

Ten Years of Exit Interviews with Former MPs

Ten years after commencing the initial round of exit interviews with departing Members of Parliament, the Samara Centre for Democracy has recently published three new reports based on a second round of interviews. These publications, and the best-selling book *Tragedy in the Commons*, have received tremendous attention in the media and amongst parliamentary observers who have been interested in the candid observations of former parliamentarians. In this article, the authors outline the organization's evolving interview process and overall methodological approach and discuss tentative plans to make the individual long form interviews available to future researchers.

Jane Hilderman and Michael Morden

Ten years ago, as a brand new nonpartisan charity, the Samara Centre for Democracy launched a pan-Canadian project founded on the belief that a chasm was opening between political leaders and citizens, but that leaders themselves might hold some clues for how to begin to close it. So began the Member of Parliament exit interviews project.

Our initial round of exit interviews was undertaken between 2008 and 2011. We worked in partnership with the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, whose support permitted us to reach former members from across parties, and across the country in both English and French. In total, the Samara Centre spoke with 80 former MPs who had sat in the 38th, 39th, and 40th Parliaments, including more than 20 cabinet ministers and one prime minister. Those interviews formed the basis for four reports, and the best-selling book *Tragedy in the Commons* (2014).¹

The 2015 federal election brought tremendous turnover to the House of Commons—cumulatively over 400 years' worth of MP career experience was departing. We decided, therefore, that it was important to replicate the project. Throughout 2017, we spoke to another 54 MPs who had sat in the 41st Parliament

and were defeated or retired in 2015. Those interviews form the basis of a series of three new reports released this year that flesh out the job description for Members of Parliament.²

The idea of exit interviews is straight forward. It's a concept borrowed from the private sector where staff or executives departing an organization are asked to speak candidly from intimate, insider knowledge about what is and is not working. In the same way, former MPs have unique insights into the functioning of our pinnacle democratic institutions. And having exited public life, they are freer to speak frankly, with attribution, unbound by the fear that their openness might cost them at election time or earn their leader's disapproval.

The Samara Centre began applying the exit interview approach to MPs systematically after observing that much of that insight was being missed, and ultimately lost. It's especially true for ordinary MPs—MPs who never landed in senior cabinet positions, for example—that they have limited opportunities to share their knowledge on the state of our politics after making their exit. Former MPs have told us that when they leave office, things can get very quiet very quickly. Letting MPs simply walk away from public life with their knowledge and experience in hand is letting data disappear down the drain—data that should be captured and used to bring clarity to Parliament, and to drive positive change. Moreover, our experience is that many MPs crave such an opportunity to seed the ground for a better political future—even if it's one that does not involve them directly.

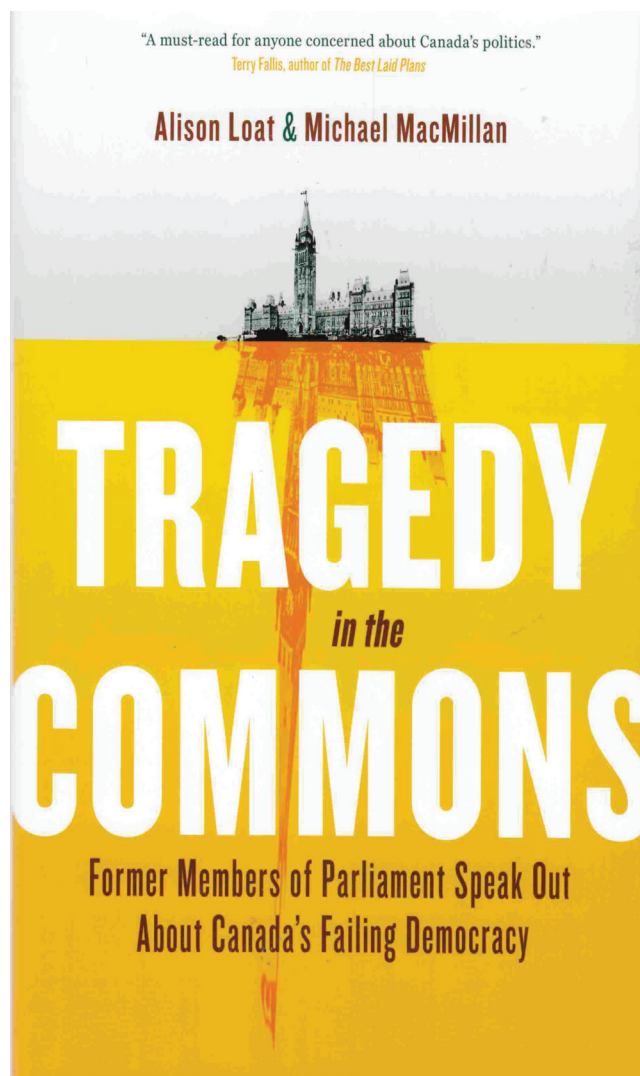
Jane Hilderman and Michael Morden serve as executive director and research director of the Samara Centre for Democracy, respectively.

The methodological approach is defined, first, in flexibility. But there are certain aspects on which we are firm; this reflects our experience, with the benefit of having conducted several iterations of interviews. We interview former MPs in person. We interview them in a venue of their choice, though we encourage a quiet and relatively private space. That almost always means their home communities, and often their homes. We've interviewed former MPs at fishing lodges, local libraries, kitchen tables, living rooms, backyards, parking lots and coffee shops.

