Unparliamentary: Tales from Canada's Colourful Parliamentary Past, by Charlie Feldman, 2026, AEVO Publishing, pp. 332, RRP $39.95 (USD/CAD), ISBN: 9781049805221

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For those of us fascinated by legislatures, parliamentary procedure and the personalities that occupy our chambers, Charlie Feldman's *Unparliamentary* is a delight. Drawing on an impressive range of archival and historical sources, Feldman reminds readers that parliaments are not merely institutions of lawmaking and accountability. They are also profoundly human places where ambition, humour, error, eccentricity and occasionally outright chaos collide. It is a direct challenge to what Feldman describes as 'Ottawa's reputation for being soul-suckingly unfun'[1] and loving tribute to the lives of those who live and work in and around Canada's Parliament.

A self-described parliamentary nerd, Feldman has spent much of his professional career studying, supporting and working within Canada's parliamentary institutions. His experience spans the Senate, the House of Commons and the Library of Parliament, giving him a rare perspective on both the formal workings and informal culture of Parliament. He also has experience as Legislative Counsel with Canada's Department of Justice and he has also served as Parliamentary Counsel to the Senate, President of the Canadian Study of Parliament Group, a parliamentary analyst and a parliamentary assistant. Educated at McGill University, where he completed a Master of Laws degree, Feldman has further broadened his parliamentary expertise through placements with the United States Congressional Research Service, the US House of Representatives and, more recently, the Scottish Parliamentary Counsel Office. This combination of scholarly interest, practical experience and genuine enthusiasm for parliamentary institutions is evident throughout *Unparliamentary*. The book is meticulously

[1] Charlie Feldman, *Unparliamentary: Tales from Canada's Colourful Parliamentary Past* (AEVA / University of Toronto Press, 2025), p. 267.

researched, but it also works as an insider's guide to the peculiar traditions, characters and unexpected episodes that make parliaments such endlessly fascinating places. And I am very pleased to be able to personally attest to this enthusiasm for visiting legislatures around the world (having had the pleasure of bumping into Charlie in Oxford and New Zealand!), which, combined with his strong opinions on parliamentary gift shops, only reinforces the guarantee that this is a book written by someone who truly delights in the world of parliament.

Covering the period from Confederation to the present day, Feldman explores the less formal side of Canada's national legislature. The book chronicles fights between parliamentarians, procedural controversies, scandals, protests, practical jokes, public demonstrations and administrative mishaps across both the House of Commons and the Senate. Many of the incidents once generated headlines but have since faded from public memory. Feldman's achievement lies in recovering these stories and situating them within the broader history of Canadian parliamentary life.

One of the book's great strengths is its ability to demonstrate that parliamentary institutions, often portrayed as rigid and ceremonial, can also be surprisingly absurd. For example, Feldman recounts the marathon voting session of 2012, where MPs sought ways to endure an all-night sitting. The scene included Play-Doh and stuffed animals, while a decade later, during extended proceedings in 2023, members were observed watching Netflix, knitting and signing holiday cards.[2] Such episodes reveal the practical realities of parliamentary life, where endurance can become almost as important as debate. The author's eye for detail is evident throughout the volume, transforming what might otherwise be curiosities into revealing insights about parliamentary culture.

The historical chapters are particularly engaging. A memorable example concerns the summer heat of 1914, when conditions inside Parliament became so oppressive that business was effectively disrupted. Attempts to dispatch the Sergeant-at-Arms were ultimately frustrated, 'but for a shady nook on such a hot day'.[3] The story captures both the practical limitations of early parliamentary life and the timeless tendency of legislators to seek comfort wherever they can find it.

Feldman is equally effective in recounting the history of protest on Parliament Hill. His discussion of the 1970 'Abortion Caravan' protest is especially illuminating. The demonstrators famously burned a placard containing the abortion provisions of the Criminal Code and 'staged

[2] Charlie Feldman, *Unparliamentary: Tales from Canada's Colourful Parliamentary Past* (AEVA / University of Toronto Press, 2025), pp. 90-91.

[3] Feldman, *Unparliamentary*, p. 112.

a decoy demonstration at the Centennial Flame on the Hill'.[4] Feldman details the ingenuity that underpinned the protest, including assistance from women working in government departments and MPs' offices who reportedly helped secure materials and forged passes. The episode highlights Parliament Hill not simply as a workplace for legislators but also as a powerful symbolic site for political activism.

Throughout the book, Feldman delights in uncovering unusual corners of parliamentary history. Readers learn, for example, that it is an offence to describe a location as being on Parliament Hill when it is not actually situated there.[5] This obscure point of law emerges in a story about an establishment that attempted to trade under the name 'Holiday Inn - Parliament Hill ' in Ottawa during the 1970s. Such anecdotes reveal the ways parliamentary institutions extend beyond politics into questions of identity, branding and public culture – tapping into the ever-present tension between the 'serious constitutional work of the legislature, and the more creative, dynamic expression of political representation that sits at the heart of parliament as 'the people's house'.

Among the most remarkable chapters is Part IX, titled 'It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's a … Pick-Up Truck?' In 1982, Clifford Kemp arranged for a crane to suspend his Ford pick-up truck in the air near the Peace Tower as a protest against unemployment and economic conditions. The demonstration took place shortly before Question Period, with some newspapers reporting that the vehicle remained aloft for two hours. It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic illustration of Parliament Hill's capacity to serve as a stage for political theatre.

Throughout the book, chapters continue this blend of humour and surprise. Feldman recounts campaigns involving 242 plastic pigs placed on Parliament's lawns in 1995 by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation to protest proposed changes to MPs' pension arrangements.[6] He discusses niche children's books devoted to the Senate's resident owls,[7] and includes photographs of a strategically snapped naked G8 protester on Parliament Hill,[8] reminding us of the colour and passion that exists outside of the walls of Parliament as well as withing.

The book concludes with a reflection that neatly encapsulates its purpose. Feldman observes:

> *While Ottawa may be boring and frumpy, Canada's Parliament deserves credit for being interesting and - as I hope this book has shown - sometimes*

[4] Feldman, *Unparliamentary*, p 130.

[5] Feldman, *Unparliamentary*, p. 178.

[6] Feldman, *Unparliamentary*, p. 262.

[7] Feldman, *Unparliamentary*, p. 260.

[8] Feldman, *Unparliamentary*, p 265

> *entertaining! Parliament is so much more than a news clip of Question Period in the House. It's not just the legislative process and its three readings of a bill. It's a place of substance, sure, but it is also where wild, wacky, and wonderful things happen. It has an often fascinating cast, even if they sometimes go off script.*[9]

This sentiment captures the essence of *Unparliamentary*. Feldman does not seek to diminish Parliament by focusing on its eccentric moments. Rather, he demonstrates that these incidents form part of the lived history of representative institutions. Parliamentary democracy depends upon rules, traditions and procedures, but it is also inhabited by human beings who are capable of creativity, folly, mischief and protest.

Unparliamentary is a thoroughly enjoyable contribution to parliamentary history. Well researched, accessible and consistently entertaining, it will appeal to historians, political scientists, parliamentarians and anyone interested in the culture surrounding democratic institutions.

[9]Feldman, *Unparliamentary*, p 268.