

Former MPs look back at House in ‘exit interviews’

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MPs tend to have lots to say when they are trying to start their careers.

But when they leave public office, either by losing an election or voluntarily stepping down, a public silence tends to set in.

Authors Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan tracked down 80 of the Commons departed, giving them "exit interviews" — the way a corporate employer might to an executive — to try to better understand what it's like to be a Member of Parliament.

They'll discuss their findings and their new book — *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out about Canada's Failing Democracy* — Tuesday night at an event hosted by Bryan Prince Bookseller and the Ontario Public Interest Research Group McMaster.

Loat says they wanted to shed light on what they believe is growing public skepticism about the country's democracy by taking a hard look at the day-to-day experience of MPs.

"Many found it challenging in modern party politics," says Loat.

Most said elected office was something that others urged them to do, not something that was a longtime personal goal. And once elected, they found it frustrating towing the party line.

Here's what some had to say:

"I think my job was to provide leadership. Not just reflect the discussion, but also to lead the discussion. And I think that is where people get caught up in 'No, my job is to do exactly what the people say.' No, you're actually sending me there to think and bring more information back too." — Paddy Torsney, Liberal MP, Burlington, 1993 to 2006

"The truth is, you're there to develop policy that is self-serving and beneficial to your party in order to keep you in power and get you re-elected ... There is politics involved in everything, so you kind of look at 'OK, how many are we going to gain from this? How does it fit with the principles of the party?'

"That was the challenge of me deciding to become an MP: I've always been an independent thinker and the fact (is) that the majority of life was governed by someone else, and you had to adhere to the policy or (endure) the wrath of the whip." — Russ Powers, Liberal MP, Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale, 2004-2006