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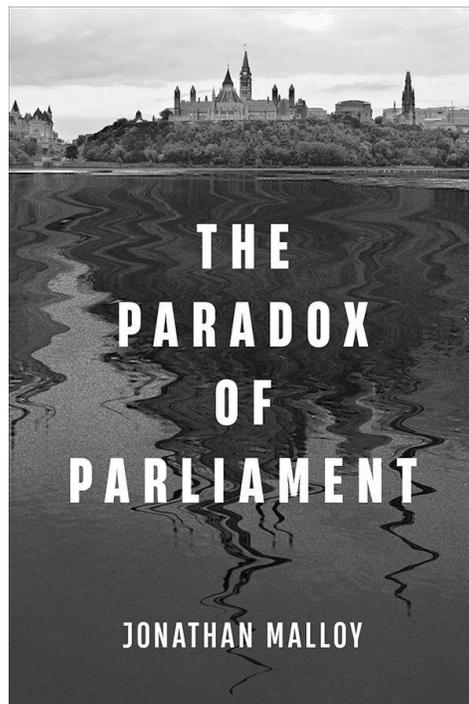
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Parliament's in a pickle



In his new book, *The Paradox of Parliament* (University of Toronto Press) Jonathan Malloy describes the catch-22 that Canada's Parliament contends with—that it is expected to serve two different contradictory purposes: represent all Canadians, while also governing decisively and with conviction. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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The Paradox of Parliament by Jonathan Malloy (University of Toronto Press, 2023)

It's the end of what feels like it's been a long year in Canadian politics. Somehow, it can feel as though Parliament becomes a messier, more raucous, less productive place every year, and 2023 has been no exception.

attention to detail; his successor trying, with much opposition, to lecture the House on decorum, before he also faced an attempted ouster; MPs continuing the trend of blatantly using Question Period to manufacture moments for social media; 30-hour long voting sessions; grocery store CEOs hauled in front of committees to be chastised with no real consequence; and so much more. Minority Parliaments are a lively affair, to say the least.

The more one watches parliamentary procedure, and the performative posturing in Question Period, in particular, the less faith one might have in the productivity of the nation's political institutions.

But Carleton University political science professor Jonathan Malloy, who specializes in Canadian political institutions, maintains that Parliament isn't necessarily as bad as Canadians might think it is.

In his new book, *The Paradox of Parliament* (<https://utorontopress.com/9781487550882/the-paradox-of-parliament/>). (University of Toronto Press) he describes the catch-22 that Canada's Parliament contends with—that it is expected to serve two different contradictory purposes: represent all Canadians, while also governing decisively and with conviction. He also challenges some of the pervasive narratives surrounding Parliament: for instance, that the introduction of cameras into the House of Commons and the Senate made things more raucous, when people at the time actually thought they improved decorum.

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Jonathan Malloy is a political science professor at Carleton University specializing in the study of Canada's political institutions. *Photograph courtesy of Jonathan Malloy*

Given its many competing priorities, Malloy argues that Parliament actually does function quite well, but that Canadians' expectations of it continually fall short because of these contradictory pressures.

Malloy deliberately declines to formulate any solutions or suggestions for reform, instead offering a detailed, but straightforward analysis of why things are the way they are. He attempts to improve Canadians' relationship with their democracy by furthering their understanding of its position and mitigating their expectations accordingly. His book covers MPs, political parties, the Senate, and he draws from the memoirs of many former parliamentarians in his chapter on diversity. One omission is the role the media plays in all this.

The Hill Times chatted with Malloy about his book, the unique position of Canada's Westminster system compared to its peers, and how Parliament itself adapts to change (hint: not well).

The following has been edited for clarity and length.

Can you describe briefly what the paradox of Parliament is?

really, in the end, we have different and contradictory expectations of Parliament. Very few people are really satisfied with Parliament. There's so many complaints about Parliament, so many calls for Parliament to reform, but in the end, I think it's really because we asked Parliament to do different things, paradoxical things. Specifically, people see Parliament as place to represent points of view. We elected 338 Members of Parliament to represent different views. But Parliament also has to decide. It has to work in teams, but it also has to work in a very adversarial way. And that's a different approach. They work together, but they are really contradictory. And the book explores that further."

