



Devoted to democracy

A Q&A with Alison Loat about her book *Tragedy in the Commons* and Canadian politics

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From submitting essays in Mackintosh-Corry Hall to co-authoring a best-selling book on Canada's democracy, Alison Loat has always had a passion for politics.

In 2009, Loat, ArtSci '99, and fellow Queen's alumnus Michael MacMillan, ArtSci '78, launched Samara Canada, a non-partisan charitable organization aimed at increasing political engagement and participation among Canadian citizens.

Before these prominent alumni could endeavour to solve the problems facing Canadian democracy, they needed to identify the primary challenges encountered by the country's parliamentary governing system.

Loat and MacMillan interviewed 79 former Members of Parliament and reflected on thematic trends in these politicians' parliamentary experiences.

The pair published their conclusions in *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out on Canada's Failing Democracy* — now a Globe and Mail #1 bestselling book.

Loat shared her thoughts on the challenges facing Canadian politics with the *Journal* last weekend.

Why should Canadians be concerned about the health of our democracy?

Countries where people are free to speak, encouraged to participate and have a voice are ones that tend to be healthier, stronger and do better in every area of development. My view is that it would help us to have stronger policy and stronger ideas on how to tackle things

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like the environment, health care and education, if we had citizens actively engaging in those issues, whether it's participating through a Member of Parliament or in other ways.

That's the wonderful thing about Canada's democracy — there are lots of ways to get involved. Another reason to be concerned is that we know that people who tend to participate less in democracy are people who are less enfranchised in the country, so people who are new to Canada, or people who have less education or less money.

If you want a country where citizens are truly treated equally and welcomed equally, that's another reason to be concerned.

What do you think holds people back from wanting to engage politically, or knowing how to become politically engaged?

A big reason people don't engage is because the system actually doesn't encourage them to engage. Currently, there are 308 ridings [in Canada]. Each political party nominates a candidate to run in that riding. Over half of those ridings don't even have websites. That's just an example of how it can be very difficult to get involved.

Politicians themselves also discourage participation, and they do that unknowingly. One of the things that we found in our exit interviews is that when we asked the MPs why they got involved in politics, they all had similar versions of the same story: they had never planned to run, it had never occurred to them before, it wasn't until they were asked that they thought about it, they're not the kind of person that you'd think would be a politician.

They went out of their way to almost make excuses for what they had done. That sends a very damaging message to everybody, including young people.

Tell me about your organization, Samara, and how you view its role within Canadian society.

Both of us [Loat and MacMillan], although our backgrounds were different, had a similar concern over people checking out of their democracy, not caring, not voting and generally not engaging in what was going on in their communities and their country. We recognized



that, and wondered if there was not a way that we could shine a light on our democracy and try to encourage greater participation in it.

Why do you think Canadians aren't voting today, especially those between the ages of 18-24?

If you look back to previous generations, young people have always voted in smaller numbers than their parents. What is changing now is that they're increasingly less likely to ever start voting.

Fifty years ago, a 20-year-old really didn't vote then either, but when they were 25 or 30, they started voting. Now, they're not, so we're almost socializing permanent non-voters. There are all kinds of different theories, but for whatever reason, young people today are not growing up thinking that they have a responsibility to vote, that it's their duty or that it's important.

What we see is that people who have never been educated to think about voting don't feel qualified [to vote]. It's a lot about introducing people to thinking about what matters to them in their community, how that relates to government and how one's elected official can influence that. You have to help people understand and feel less intimidated before you start to encourage voting.

What would you say to someone who argues that his or her one vote won't make a difference

I would ask how they came to that point of view. Telling somebody to do something differently than they already do it is usually not effective. Most smokers know they shouldn't smoke and they still do it. So I usually just try to ask people what their experience is, what issues they care about, and how they try to make a difference on those issues. I try to come at it from an angle that interests them.

Some people may never decide to vote and they're free to do that. I respect people's choices. I always say that even if you just go to the poll and spoil your ballot, then at least you see that there is some function that's taking place there.



Do you think we would have a stronger democracy if we had career politicians, rather than Members of Parliament with varying professions?

I actually think it's a strength of our political system that we do have a diversity of people in politics. Egypt tends to have a lot of people in the military that run, so [politics] is a more defined career path there.

In Canada, although there is a lot of lawyer MPs, it's not the main profession. We have this relatively diverse political class — not as diverse as it could be by a mile — but there's not a set path. You don't have to be a millionaire. You don't have to have gone to certain schools or have a certain background, and I think that's a strength of the system.

What are your thoughts on Canada's parliamentary system? Do you think there are better alternatives?

I think there are a lot of things that are very strong about it. It has evolved and is very receptive to the people who serve in it, so this is how I always come back to the role of the MP being so important.

If you look at what people are most dissatisfied about, it actually has to do mostly with political parties. While there are changes that could be made to Parliament, on the whole, I actually think we have a very good system.

What are some of the changes we could make to help Canada's political system become more effective and efficient?

What I'd like to see is the regulation of political parties, one of the most heavily supported public organizations in the country. They're well subsidized through taxpayer money. If you really look at where they're spending their money, I bet you a lot of it is going towards negative advertising, and why we allow our tax dollars to go to that, I'm not sure.

So more transparency from our political parties, how much they're spending and what they're spending it on. I would like them to spend a lot more money on policy development and citizen engagement, particularly at the riding level, than on negative advertising.



Currently, women comprise approximately 25 per cent of Parliament. How can we increase the number of women legislators and make the House of Commons more representative of Canada's population?

We definitely underrepresent in a number of different areas, and women is obviously one of them. This comes back to the political parties. Women will win if they are nominated in ridings that are competitive.

Who does the nomination; who decides who the candidates are going to be? That's the political parties. You have to get more women nominated in winnable ridings, so they'll be more likely to win.

Earlier this month, over 300 Queen's students received a copy of *Tragedy in the Commons* at the annual *Queen's Model Parliament* conference in Ottawa. Why should a Queen's student, or any university student, read *Tragedy in the Commons*?

Ultimately, one of the privileges of living in a representative democracy is that the system is meant to be a reflection of us. I think it provides a really important reflection on the state of the country we live in. We tried to write it so that there's things that you can question, that you can talk about over dinner, to try to spark ideas for a better political system that works better for people.

My hope is that young people will read it, and they'll have some concerns, but they'll also be left with some optimism and a sense that they have a role to play in helping our democracy function better.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.