



Tragedy in the Commons : Book Club Guide

In a *Maclean's* article about *Tragedy in the Commons*, journalist Aaron Wherry wrote that “there is something to be said for understanding politics as a fundamentally human endeavor.” Now that you’ve read the personal reflections of 80 former Members of Parliament, how have their human experiences affected your views on politics, the role of MPs, the actions of political parties and ultimately your own ability to affect the state of Canadian democracy? Here are a few questions to help you work through your reactions to the book.

Personal Reflections

1. Recall your opinions of elected representatives, particularly at the federal level, before reading the book. Were your opinions positive? Negative? Indifferent? How has reading the book changed the way you view our elected officials?
2. This book is full of stories from “behind the political curtain.” Talk about a particular story that struck you as significant, interesting, profound, disturbing or sad. Why was it memorable?
3. What is your definition of “being political”? Do you consider yourself political? Why? Why not? (pg 30)
4. What did you find the most surprising about the interviewees’ responses noted in the book? What was the least surprising response?

The Role of Members of Parliament

5. “A trustee believes she was elected by the public to use her own judgement to make a decision. Meanwhile, delegates are understood to be representatives who follow the expressed preferences of their constituents, regardless of their own personal opinion.” (pg 87)

Do you think MPs should govern as trustees or as delegates? Should that choice be formalized or left up to individual MPs?



6. Many of the MPs in this book refer to themselves as political “outsiders,” and say they never intended on running for political office. Why do you think it has become such a faux pas to express political ambition? Why is it okay to aspire to be rich or famous but not to wield political power?
7. Have you ever called your MP for help navigating a government program? Do you think it should be part of an MP’s job to help citizens with bureaucratic issues (i.e. immigration, employment insurance)? Is it fair that an MP’s intervention can speed up these processes?
8. How do you decide who to vote for in elections? If party affiliation or the party leader play a big role in your choice, shouldn’t MPs be put under pressure to stay in line with their parties?
9. As long as MPs feel obligated to vote with their party, do you think the role of an MP is becoming redundant?
10. Are the best representatives those who seek the role themselves or those who have it thrust upon them by others? (pg 13-14)

Party Control

11. Many of the MPs discuss their concerns about the fairness and clarity of the nominations process. If you were leading a party, which of the recommended reforms on page 56 would you implement first?
12. Mark Twain once said that “if you do not read the newspaper you are uninformed....and if you do read it you are misinformed.” Do you think that contemporary members of the media are contributing to a healthy democracy, or do they intensify extreme partisanship by choosing, for example, to “...pounce on every caucus member who expresses an opinion that differs from their party line”? (pg 224)
13. “...Such tight discipline also contributes to the public’s ability to hold parties accountable at election time: if all members of a party vote in a particular way, then the party’s positions are ostensibly clearer to the electorate.” (pg 165)

How much control is reasonable for a party to exert over their MPs? Do you agree that tight discipline helps the public to hold their representatives accountable for promises made at election-time?

The Role of Citizens

14. While the authors note that citizens must demand and reward a more nuanced political culture, they also note that citizens are losing trust in government and withdrawing from the political process in droves. Has the book provided any insights that you yourself could use to win back at least some of your friends and family’s respect for, and engagement in, our democracy?
15. What role do you play in the “tragedy in the Commons”? Do you feel capable and motivated to begin making real change? If so, how?

This book club guide was developed by Samara volunteers Alana del Greco , Bob Sutton, Katrina Afonso, Louise Cochrane and Steven Lee. You too can be a Samara volunteer by signing up at <http://www.samaracanada.com/contact-us/get-involved/volunteer>