What makes this paradox a particular challenge for the Canadian Parliament in our context compared to other legislatures and the parliamentary systems in other nations?

"It's a good question, because all legislatures, to some degree, have this paradox; that they both have to represent points of views then they also have to come to decisions. They also have to hold governments to account. There's a lot of different things going on there. I think what makes Canada relatively unique, even among Westminster model Parliaments, is the incredible importance of regionalism in this country. Amid all the other expectations of Parliament, there are regional expectations of Parliament, which often Parliament really fails, I think, to fulfill.

"Parliament also has more competitors than in other countries, including, say, Britain and Australia. By competitors, I mean other types of institutions. One is federalism. We have very strong provincial governments in this country. And so Parliament is not necessarily the centre of political action for the country. The Canadian Parliament really has more competitors, or centrifugal forces, more things pulling at it that, again, really adds to this paradox; these different expectations of what Parliament can reasonably achieve."

So a question I had when reading this was: does this paradox mean that Parliament is doomed to fail? That it can never do what Canadians want it to do? But also is that just the paradox of democracy—that the whole of the population will never be content with what gets decided there?

Parliament, and, in many ways, it works fairly well. But it leaves people unsatisfied. And that's the issue, I think, with politics, in general, is that politics always involves compromises; involves not getting everything you want, and in the case of Parliament, Parliament doesn't always do the things that we'd like it to do. But that doesn't mean it doesn't get a lot done. Parliament gets a lot done on an everyday basis. But it also disappoints people in a lot of ways. And, unfortunately, that does lead to disillusionment, not just with Parliament, but the entire political system."

Can you describe a little bit what it is able to do well?

"I would highlight two main things that Parliament does well: one, is that it does do a lot of fairly routine things well, passing bills that are not particularly contentious. The work of committees, I mean, some committee studies get quite contentious, but there's lots and lots of committee studies going on all the time. Most of them achieve good things, but they aren't particularly controversial, so they don't get a lot of attention. So there's a lot of parliamentary business that just kind of gets done on a fairly routine basis. And this is good for governance and public policy, but it's not really noticed compared to when things do break down.

"The other thing Parliament does, for better or worse, is it holds the government to account. That's the focus of Question Period, and the focus of other areas of Parliament, and again, you know, many people express dissatisfaction with Question Period. There's lots of theatrics and stuff, but Question Period is extremely important for holding the government to account. The government spends a lot of time thinking about Question Period, and so does the opposition. It can be messy and unsatisfying, and I think it could, maybe, be better in many ways, but that's what scrutiny is, and that's the heart of Parliament going back hundreds of years."

It seems as though this discussion of decorum in the House is certainly a perennial one, but it almost seems like it just continues to devolve and decline. Is that actually happening? What do you make of this particular moment in Canada's Parliament in terms of decorum in the House?

"There's no doubt decorum could be better. Parliament can be a very contentious, adversarial place. Many people would find it just downright toxic, the way that there's just so much interrupting, so much yelling, and so on, so I mean, it

much better could it be? What would be good decorum in Parliament? And we're talking to the House of Commons here, specifically, although we've had recent issues in the Senate as well.

"It is not satisfactory. It's far too adversarial, too toxic, in my view, but I also am not quite sure what is a reasonable expectation we can put on decorum because Parliament is about the major issues of the day; it is about genuinely different political philosophies and visions of the country, and people are going to take that seriously. This idea that everyone can sit down and calmly discuss the issue, that's not really how it works. There's always going to be disagreement, and as I said, Parliament has to decide. That's part of the paradox. People can bring their views, represent them, but they also have to decide, and deciding usually can get contentious."

You wrote that "Parliament absorbs change rather than be changed." Can you explain what you mean by that a little more?

"I give the example in the book of how in the early days of the pandemic, when on the very first, initial week, Parliament was actually pretty nimble at working together in this very unusual circumstance to make some decisions there. But it wasn't long before government opposition just slid into their normal roles, sniping at each other, and the normal patterns re-asserted themselves. Over the years, there's been expectations that, 'Oh this will change Parliament,' or 'Here's an opportunity for reform.' And again, and again, Parliament doesn't really change. It evolves for sure, but it doesn't transform. It tends to absorb external shocks, rather than being transformed."

