

Alex Marland, Whipped: Party Discipline in Canada, 2020, University of British Columbia Press, \$39.95, 459 pages, ISBN: 9780774864961

Darren G. Lilleker

Party discipline is controversial. An undisciplined party appears disunited and so unelectable, and maverick parliamentarians can claim to be more principled and better represent the wishes of her constituents. Yet Kam's (2009) study of the parliamentary democracies of the UK, Canada and Australia highlighted parties increasingly tighten control over their elected members, although highlighting members simultaneously feel emboldened to break with discipline. Marland focuses on just one of these cases, providing an important fresh look at the issues around party whip systems and explores the mechanisms of party discipline and the extent discipline can be enforced in the digital age of direct communication between represented and representative.

Marland highlights the public relations problem which Canada's "most rigid party discipline" (p. 4) imposes upon elected representatives. The inability of parliamentarians to speak for citizens if their voice contradicts the party line or offer constructive criticism of the executive leads to a democratic deficit, citizens feel they lack effective representation and so their trust in democracy processes is weakened. Performing the role of maverick means less access to ministers, resources and lower chances of advancement. Hence modern parliamentarians find themselves in a lose-lose situation. Marland's work therefore explores the "struggle for an equilibrium between the need for discipline in party politics and its suppression of political representation" (p. 5) focusing mainly on the 42nd parliament, December 2015-September 2019. The era after Stephen Harper had stamped his authority upon the Conservative led coalition 2006-15, a model followed by Justin Trudeau's majority Liberal government.

The study notes parliamentarians feel pressured to perform the role of local franchise holder, performing a uniform service as determined by the national brand. However, not all Canadian parliamentarians can follow this model. Backbenchers deal mainly with constituency casework and feel unable to simply reiterate the government line. Thus, as in countries with similar political systems, those who make policy are brand ambassadors maintaining a distance from citizens, those who do not are accessible and engage in asynchronous and synchronous communication with a range of citizens they represent. The norms of each role relate to longstanding questions regarding who parliamentarians should represent and to whom they owe loyalty (Norton, 2007). Marland's work finds group identity and belonging are significant drivers of conformity. Identifying with the wider group, their party, parliamentarians conform to dominant patterns of behaviour, including following a shared script. That group norms develop between parliamentarians is an area previously unexplored. Parliamentarians are usually viewed as being instrumentalists, seeking promotion or electoral benefits. The shared notion a party must appear disciplined in order to maintain public support means most parliamentarians, while railing against discipline, also tend to follow the party line.

Marland's work highlights the broader democratic challenges strict party control causes. Parliamentarians face a backlash from media and citizenry when they give incomplete or non-answers to questions and speak in partisan platitudes. The resulting disaffection leaves a space for populists who speak freely, highlighting the increasing distance between the citizen, their direct representative and decision making, to win support for their perceived honesty and authenticity. Top-down command and control means citizens perceive democracy is limited to the ballot. Spaces for open debate, such as Canada's parliamentary caucuses, are held privately. The points of consensus that emerge conceal the pluralism of opinion on key policies. Parliamentarians find the

consensus position is communicated out via party public relations machines, leaving little opportunity for more personal or nuanced messaging without appearing to contradict the party line. Hence institutional control mechanisms stifle the agency of the parliamentarian.

The case studies and vignettes drawn from 131 interviews offer a rich picture of specific incidences in Canada and specific insights into Canadian politics. However, the broad findings apply to a plethora of parliamentary democracies where there are tensions between the role of the parliamentarian as representative of the party or of those who elect them. The main questions raised are two-fold. Firstly, can parliamentarians organise and combine forces to challenge party control, reasserting their role as representative of the people. Secondly, can the processes and institutional norms whereby only candidates most likely to toe the line are selected and party control over the collection of data and dissemination of statements be weakened to allow greater autonomy. These questions focus on process, but they go to the heart of challenges within many parliamentary democracies.

For citizens to have trust in democratic processes they must feel they will be listened to and that their arguments have weight. The representational function of parliamentarians normatively should include soliciting and aggregating the views of those they represent, feeding these back into decision making as well as feeding forward the outcomes to their constituents. Marland shows the significant barriers due to “social conditioning, institutional structures, leader-centric systems, personal ambition and communication” (p. 341) hinder the representative bridging the gap between party or government and citizen in a way that benefits the health of parliamentary democracy. Marland draws on the research to propose systemic reforms, challenging legislators, scrutineers and the academic community to consider how to improve democratic process. The work thus is timely, it speaks to debates on how to reinvigorate trust in democracies and how to stave off threats posed by populists. These two challenges form a nexus that threaten the culture of democracies and thus the work is important for informing debates on how the reform of institutional processes can address systemic problems which are undermining democratic projects the world over.

References

Kam, C. J. (2009). *Party discipline and parliamentary politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Norton, P. (2007). Four models of political representation: British MPs and the use of ICT. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13(3), 354-369.

Reviewer

Darren G. Lilleker is Professor of Political Communication, Head of the Centre for Comparative Politics and Media Research and has published widely on political communication and citizen engagement with politics.