

is careful to note that Skelton was “not anti-British, nor anti-empire. It was imperialism and the agents of imperialism that were his enemies” (p. 13). Indeed, Skelton’s world view saw Canada as British North America while Britain was British West Europe.

Despite his partisan background, Skelton continued to serve when Conservative R.B. Bennett formed a government in 1930. After some initial misgivings and clashes of opinion which led Bennett to consider firing him, Hillmer notes that Skelton was soon found to be indispensable.

As King’s Liberals returned to government, troubles in Europe pointed to the possibility of renewed military conflict. Skelton, fearing impending divisions in Canada, clearly favoured an isolationist policy in the lead-up to World War II and expressed disappointment when King stated that the possibility of Canada staying out of a British war with Germany was nil. Skelton suggested the wary attitude of Canada’s francophones was “really Canadian” (p. 44); yet he noted that a majority would support participation in war provided there was no conscription. The civil servant’s isolationist sympathies did not preclude him from acknowledging the likelihood of war and his views on conflict shifted as Germany invaded France and set its sights on Britain.

At the time of Skelton’s unexpected death, in the midst of a particularly bleak period during the Second World War, Lester B. Pearson, then working in the Office of the High Commissioner for Canada in London, lamented that “seldom... in any organization has the loss of one

man meant so much” (p. 55). Hillmer’s deft skill in curating these documents presents readers with a strong confirmation of Pearson’s praise.

A prolific scholar, Hillmer’s extensive background and expertise in 20th-century Canadian international policy offers a unique opportunity for a thorough and insightful guided tour of Skelton’s professional life in government.

**Will Stos**

Editor

Canadian Parliamentary Review

**Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada’s Failing Democracy, by Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto, 2014, 288 p**

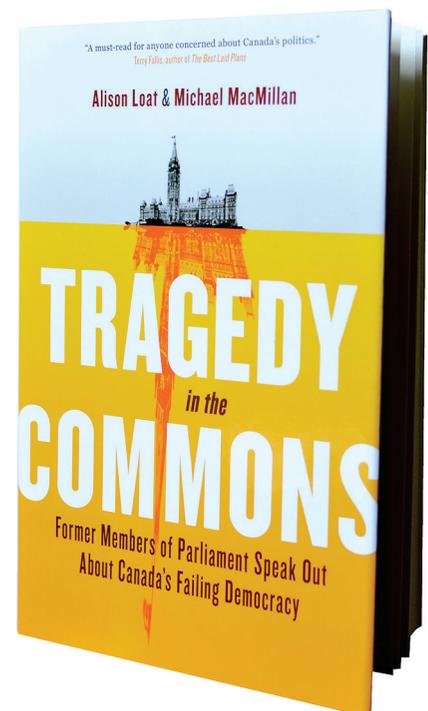
It’s very easy to find writing that looks at the health of Canada’s parliamentary system, but up to now there has been very little that spoke to the parliamentarians who worked in the system. Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan seek to fill this gap with *Tragedy in the Commons*.

The book, a synthesis of the Samara Institute’s exit interviews with 80 former Members of Parliament, features an impressively broad group of politicians, including some who retired by choice and others who experienced electoral defeat, along with a former Prime Minister and Ministers from different governments, as well as backbenchers who left office still wet behind the ears or long in the tooth. Structurally, the book devotes chapters to the stages of a parliamentarian’s career: entering politics; the various parts of elected office; and,

ultimately, the return to civilian life. A concluding chapter offers thoughts on how to improve our governance from their experiences.

A few clear themes emerge. First, the authors remind us that being a Member of Parliament is a job without an instruction manual. Once elected, MPs find themselves dropped quickly into the deep end, with little orientation for a demanding job that has often brought them to a new city away from their families. There’s even little guidance for running a constituency office.

Second, those interviewed felt that they often had too little voice in the political system, subjugated by a top-down party system that limited their ability to act independently in the interests of their constituents. MPs could have been placed on committees for which they had no expertise or shuffled to another in mid-term; there were constant expectations to be a good soldier and partake in the



---

partisan circus the public has come to expect. For example, Gary Merasty, a Liberal elected in Saskatchewan in 2006, was frustrated enough to resign before completing a term, feeling he could do more good as a civilian.

Third, there are different perspectives on what the role of an elected representative should be. Two camps emerge: delegates vs. trustees. The former act as the direct voice of constituents in Ottawa on an ongoing basis; the latter act based on their own judgement, having been empowered to act by proxy - little captures the difference between Reform and Liberal MPs from the class of '93 better than these two camps.

It is clear that MPs feel constrained by the absence of much direct power. But it's equally interesting to discover places where MPs find the system works. Party caucuses, for example, were cited as a way of holding cabinet ministers to account. Both Conservatives and Liberals indicated that successful

policy must first make its way through a party's MPs at caucus. At times, on issues such as post-secondary education, a caucus could push the government to do more. A full caucus is decentralized and consultative by definition, mostly free from party control.

Complaining about the centralization of power in leaders' offices is nothing new in Ottawa. Jean Chrétien was known as "The Friendly Dictator" in the early 2000s and Stephen Harper's reputation for centralizing control in the Prime Minister's Office is well-known. Every new government seems to promise a new and more collaborative approach to parliament; but each successive long-serving government tends to take top-down control to unprecedented levels. If anything, perhaps we should be surprised that MPs themselves are surprised at this state of affairs in Ottawa.

*Tragedy in the Commons* looks very specifically at the experiences of former MPs, but it raises questions that the general

public must grapple with. Are Canadians comfortable with party-driven politics that keep MPs on a short leash? Popular perception seems to be that we are not: voter turnout continues to decline and even retired MPs are reluctant to think of themselves as "politicians." And yet little changes.

The book draws its title from a famous essay by ecologist Garrett Hardin, which lamented how collective action problems can result in everyone ultimately suffering. Such problems are only ever really solved when all participants agree that something needs to change and actually endeavour to fix it. MPs who were interviewed want change, but appeared unwilling to make a sustained effort to bring about that change. Perhaps the real tragedy in the Commons is that their constituents, the public, seem resigned to accept this inaction.

**Michael Powell**

Government Affairs and Research  
Associate, Impact Public Affairs