

At the Court of Her Majesty's governments in Canada and the UK

Donald J. Savoie. *Entourage on the Rideau and the Thames: Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Review by Mel Cappe

This is really two books. One is an expert review of the literature and practice of government and governing with an acute examination of the forces of change operating on the institutions of government. The other is an interesting and well argued, however flawed, critique of how those institutions have morphed into court government, a modern version of the court as it slavishly served the absolute monarchs of the 16th century.

Donald Savoie is an acknowledged academic expert on the arcane subject of the internal functioning of government. He holds the Canada Research Chair in Public Administration and Governance at the Université de Moncton. With the many shadows and ghosts of past Savoie books, this could have been the culmination of his work in the area. However, by critiquing but not solving the problems of government, he leaves much room for another book that elaborates solutions as to what legislation, processes and reforms are required.

These subjects can be hugely boring except to bureaucrats and academics. However, they are fundamentally important to the fair and effective functioning of our democratic institutions and to the efficiency and fairness of our economy and society. Those who care about how governing institutions adapt to massive change, the role of leadership in forcing that adaptation and the international competitiveness of Canada will find this

book thoughtful and erudite. It provides a description of the evolution of democracy from Plato through Magna Carta to Stephen Harper and Gordon Brown.

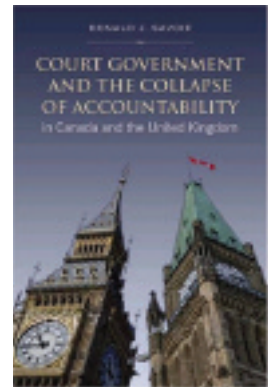
But Savoie implicitly likens the centres of governments to the award-winning HBO series *Entourage*. The series is based on the sycophantic fawning of friends and family on a star loosely modelled after Mark Wahlberg. The tagline for the HBO series is "His fame is their fortune." The presumption in Savoie's book is that the Clerk of the Privy Council in Canada and the secretary to cabinet in the UK do no more for the PM than Turtle does for Vince in *Entourage*. They and their institutions, PCO and the Cabinet Office, are presumed to be simple yes-men to the PM. This is just not so. The increasing central control in government and the innovation of informal control mechanisms need not be vacuous and totally responsive to the prejudices of the PM. Rather, they are a rational response to the modern complexities of governing.

Court Government chronicles extensively the recent failures of the systems of Whitehall and Wellington Street. Savoie makes frequent reference to Tony Blair's "dodgy dossier" justifying the war in Iraq, to the death of the weapons expert Dr. David Kelly and to the subsequent Hutton and Butler inquiries. And he refers extensively to Jean Chrétien's sponsorship scandal and the Gomery Inquiry (for which Savoie was director of

research). The lessons for roles of MPs, ministers, prime ministers, officials, deputy ministers and permanent secretaries, as well as citizens, are profound. The contrast of war-and-peace and life-and-death in the UK, versus millions of dollars in Canada, is just so Canadian.

However, revealed in the Hutton Inquiry was a wonderful moment in the memo exchange between John Scarlet, then chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee (and later the head of MI6), and Jonathan Powell, chief of staff to Tony Blair. Powell is conveying changes in the "dossier" that the PM wants. Scarlet's response is that most have been accommodated, but in reference to one or two, "The intelligence does not justify that change." This is Scarlet drawing the line, speaking truth to power. Nevertheless, Savoie is correct about the seductive nature of being close to power, as pointed out by the Butler Inquiry. Being at the centre and holding the mirror up to the prime minister requires fortitude and conviction. While senior officials do have it, this book reminds them of their fragility.

Savoie undervalues the role of individuals and their personalities. One can see the abandonment of formal processes of decision-making in the UK as a natural evolution of the institutions of governance in response to the changing nature of politics, or partly as a response to the personality of Tony Blair. Tony insisted on being addressed by his



first name. He governed from the den of Downing Street, leading to references to “sofa democracy” and “denocracy.” Tony Blair was partly a product of politics at a point in time (after Thatcher and Major: strength and boredom). But his institutions of government were partly a response to his personality. Gordon Brown, the dour Scot, has reverted to more formality, but not less centraliza-

tion. Some of these developments are institutional responses to the changing nature of politics and the forces of change: the role of the media, leader-to-leader international communications and the increasing complexity of policy issues. Some of these developments are a coherent program of the UK approach known as “muddling through,” or what Peter Hennessy calls the “good chaps theory of government.” But some of these changes are adaptations to personalities. Brian Mulroney was remarkable at managing his caucus. Blair was the consummate campaigner. Never underestimate the role of personality in government.

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Savoie finds the similarities in the two countries’ governing structures enticing. However, he underplays the differences between the Canadian and the British system, which are still profound. In many ways, Canada’s Parliament has remained more Westminster-like than Westminster.

The increasing centralization and importance of courtiers that Savoie describes are a natural evolution and necessary response to increasing complexity, as he notes. Savoie describes policy challenges that cut across departments, governments and institutions. He adds that these crosscutting issues have many causes with disparate implications and indirect effects. The increasing openness of government changes administrative and policy practices. Changes in societal values, new voices and sources of power, less deferential media, and a shift in loyalty make these changes more acute. The declining role of the political party and increasing internationalization of issues further promote centralization. All of

While the UK reliance on traditional pomp and ceremony is way over the top, the actual operations of the institutions of government have adapted further and farther in the UK than in Canada. The British PM faces the House for Question Time, only once a week for half an hour. This has for the past decade elicited mouth-watering envy from Canadian PMs. The use of real debates, with spontaneous interruption in the House, distinguishes the British House from the Canadian. And MPs in committees in Parliament actually asking tough questions of officials and ministers and summoning the PM once every six months before the Parliamentary Liaison Committee of Committee Chairs make the British system much more accountable.

Moreover, while centralization of Canadian governing institutions has been done by stealth, in the UK it is quite institutionalized. In Canada, PCO uses its influence informally and indirectly, with the ultimate authority being the Clerk speaking with the PM’s voice and the Committee of Senior Officials’ assessment of deputy ministers. The UK has actually institutionalized this centralization. The creation of the PM’s Delivery Unit, the PM’s Policy Unit, the Number 10 Strategy Unit, the Office of Public Services Reform in the PMO and the PM’s bilaterals with

ministers have all worked to move the UK system to a more formalized and more centralized system than in Canada. In fact, three of the functions that report to the PM in Canada through the Clerk of the Privy Council (foreign policy, security and G8 sherpas) actually report directly to the PM in the UK. While the similarities are significant, the differences (not to mention federal versus unitary state) are profound.

This book is a very useful addition to the literature on governance in Westminster parliamentary democracies. The insights of Professor Savoie and the examples to back them up are important. Fearless advice from public servants and candour in cabinet deliberations can improve decision-making. The presumption that the evolution of governing institutions reduces accountability and is necessarily a bad thing is not proven. The solutions he proposes, like legislation on roles of public servants and ministers, are only hinted at in the last few pages of the book. I suppose we shall just have to wait for Savoie’s next book to elaborate a program of reform that deals with the underlying forces he so ably describes.

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