



Guest Post from Terry Fallis: 5 Reasons You Should Read *Tragedy in the Commons* by Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan

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Fixing Our Democracy: The Free Ride is Over

Even though I once made my living as a political staffer in Ottawa, I'm not happy with the way we practice politics in this country. I suspect most Canadians feel the same way. This isn't a bold and provocative statement. The signs are all around us. Anecdotally, we've all witnessed the coffee-shop eye-rolling, the head-shaking, and even the classic hands-thrown-up-in-surrender, when Canadian politics somehow enters everyday conversation. Most Canadians turn away.

Why? Theories abound. Perhaps it's due to what I've come to call our "apathy of affluence." On the surface, our country works pretty well. Hot water always seems to come out of the tap. We put out our garbage in the morning and find an empty can waiting for us when we come home at night. Subways, street-sweepers, and snowplows usually run when they're supposed to. There sometimes doesn't seem to be much incentive to get involved with how we are governed. It's as if we have been lulled to lethargy by our own particular brand of "peace, order, and good government."

But there are hardcore numbers beneath the anecdotal that "prove" just how unengaged and disenchanting voters have become. When Lester Pearson was Prime Minister, 80 percent of eligible voters marked an X on a ballot in federal elections. Today, we're down to 60 percent. Let me save you the effort and do that math for you. That's a 25 percent drop in voter turnout in one generation. Yes, 25 percent.

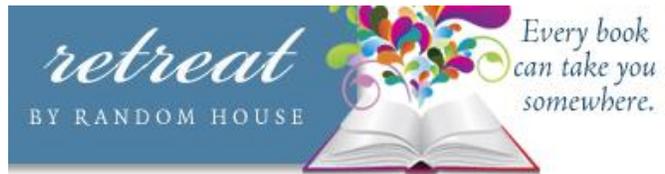
So what does that really mean? Well, for one thing, it means that majority governments are being elected by a minority of Canadians. Not since the Mulroney sweep of 1984 has more than 50 percent of Canadians elected a government. That's really not how our democracy is supposed to work.

In their brilliant new book, *Tragedy in the Commons*, Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, co-founders of *Samara*, have made an enormous contribution to our collective understanding of our faltering democracy. They interviewed 80 former MPs from across the ideological divide to examine our damaged parliament and politics. What they discovered was fascinating, important, and all too disquieting. Perhaps just as revealing and instructive was what they didn't find.

Though there are many more, here are just five reasons to read *Tragedy in the Commons* and recommit to our obligations as citizens in a supposedly leading democracy:

1. **Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan are eloquent and passionate in their thoughtful and thorough analysis of these interesting MP exit interviews.** They make powerful sense of the often disparate and sometimes conflicting views of those who have sat in the House of Commons, the very seat of our democracy.

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2. **Even veteran MPs who have worked in the crucible of federal politics for many years don't agree on, or don't know how to fix our democracy.** It is the clearest evidence we have that we cannot and should not surrender responsibility for mending our democratic institutions, and the brand of politics they foment, to our elected representatives. They don't have all or even many of the answers. In fact, the reforms they did propose in their interviews were often minor and modest, and therefore likely to lead to minor and modest change to a paradigm that needs much more. *Tragedy in the Commons* should be a clarion call for citizens to get involved and get engaged. Clearly, broader perspectives are needed if our MPs cannot reach consensus either on the problems, or on the solutions.
3. **If we don't address the challenges examined in this book, majority governments that, incidentally, govern all of us, will continue to be elected by a declining minority of Canadians.** Whatever you may think of our parliamentary system and our first-past-the-post approach, surely we want our majority governments to enjoy at least the support of the majority of voters.
4. **If you're not informed, if you're not concerned, if you're not taking your citizen's share of ownership of our democratic malaise, and if you're not exercising your responsibility to vote, you're forfeiting your right to complain.** Acting on what you learn from reading *Tragedy in the Commons*, is an excellent first step in embracing our democratic obligations.
5. **Without being overly cynical, when you get right down to it, those who hold power, and even those who aspire to power from the opposition benches, have an interest in sustaining the current public ambivalence towards politics.** After all, it's easier to govern when the majority of Canadians are looking the other way, even if they've turned away in frustration. *Tragedy in the Commons* is a sober and potent reminder of the need for us all not to turn away from politics, but to turn towards it, to confront it. Our democracy will not improve unless and until we do.

I don't hold our politicians completely responsible for our current situation. All Canadians, and particularly those who have studiously avoided their democratic responsibilities, are complicit in our compromised democracy. *Tragedy in the Commons*, this important original research, is a searing indictment of "politics as usual" and the clearest evidence we have that even stable, first world democracies like ours need care and tending, not from our politicians, but from informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. *Tragedy in the Commons* should be a sign to us all that our free ride is over.

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