The interviews are long-form and relatively unstructured. Although we work from interview guides that identify themes we hope to probe, we want MPs to lead the conversation. We ask former MPs for two hours, and that is generally the time the interviews take. We ask all participants to agree to be on the record, though we sometimes withhold attribution in our publications in order to draw attention to commonality of experiences across parties and members.

One of the ways in which the Samara Centre's exit interviews are distinct from some academic research interviewing political elites is in the use, in part, of "biographical interviewing". Biographical interviewing encourages interview subjects to move chronologically through their experiences—in our case, their experience in public life, beginning with reflection on how they came to pursue elected office. There is initially just minimal intervention from the interviewer, which means that the interview subject is given freedom to shape a narrative. This approach has several advantages, including providing an easy point of entry for the interviewee, and allowing the interviewee to speak comfortably from closely held knowledge. The challenge comes in analysis, when we must pull apart the dense mass of data produced in this way, to find the data points that are particularly interesting.

Another distinction from academic research is that the purpose of exit interviews is first, to create an overall record or oral history, and second, to answer specific research questions. So while we do, at points, direct former MPs toward particular topics, the interviews are considerably less directed than academic interviews with politicians that seek answers to highly defined and specific questions. This sometimes provides less leverage over some questions than we would like. The advantage of this approach, for our purposes, is both in creating a complete record for posterity, and in allowing former MPs themselves to identify aspects of their experience that they find salient—to let us know what they think matters.



To get to the Samara Centre's own research output based on the interviews, we examine the interview data in ways that are both positivist and interpretive. We look to identify real information about the typically hidden domains of MPs' lives, trying when possible to test the veracity and accuracy of anecdotes by comparing them against one another and the public record where possible. We also examine MPs' subjectivity, the meaning they perceive in their experiences. We consider the implications of what they do not know or care to comment on. Interview data is first coded thematically. This means that interviews can be read vertically, as single documents, or horizontally, with thematically similar material from different interviews (for example, MPs' descriptions of their nomination experience) read together. This makes possible the search for patterns and shared experiences.

In our output, we try to strike a balance between simply documenting and advancing an argument. But we are not stenographers. As an organization committed to provoking improvement in the health of our democracy, we reserve the right to advance a point of view. That involves making normative choices about what ought to be, based on how MPs describe what is. The result is that in some instances, we reach different conclusions than some of our interviewees did. Our conclusions are not unassailable and they invite debate—but they are always founded on careful consideration of the interview data as a whole.

The reports published by the Samara Centre, as well as the book *Tragedy in the Commons*, have made their way into offices of elected representatives at all levels, in the post-secondary curriculum of many Canadian political studies courses, and into key training places like the Institute for Future Legislators at the University of British Columbia. Like the “samara” seeds that our organization are named for, we believe this research is planting seeds for a different way of pursuing politics for those who go on to be active citizens, political staff and public office seekers. In particular, the second volume of reports has grown more explicit in recommendations that could improve the functioning of Parliament, constituency offices and parties, based on the insights of former MPs.

But the interviews are not meant to be viewed only through the lens of the Samara Centre for Democracy. Our ambition is broader than that. We want the interviews to stand alone as a public resource. Following the growing emphasis in the social sciences on openness and transparency, we are enthusiastic to share the interviews with interested academics on request. But time and resources permitting, the Samara Centre intends to render all the material—currently interviews with 134 MPs, totalling more than 250 hours of audio across four different parliaments—in a form that is more broadly and publicly accessible. In the immediate term, we hope it will be a useful source for interested citizens, aspiring politicians,

political scientists and other professional observers. In the longer term, it will live as a rich oral history of Parliament in the early 21st century—unlike anything that has existed before.

Many who learn about the project have encouraged the Samara Centre to expand the scope of the exit interview project—to include senior political staff, to include Senators, to cover provincial and local levels for comparison, or even to return to interviewees a decade later to see how their views have changed. Though this has not been possible for the Samara Centre given our limited capacity for what is a resource-intensive project, we have always welcomed and encouraged others to take up this work, too.

A foundational belief of the Samara Centre remains intact 10 years later: that it is elected office-holders who can and must be key players in the effort to stimulate new energy and enthusiasm in our democracy. Despite popular dissatisfaction with “elites,” representatives remain at the heart of Canada’s democratic machinery. For the last 10 years, the exit interviews project has tried to capture some of former MPs’ capacity, insight, and commitment to public service—to drive change now, and create a lasting record of Canadian democracy.

Notes

- 1 Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan (2014), *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out about Canada’s Failing Democracy*, Toronto: Random House Canada.
- 2 Michael Morden, Jane Hilderman, and Kendall Anderson (2018), *Flip the Script: Reclaiming the legislature to reinvigorate representative democracy*, Toronto: the Samara Centre for Democracy; Terhas Ghebretelle, Michael Morden, Jane Hilderman, and Kendall Anderson (2018), *Beyond the Barbeque: Reimagining constituency work for local democratic engagement*, Toronto: the Samara Centre for Democracy; Michael Morden, Jane Hilderman, and Kendall Anderson (2018), *The Real House Lives: Strengthening the role of MPs in an age of Partisanship*, Toronto: the Samara Centre for Democracy.