You stress in your book that you wish to remain almost a passive observer of the complexities of Parliament and you didn't want to make recommendations or predictions, but rather want to examine it closely. And I think at one point, you described Parliament as an onion, one which, the more layers you pulled back, the more complex it seemed. I have to say it felt a little bit hopeless, to be honest, that this institution might just be so large and complex that reform is so difficult to make, and when it is made, it just inevitably reveals more problems and more complexities. Are we just stuck with the way things are?

reasonably expect of this institution?’ And by highlighting what I call the paradox, and these different forces at work, I’m really trying to say to people: let’s not set ourselves up for dashed hopes. Let’s try to understand what’s going on here, and what can we do with what we have?

“A line that I think I have in the book somewhere is: MPs can institute parliamentary reform any time they want. They just have to start doing things differently and that does require sometimes going against their leaders, going against the culture, going against each other. There’s reasons why they don’t do that. But Parliament really is capable of great things. And I think ultimately, again, I think it does work and does serve the country reasonably well. It could do certainly a lot better there. But that’s really up to all of us to expect more from Parliament, but expect realistic things from Parliament. I do think that we have a very long history in this country of expecting too much from Parliament and then being disappointed when it doesn’t meet our unrealistic expectations.”

I know you stayed away from it in the book, but what are some things you’d like to see changed?

“Certainly the biggest thing I would like to see changed is a large immaturity about the institution itself, because it seems to me that everyone—from all sides, government, opposition—they come to Parliament naturally thinking, ‘What’s in it for me and my party and my point of view?’ which is still there. And I think no one is really trying to think largely about what’s best for the institution, regardless of my own personal interests and things there.”

I wondered if you’d considered the role of the media in shaping Parliament or reflecting Parliament back to itself?

“Media is indeed part of the problem. I never like to just sort of bash the media, but like the media is a business that has to find things that are interesting, that will get people’s attention. And so naturally, the media focuses on conflict because that’s what people pay attention to. And so the media tends to then reflect that and carry that on. I don’t blame people for pursuing their self interests, the interests of their parties or the interest of other media outlets like that there. But it means then that no one’s looking at the overall institution.

certainly there's a lot of institutional memory that is gone now from the press gallery, that perhaps had a better, broader understanding of parliamentary institutions. It's still there for sure, but not as much as it used to be."

You did note that some of the most significant reforms in recent history were the reforms made to the Senate in 2016, when Justin Trudeau kicked senators out of the Liberal caucus to reduce partisanship in the Red Chamber. What do you think of this change, and is it sustainable?

"The Senate has always been a solution shopping for a problem to solve. Why do we have a Senate? Is it because the House of Commons is too partisan and too raucous? Is it for regional representation? Is it because we want some sort of eminent sober second thought? Is it a vehicle for greater diversity? Is it meant to counterbalance the partisanship of the House of Commons?

"There's no doubt that the 2016 reforms have partially transformed the place. But of course, you know, one party has not agreed with those reforms. And I think that the long-term test really will be a change of government. As to whether or not this this new approach to the Senate works, go back to the paradox. The Senate is now this wonderful representative 'Dream Team' of dozens of Senators who've been appointed on their own personal merits. They don't have party ties, they're not there to sort of argue for a partisan point of view. They're just there to represent Canadians. Well, that's great, wonderful. But it also means then that they don't necessarily work well as organized teams. And certainly, the Conservatives would say that in the end, these [Independent] senators do represent a certain point of view, a certain type of Canada that does not necessarily represent all of Canada. I think there's some validity to that argument as well there."

Why did you want to write this book?

"I wanted to write a book about Parliament that explains things. It serves well as a textbook for students and things like that, but I really wanted it to be a book that any anybody who would be interested in the first place in reading a book about Parliament, would enjoy this book. I did try and avoid academic language and tried to avoid jargon. I tried to write a book that that was genuinely interesting to people that would be inclined to read a readable book about Parliament in the first place. I'd be really glad if it gets a wider readership that really again just helps people to think more about Parliament,

Because Parliament is capable, I think, of great things. But we have to be realistic about what we can expect from it.”

The Paradox of Parliament, by Jonathan Malloy, University of Toronto Press, 304 pp., \$45.95.

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