
Book Excerpt: *Tragedy in the Commons* “What Job Is This Anyway?”

Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan

In Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada’s Failing Democracy, authors Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan draw on exit interviews with 80 former parliamentarians to reveal how federal politicians felt about their experiences leading and directing the country. Chief among their findings: many MPs did not have a clear understanding about what their job in Ottawa was, and often felt stymied by a partisan system that constricted their freedom in Ottawa. These selected excerpts from Chapter 4 (“What Job Is This Anyway?”) suggest that many MPs interviewed found the most tangible result of their work to be individual casework for constituents in their home ridings, prompting the authors to ask if all constituency work alone is the best use of an MP’s talents and time.

Once they’ve faced down the challenges of their first weeks in Ottawa—where the office is, how to claim expenses, where to find staff, how to get to the bathroom—new MPs face a more long-term hurdle: managing the many demands on their attention and schedule. The former Liberal MP for Miramichi, New Brunswick, Charles Hubbard, for one, was astonished by the number of people who approached his office to seek help from one of the federal bureaucracies, such as Immigration Canada, Revenue Canada or Service Canada. “Your office is always facing calls where somebody is frustrated with trying to approach the government,” said Hubbard. “When you think of somebody having trouble with his income tax or with his EI or trying to access the Canada Pension or an old age pension, and they get the proverbial runaround, they wind up calling your office.”

In fact, Hubbard’s office dealt with this type of matter so frequently that he assigned the equivalent of two and a half full-time people to handle the calls (most MPs have only half a dozen staff between their

two offices). The staffers, Hubbard said, averaged more than a hundred such calls per day; in the 15 years that he served as an MP, Hubbard figures his staffers handled more than a hundred thousand calls that involved constituents seeking help in their dealings with federal government bureaucracies.

A high school principal before entering politics, Hubbard shared a story about a former student in desperate need of help. By then about 35 years old, the man had a wife and three kids, and was dying of cancer—and yet Service Canada was denying him his disability payments. When Hubbard heard about the situation he called the man’s doctor, who subsequently wrote a statement to support the man’s claim, which Hubbard then made sure was read by the proper person at Service Canada. A month before the former student’s death, Service Canada approved the man for the disability pension. The money would make an enormous difference in the lives of the man’s family—his kids would get the payments until they came of age, and his wife would get payments as long as she needed them. “So, you know, as a Member of Parliament, you have people in need who call you, and who can benefit from a bit of effort you put into it,” Hubbard said.

Hubbard came to regard dealing with these appeals for help with the Canadian federal bureaucracy as an important aspect of the MP’s job. When we asked which part of his work as a parliamentarian he enjoyed most, Hubbard mentioned these cases. “You probably

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get more satisfaction from helping people than you did from trying to wade through legislation,” Hubbard said. “And the struggles in Ottawa, in terms of trying to put forward your ideas, or to get changes done, it’s a very frustrating experience. And when you look at somebody who is in need of Canada Pension, who’s been denied it... by bureaucrats who’ve never seen them, and the person comes to [your] office and you see the condition he’s in, and he has five kids at home and is disabled and you can help that person, there’s probably more satisfaction from that.”

Few would ever fault Charles Hubbard for doing what he could to help any individual, let alone a former student, facing such tragic circumstances. But we were struck by the number of MPs who had similar stories. Is this what voters send MPs to Ottawa to do?

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Just as Charles Hubbard remembers fondly helping his ailing former student navigate Service Canada, some MPs emphasized working in a service-oriented capacity for constituents not only as one of the job’s most gratifying elements but as one of its primary purposes. “You’re the ombudsman,” explained Conservative MP Jim Gouk. “When there’s a federal problem, you’re the go-to guy. You’re the one that they look to for help because if you can’t help them, who can? You either help or put them in touch with someone who can. You listen to their problem.” This can mean assisting constituents with the bureaucratic matters—immigration, employment insurance, passports or veterans’ support. It also includes helping people benefit from federal programs or legislation, and fulfilling the role of a representative by attending social occasions or other commemorative events. In fact, about a quarter of the MPs we interviewed said this service to constituents, when they could operate freely from any party interference and the results were tangible and personal, was the best part of being an MP.

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A few MPs, on the other hand, disagreed with what they saw as an over-demand for constituency service on the part of those they represented. Conservative MP for Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Brian Fitzpatrick referred disparagingly to the “chamber of commerce” philosophy held by some mayors in his riding, which had them badgering him about what he was doing for the riding as its MP. Was he bringing them grant money that would create jobs? Was he wooing industry? “I guess I never really was strong on that area,” Fitzpatrick said. “I didn’t think that was the role. We’re lawmakers—we’re there to make sure that we pass good laws and so on. It’s not like I’m a lobbyist, to bring industry and stuff to your

riding. . . . It still bothers me, because philosophically I think the role of government is to create the proper environment so that enterprise and business operates in a free market, not with the government trying to give out grants and so on. So I always found it a bit distasteful to get involved with that stuff, but you’re forced into it whether you like it or not.”

