



Canadian democracy not failing

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Good news. The annoying young politicians with zero life experience actually aren't taking over the House of Commons.

"Those who self-nominate, who also tended to be male and to have revealed careerist or policy-related motives for running, are much less likely to become MPs."

This means the people we send to Ottawa actually do come from a wide range of backgrounds – "it suggests we don't have an established and difficult-to-penetrate 'political class.'"

That's just one of many valuable tidbits in *Tragedy in the Commons*, a new book by Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan.

Readers might also be surprised to learn the attendance at Sun Media columnist and former MP Monte Solberg's original Medicine Hat nomination meeting: "Maybe 10,000 all told."

The book, a project of the Samara Institute think-tank, is a compilation of 80 exit interviews with former MPs from recent Parliaments – the most comprehensive of its kind.

Away from the din of Parliament and party, they were free to speak their minds.

While entire books have been written on interview subject Paul Martin, many of the other politicians excerpted here wouldn't otherwise get exposure.

In that respect, *Tragedy in the Commons* is an interesting and informative collection of anecdotes.

But what doesn't work is the whole framing device. The book's premise is clear from its subtitle: "Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada's Failing Democracy."

That's quite the statement. But the words between the covers prove democracy is thriving... with a few caveats.

Interviewees are proud of their constituency work. They were fulfilled by their work on committees – which, the authors remind us, is where the real work happens.

However they were frustrated that their committee assignments didn't match up with their personal experience.

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They were upset with how party central didn't seem to care about them except when it came time to whip the vote.

Their experience with nomination meetings – and these are the winners speaking – was sour.

And the common refrain: the PMO is too big for its boots.

The typical "democracy is failing" argument heard these days, which is not really a part of this book, is that partisan foibles are holding back progress. That Parliament just isn't working.

While the regular citizen who simply wants more money for their local initiative sooner than later might find the lack of a fix-all bill frustrating, that doesn't mean the whole process is rotten.

The PMO recently fed this confusion by creating a graphic bragging that 2013 was their "most productive year on record with 40 bills being passed" – as if conservatives believe legislation for legislation's sake is the goal.

It's a strange notion that if, in these days of largesse, the majority is delayed or encumbered in creating even more "progress" somehow democracy has fallen.

Sure, the quick passing of a bill due to cross-partisan consensus is democracy in action. But so are legislative gridlock, endless bickering and the antics of party politics.

As George F. Will writes in a recent Washington Post column, "The argument is between conservatives who say U.S. politics is basically about a condition, liberty, and progressives who say it is about a process, democracy."

Western governments have been expanding for centuries. Progressives tend to celebrate this and think we've reached a point of saturation where finally, just maybe, the mechanisms of government can cure certain human ills. The other side believes we're being suffocated by government intervention to the point where human responsibility has been eroded.

This is not about pettiness. It's about core principles.

And of course these two views will only clash further in the years ahead. To call this a fault of democracy is to misunderstand the purpose of democracy.

That said, this doesn't discount the concerns brought up in the book.

It just means Loat and MacMillan gave their book a theatrical title and tried to bookend their interviews with a contrived thesis.

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A truly failing democracy would be if Stephen Harper loses the next election but refuses to step down. Or if a bill passes and bureaucrats refuse to implement it. Luckily this stuff doesn't happen in Canada.

But Tragedy in the Commons makes it clear that while we don't have a crisis of process, we do have a few crises of particulars. What to do?

Perhaps, as Paul Martin recommends, earnest question period asks can be submitted in advance, to give the government more time to prepare real answers, rather than snarky zingers.

As for the seeds of democratic participation: "At a bare minimum, parties post clear nomination processes online to indicate how one goes about becoming a candidate, and how a citizen can get involved in the process."

On the matter of how MPs stop acting like jerks in the House – well just stop. Although that's easier said than done. In today's social media culture everyone acts like jerks in the public square.

"In short," as Loat and MacMillan summarize, "parties should hold themselves to higher standards, and be held to higher standards by their memberships and by MPs themselves."

Our democracy is far from failing. People run for office and get elected. Parties are created and ascend to power. Legislation is introduced and either turfed or amended and reformed.

The very fact that current MP Michael Chong can introduce his Reform Act, generate serious discussion and revise it, shows the messy system works.