feeling anxious, frustrated and resentful before the pandemic will still be there, with nothing to distract from them. “Two months after ‘We’re out of COVID,’ people turn to, ‘Okay, well, what about the other issues? What about racism? What about climate change? What about affordability?’” Colledge says. “And none of those have been solved. We just sort of parked those for 18 months.”

That is where this new-old Liberal government should mark out the dragons on their mental maps. On some please-God-not-too-distant day, the pandemic won’t even be worth a segment on the evening news anymore. And when the fire is out and the smoke finally clears, Canadians are going to look around at the house they share and remember all the tatty bits and jagged edges that were waiting to ensnare them before COVID obliterated everything else.

That is going to be one heck of a cleanup job. And a battered, hollow-eyed nation, still heaving for breath after two years of sneaky hate spirals shrinking their lives down to the things they could clutch in their hands, is going to be staring at the smiling man at the microphone and his government, waiting for answers.