Liberal MP Sue Barnes saw the importance of constituency work, but felt that most of it could—and should—be done by the staff at her local office. “I’m known for good constituency work, but I didn’t do most of it—my staff did it on my behalf,” she said. “I gave them the instructions, and they knew they’d be in trouble if they didn’t do it.” At the same time, she added, “To me [constituency work is] a sidebar.” And she recognized that her constituents would have preferred she work directly on providing service in the riding. “It’s something of a political truth that they don’t care what you do somewhere else.” However, Barnes saw the two as linked, and acknowledged that she chose her legislative priorities from among the issues that mattered to her constituents.

She backed medical marijuana in 1999 and 2004, for example, because a constituent raised the issue with her. “A lot of things [were] sparked by individual constituent problems,” Barnes said. “My interest in same-sex marriage came from a constituent who



Authors Michael MacMillan and Alison Loat



In Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan's revealing book *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada's Failing Democracy*, many MPs describe front-line constituency work as consuming vast amounts of time and personnel, prompting questions as to whether some MPs have become "defacto front-line service representatives for the federal government."

worked for me in my first campaign, and later died of AIDS—a very intelligent young man."

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It's a noble pursuit, helping frustrated citizens deal with the federal government's most difficult bureaucracies, whether with passport applications, immigration claims or pension problems. But the practice raises a larger question: Should our Members of Parliament really be spending their time on such issues? The traditional definition of an MP in the Westminster system of government—to consider, refine and pass legislation, and to hold the government to account—suggests not. Eleni Bakopanos, for one, agreed: "That was the hard part," she said, "trying to explain to somebody, especially immigration cases, where we were limited in how far we could intervene. . . . It should not be the MP's office handling that."

Bakopanos is right. The practice of MPs intervening in immigration, employment insurance, veterans' affairs, Canada pension and disability cases raises difficult questions about political interference in a process that is meant to be handled by an objective bureaucracy. Judging from the MPs' reports of their efforts, Canadians, and would-be Canadians, are receiving unequal and inconsistent treatment. If you know an MP, or if an MP takes an interest in your case, then it seems likely you'll get better service. Is the Canadian federal bureaucracy one that functions better on the basis of who you know? Do citizens who happen to be Conservative Party members receive the same level of service from their MPs in Liberal-held ridings? What about NDP, Green or Bloc party members? It is a precept of our democratic government that our party affiliation should not act as an advantage, or disadvantage, in our dealings with bureaucrats.

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Party affiliation aside, one's ability to solicit help from an MP can also be enhanced by a personal connection. In other countries where politicians interact with government in such a manner, those activities are referred to as corruption. Ideally, our bureaucracy should be equally accessible for all, regardless of whether one happened to catch the MP's attention, or helped out in a certain political campaign.

Then there's the question of appropriate focus. Working for their constituents in this way, our MPs are acting as de facto front-line service representatives for the federal government. Should an MP's job description include the imperative to paper over a broken bureaucracy? Or should the federal bureaucracy's decision-making processes be made more transparent and accessible to citizens, so that the burden of this work can be taken out of MPs' offices and placed back in the bureaucrats' hands, where it belongs?

Another question the practice poses: Is it the most effective use of our parliamentarians' time? Many Members of Parliament are spending valuable time and energy acting as intermediaries between individuals and the federal government. But rather than responding to citizen complaints about, say, an immigration process gone awry, rather than untangling the individual snarls symptomatic of a flawed system, shouldn't MPs more productively devote their energies toward reforming these snarled bureaucracies? Toward streamlining our nation's immigration application processes? To improving the customer service provided by Revenue Canada and perhaps simplifying the tax code? To fixing the approvals processes of the pension and employment insurance systems?

All that said, it takes only a little analysis to understand what's motivating the phenomenon, at least from the MPs' perspective. Part of it might be decent human kindness: after all, people can arrive at an MP's office in pretty dire straits, and it is human

nature to want to assist. It also helps MPs take the pulse of the people they represented. "The constituency work is the reality check," said John Godfrey in an interview on CBC Radio's *The Current* about his exit interview. "You can be far too abstract if you're not dealing with real people, one at a time, sitting in front of you, with real problems."

Let's not fool ourselves, here, however: a constituent assisted by an MP is a constituent who is likely to vote for that MP in the next election. More fundamentally, constituent service is a manifestation of the same factors that encourage and perpetuate MP freelancing.

In many ways, this customer service work is the logical extreme of freelancing. Helping constituents to fill out paperwork, immigration forms, passport advocacy—this is what our federal political representatives descend to, when our political system renders them impotent. It's a logical symptom of the MPs' absence of power.

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An MP typically starts out as a backbencher who isn't allowed much control over her political career. She doesn't choose the committee on which she serves. Her press releases, and increasingly her parliamentary speaking points, are pre-written and approved by the leader's office. And she certainly doesn't get much input on the important aspects of government

legislation. So how does she assert herself?

How does she work in a manner that gives her personal satisfaction and the feeling that she's made the most of her time in office? Acting as a customer service rep for the federal government is perhaps the easiest way to do that. This is labour that the MPs can control.

Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada's Failing Democracy is published by Random House Canada and available anywhere books are sold.

See also, *Parliamentary Book Shelf*, page 44

