

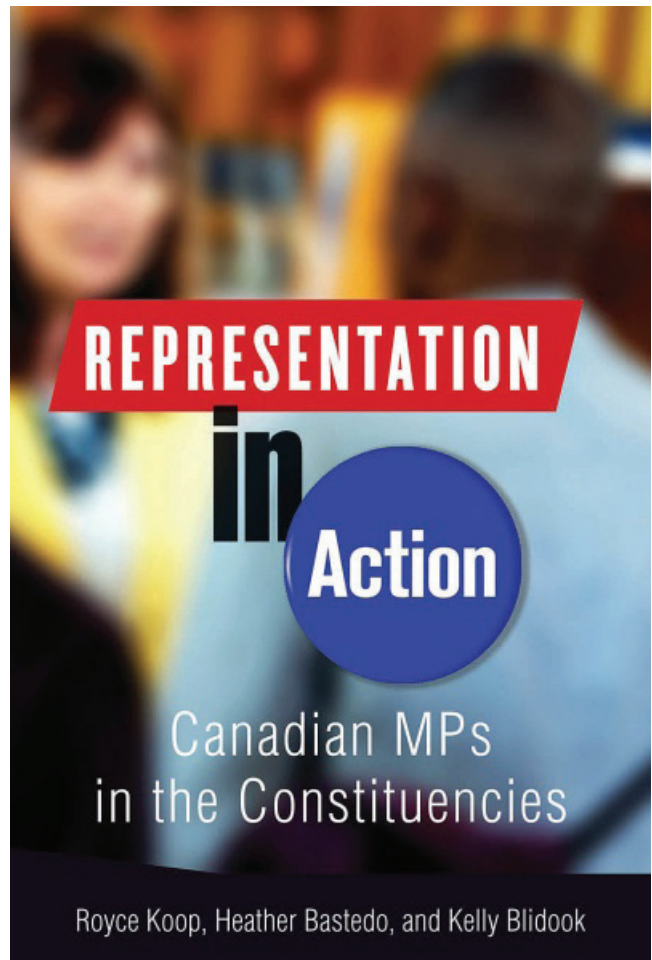
Parliamentary Bookshelf: Reviews

Representation in Action: Canadian MPs in the Constituencies, by Royce Koop, Heather Bastedo and Kelly Blidook, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), 235 pp.

There is no doubt that Canadians take the work of their Members of Parliament for granted and there is a reason for this: almost all MPs are elected because of the label they represent, not because of their personal qualities or politics. Parliamentary representation has rarely worked out in practice the way it was supposed to in theory. The democratic ideal was that electoral districts would choose one of their own to represent the region without compromise within a unifying assembly. Instead, political parties have used their own organizing and ideation powers and quickly overcame whatever an individual might offer (exceptions do exist, but they are extremely rare). Members of Parliament are seen as practically anonymous and interchangeable, utterly dependent on the party and programme they represented during the previous electoral contest.

The role of MPs, in Canada as in Great Britain, was basically untouched for 200 years. Two things changed this in the postwar period. First, government expanded and offered a wider variety of services—and inevitably created administrative issues in the implementation of programs. Secondly, the democratic impulses of the 1960s gave expression to the idea that more MP involvement would help resolve problems and create a more solid link between citizens and parliament. As problems multiplied and as the State sought to be more responsive, constituency offices were funded in the early 1970s. The initiative was modest and came with just enough money to rent storefront space in the riding and one or two relatively poorly paid administrative assistants who could respond to the needs of residents. The idea that Members of Parliament were responsible to represent the State instead of the opposite was cemented.

There is a small literature in Canada that examines the role of MPs. David Docherty's *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa* focused on the MP as legislator. Anthony



M. Sayers's *Parties, Candidates and Constituency Campaigns in Canadian Elections* valiantly argued that constituencies were sufficiently unique and that riding associations did make the difference in electoral outcomes. David V.J. Bell and Frederick J. Fletcher's edited *Reaching the Voter: Constituency campaigning in Canada* (Vol 20 of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing) came to a different conclusion, with most contributors concluding that the 1988 local-level efforts were nothing more than reproductions of the national campaigns. R.K. Carty's

Canadian Political parties in the Constituencies (Vol. 23 in the Royal Commission) also looked at the party on the local level but hardly mentioned the candidate. In his various works, Peter McLeod specifically examined the workings of constituency offices and the functions of the people who are employed by them.

Royce Koop, Heather Bastedo and Kelly Blidook bring a new perspective on the role of MPs in *Representation in Action*. The book is innovative in that it is the first time scholars report on MP behaviour at home by personally observing their subjects in action (this method is still common in some of the better journalism). In each case, one of the writers spent a few days in 2013 accompanying the parliamentarian in his/her journeys in the riding, reporting on meetings with stakeholders, voters, media, etc. This is an important distinction—readers looking for trends in parliamentary committee involvement, policy-making roles or even private-bill generation will be frustrated. This book is about how members of the Canadian House of Commons cultivate the rapport with their constituents.

The choice of MPs was carefully made so as to present a wide perspective on the many roles of MPs. Men and women are represented; attention is devoted to ensuring a balance between rural, semi-rural and urban ridings. Not all provinces are represented, but the effort is laudable and the composite portrait is convincing. The book is structured around three detailed case studies and each is given a chapter: Leon Benoit in Alberta, Tony Clement in Ontario, and Megan Leslie in Nova Scotia. Another chapter examines three different representational styles (Niki Ashton in Churchill, Manitoba; Scott Simms in Bonavista-Gander-Grand Falls-Windsor in Newfoundland; Ted Hsu in Kingston, Ontario). A final chapter reports on one author's (Heather Bastedo) particular observations of five members in densely populated urban areas in the Greater Toronto Area (Andrew Cash, Mike Wallace, John McKay), and two in Greater Montreal (Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet and Pierre Nantel).

The authors focus on four particular types of “connections” MPs make with their constituency (policy, service, symbolic and party) and report on how the individuals they observed fulfilled their roles. Naturally, there is a wide variety of practices. Some MPs are drawn to public service because of their policy expertise and use it to their advantage among key members of the riding; others because they want to help their fellow citizens find better access to government services. The authors emphasize the “symbolic” connections MPs make with their electors and detractors: where they meet, how and at what time. The intention is to draw stronger ties between individuals. A good example is the choice of Tim Hortons donut shops to meet people (and to hold court!)—a place to see and be seen that is far more agreeable a space than a drab office (where the real work of helping constituents actually happens).

The authors draw a variety of conclusions that are hardly ground-breaking, namely that the individual traits of MPs will shape the nature of their service, as will the nature of the riding they represent. The book is clearly written, if often repetitive and prone to grand declarations of the obvious, but it probably does justice to the individual MPs involved. Portraits like these are useful, but best situated in richer socio-demographic studies. For instance, we never learn the ages of the MPs involved, and cannot judge if they are older or younger than the average for their cohort. We learn practically nothing of their educational, professional, family or social backgrounds, or how long they have served in parliament (again, context would bring more insight to the enterprise). This is not journalism but a rather cold analysis written under the fluorescent lights of the laboratory. All the same, the approach is novel and may yet set a baseline for future studies as others seek to measure the changing role of MPs in a new era of technological change.

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