

Heather Menzies: Reclaiming the commons in Canadian politics

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Heather Menzies

Members of Parliament being overly connected to political party bosses is only part of the “Tragedy in the Commons” laid bare by Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan in their best-selling [book](#) of that title. The other half at least is the disconnect at work. MPs are disconnected from their constituency and their ability to represent its concerns in the common-good forum that is Parliament.

Turning this around involves many things, some of which are included in Michael Chong’s reform proposals, such as cancelling party leaders’ vetoes in selecting constituency candidates for election.

To put the scope of the necessary reforms in perspective, however, it might help to know that the original constituency was the commons itself. From the research I’ve done on this institution as it developed historically in the Highlands of Scotland, I have found that the self-governing commons was the prevailing form of both organizing society and running its political economy. Constituents represented themselves directly in open commons meetings, held at the local public house (pub). They were immersed in the commons (its fields, fens, forests and upland pastures), virtually living the indivisibility of the common good. And they brought this sense to commons decision making, such as what stints, or limits, to set on the numbers of sheep and cows each family could send to the common summer pasture, to prevent over-grazing.

The erosion of the commons as self-governing constituency involved a myriad of factors over several centuries. These ranged from granting feu charters of effective land ownership to Norman and Anglo-Norman barons, during feudalism, to the separation of law and regulation from local practice and custom and its standardization as a national common law, the Agricultural Revolution and the Improvement Movements and, with these, the rise of new propertied interests leveraging the proceeds from commercial-scale

farming into a national economy and emergent empire. These people used the new institution of Parliament to good effect, including to pass enclosure acts that brought more and more common land into the regime of private ownership and commercial development.

The House of Commons became more fully representative over time, as the franchise was extended to all men, not just property holders, and to women as well. But its record at representing the common good of constituencies, its ability to advance indivisible benefits like universal health, education and housing and to address indivisible harms like oil or gas-polluted drinking water or carbon overload in the air has, if anything, actually diminished.

One reason is that constituency groups have been redefined as special-interest groups, with these increasingly abstracted from actual constituencies, and arranged in a pecking order the top one of which is big business. This might help explain why trust in government has slipped from 60 per cent in 1968 to 28 per cent today, why 46 per cent of Canadians feel that MP s do not represent constituents, and why only 38 per cent of young people, between 18 and 24, bother to vote.

Cutting the bullying ties to the party and allowing MP s to reconnect with electors so they can get back to their job of representing a constituency should help. But equally, electors and would-be electors have to reconnect with the constituency themselves. Part of reclaiming an agenda of the common good must involve reclaiming the constituency as the common ground where this can be articulated and local MPs held accountable.

It is a moment of opportunity, particularly for young people to shift some of their activism to the local level.

Restoring integrity to the House of Commons needs both: reducing accountability to the centres of party power and increasing accountability to the grassroots of the commons of constituencies.

Heather Menzies' 10th book, *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good*, will be launched in Ottawa on May 15 from 5:30-7:30 p.m at 25OneCommunity, 251 Bank St., 2nd. floor.

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