A must-read this summer

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It's not often I've reviewed a book for this column. My focus on local politics usually limits the opportunity.

The book I'm suggesting you read is called "Tragedy in the Commons." While it sounds like a fiction thriller with politics as a backdrop, it's actually a non-fiction work detailing the experiences of 80 former MPs from across the country.

Those of you who follow politics will find it eye-opening and it will change your view of what it means to be a member of Parliament.

It will also hurt.

The book, published this spring, was written by Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, who founded a think-tank — Samara — in 2009, dedicated to increasing Canadians' awareness of politics and encouraging political participation.

They have a lot of work to do. One of the projects they assigned themselves was to write a book about MPs. Who better to talk to than those who held the position but are no longer constrained by the tentacles of office?

The authors conducted exit interviews with former MPs representing all parties in the House of Commons.

They came away with over 4,000 pages of transcripts and then set about distilling those observations into a coherent script. They believed they would produce a book that would provide insight into how we do politics in this country, and they achieved their goal.

There's much to be learned from "Tragedy in the Commons" — it's a real page-turner, with informative writing and exciting stories.

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Several years ago, Ottawa journalist Stevie Cameron wrote a similar book, "Ottawa Inside Out," in which she describes MPs as the least important animals in the political food chain.

Loat and MacMillan confirm that.

MPs really don't have a job description — which is surprising — and newcomers can be overwhelmed if they don't have prior knowledge of the parliamentary process. The belief among newly elected MPs that their role is to bring their constituents' concerns to Parliament is quickly abandoned once they realize their actual role is to do the party's bidding and deliver the message back home.

While the job lacks definition and the need for better orientation for newbies is clear, the reality of the job is even worse. MPs are left to their own devices and must carve out a role for themselves that can be justified in their own minds and the minds of those who sent them to Parliament in the first place.

For many MPs, this is accomplished by doing "constituency work." Most of the former MPs interviewed for the book said that was the most fulfilling part of their job.

At this point the authors pose an intriguing question: "If parliamentarians do not have a shared conception of an MP's job description, how are Canadians to know what MPs are supposed to be doing in office?"

Their second question is equally tantalizing: "If citizens don't know what to expect from our elected officials, should we be surprised when they believe MPs don't deliver?"

The tight control parties have over their members and the rules MPs are expected to live by in Ottawa are arduous. Getting ahead has nothing to do with merit or ability. Advancement is mostly determined by being a good foot soldier and being noticed by the leadership in a positive way. Standing up for your constituents and opposing a party's position is not the kind of attention you want.

Chapter 5, "Kindergarten on the Rideau," focuses on the House of Commons and the role of MPs inside the chamber. It's revealing and a little revolting.

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"Tragedy in the Commons" is fascinating and well-researched. It does nothing to encourage participation in politics, which seems to fly in the face of the authors' original intent, but maybe it will inspire some change. We can only hope.

Sadly, the book confirms some of our worst fears about our democracy, but it won't disappoint.