Whipped: Party Discipline in Canada.

By Alex Marland

Review by David E. Smith
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For anyone familiar with parliamentary government, party discipline seems rather a simple concept to grasp. By the time the reader has finished this book, however, the error of that assumption lies beyond dispute. Party discipline is a far more detailed endeavour, embracing attitudes, history, and political engagement than is popularly assumed. At the same time, the author emphasizes that ‘cabinet solidarity and collective responsibility are the heartbeat of parliamentary government’ (126). As an aside, it should be noted that while the theme of the analysis is Parliament, one of the book’s chapters also examines provincial legislatures.

Seeing all the details or dimensions of the concept together is what sets this book apart—apart even, it should be said, from the pre-eminent treatises on Canadian government and politics produced by Norman Ward and R. MacGregor Dawson. As contradictory as it may seem, the author of Whipped injects life as well as scholarship into this central, but neglected, aspect of parliamentary government, for, in his words: ‘Discipline is more than voting. It has to do with attitudes, with comments, [and] engagement’ (133). There is no doubt that Professor Marland’s innovative examination will earn the reputation for being as essential to the study of Canadian politics as the work of Ward and Dawson, in addition to its becoming a necessary companion to them both.

There are layers of party in Parliament, and one of the book’s original and important contributions is the author’s skill at personalizing parliamentary politics, for example depicting, on the one hand, how different backbenchers experience the House of Commons and, on the other, illustrating the intricacies of Commons activity seldom acknowledged in media reporting. Notwithstanding party discipline, there is more plasticity to the politics that accompany it than
might be inferred from the book’s monosyllabic title. For instance, the extent of the digital world’s influence on party discipline is noted, most specifically in its contrasting contribution to the decline of parties’ coherence and structure outside as opposed to inside Parliament. As the author notes in the book’s opening paragraphs: ‘The tight binds of partisanship among Canadian politicians are at odds with political parties’ loosening grip on the electorate’ (4). In consequence, party coherence and structure are in decline outside Parliament, as witnessed in the continuing decline in voter turnout at elections, as opposed to their demonstrated vigour inside. The disturbing question the reader of this analysis cannot escape pondering is whether (and if so, to what extent) party discipline is driving voters away from the polls.

In summary, Whipped constitutes a major—and, undoubtedly, permanent—contribution to the study of not only Parliament but of Canadian politics defined more generally.