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Book Review by Patrick Brown

A First Person View of Ottawa

Elizabeth May is no stranger to what happens on Parliament Hill. This is not just because she is the leader of a national political party. It's because she has been around Ottawa for years, as an environmental lawyer and activist, as one of the original organizers of the Green Party, as an advisor to the Minister of the Environment, Tom McMillan, and as Executive Director of the Sierra Club of Canada.

Losing Confidence: Power, Politics, and the Crisis in Canadian Democracy, published at the beginning of April, is her first person account of the politics and elections of the past few years. Her knowledge of history, of parliament, of how things are done in Ottawa, together with her devotion to representative democracy, the environment, and social justice give her a unique viewpoint. Her ability to tell a great story helps too; this is a very good read.

She pulls no punches, taking on all four of the other political parties (and political parties in general), the media, the RCMP, the electoral system, election campaigns and the money that pays for them, the Prime Minister, lobbyists, and the partisan incivility that characterizes the House of Commons and its committees today.

Recalling Recent History

We may find it hard to remember all the strange political events that have led us to the current uncertain parliamentary standoff. This book covers them all, including the sponsorship scandal, the RCMP memo about Ralph Goodale in the 2006 election, the Maher Arar case, attack ads, the firing of the head of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission; the 'leaders' debates' for the 2008 election; the 'in and out' scandal of election campaign financing, and the 2008 'economic statement' that led to the threat of a coalition of the Liberals, the NDP, and the Bloc Quebecois, followed by the prorogation of Parliament to avoid a vote of confidence; and more.

Elizabeth May was right there: in Ottawa, in the galleries of the House of Commons, in contact with the politicians and the press. Her accounts of these events are clear and fascinating reading.

This book relates these events to longer term trends: the fashionable denigration of government in the '90s, the rise of

the 'presidential' power of the Prime Minister and particularly Stephen Harper's iron-fisted control of what is said and what is done, the centralization of control and reduced capabilities of the media, the power of international 'government relations' lobbying firms, and Canadians' general lack of knowledge about our government.

A Fundamental Challenge

Examining the loss of public respect for politicians, and the level of scandal and corruption within government, May challenges what she calls the 'corrupted value system of our entire society— the assumption that naked self-interest trumps altruism as the driving force of human, and particularly political, behaviour. 'This may be fine for market-based economic theory, but it is surely disastrous for human affairs.' Unfortunately, she continues, political actions based on such assumptions 'tend to have a self-fulfilling nature.'

Fair Voting

May reserves her most cogent comments for the deficiencies of the First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system, and the urgent need for a proportional representation system. This, she says, is essential for a Parliament that really reflects the desires of the voters, who have been turning up at the polls in ever-decreasing numbers.

She observes that Canada has had multiple political parties since 1920, and from then to now, the nation has experienced thirteen minority governments and twelve 'false majority' governments. (A 'false majority' government is one in which more voters voted against the 'winning' party than voted for it.) Her chapter on 'Making the Vote Fair' is a thorough review of Canada's voting history and a very thoughtful survey of the alternatives.

Coalition Government

'Coalitions', says May, 'are the way of the future.' In fact, that's the title of her final chapter. It starts with an analysis of the 'parliamentary crisis' of December 2008 which, she says, demonstrated a number of the key points of this book. Political parties, she says, are all about getting and keeping power. 'When the party that forms government decides that governing

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is less important than winning the next election, the entire parliamentary process becomes a mere backdrop for non-stop electioneering.'

She finds the 'tribal' hatred between parties 'insidious'. She notes that the Green Party has tried to engage other parties in 'co-operative approaches' in dealing with environmental policy; this seems to have been largely unsuccessful. 'I am not sufficiently partisan to understand why sensible people would not be willing to work together in the interests of protecting future generations,' she remarks.

She realizes, however, that constant attacks on other parties is what party leaders are expected to do, both by the media and the public, and that any other approach is 'threatening to the

whole construct of partisanship.' But she points out, 'moments of flux and crisis allow innovations to occur.' And she provides examples.

Elizabeth May's point is that 'a move towards coalitions would reverse the trends that threaten Canadian democracy.' She clearly regards the threat of a 'false majority' government as far more serious.

If anything, the 'reduced capacity' of the media is the key contributing factor to this danger. But 'we have to get involved ourselves. Democracy is not a spectator sport.'

Elizabeth May: 'Losing Confidence: Power, Politics, and the Crisis in Canadian Democracy,' McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 2009, \$21. ☞

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