

**The Influence of Central Agencies
in the
Policy-Making Process**

**Notes for Remarks to the 21st Annual Conference of the
Canadian Study of Parliament Group**

James R. Mitchell
November 27, 1999
Copyright © Sussex Circle 1999

Check against delivery

Introduction: The Role of Central Agencies

I'm delighted to be here. I'm conscious that I have 15 minutes to offer you a few thoughts on a very important subject – the influence of the central agencies on the policy-making process, and specifically, why and how this matters to Parliament.

I will begin by stating clearly the thesis that I wish to advance today in this session. It is this:

Paradoxically, the institutions of government that have perhaps the greatest influence on policy – namely, the central agencies – are the least open to scrutiny and engagement by Parliament.

The question I hope to explore with you is, if this is true, what can Parliament do about it?

I will begin with the issue of the centralization of power.

As Donald Savoie has shown so very well, we live in an era of Prime Minister-centred government. There are many reasons for this – and they are not particular to this Prime Minister. Indeed, this Prime Minister is well known to favour letting Ministers do their jobs without undue interference from the centre.

Rather, and as Mr. Sharp said this morning, the concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister and his advisors is something that has been developing for a very long time. It is a characteristic not only of the Canadian government but also of Britain, Quebec, Ontario and virtually every other Westminster jurisdiction.

But my interest today is not the Prime Minister but the centre of government, in the form of the central agencies – the Privy Council Office, the Department of Finance and the Treasury Board Secretariat.

The concentration of power at the centre of government has many manifestations and many causes. It is manifest in:

- the public role of the Prime Minister as first and final spokesman for the government on all major policy issues;
- the internal role of the Prime Minister as architect and chairman of Cabinet;
- the power of the Minister of Finance – not just on tax and fiscal policy, but on the larger government agenda as articulated every year in the Budget (this in itself is evidence of the accumulation of power at the centre)
- the omnipresence of the Treasury Board Secretariat on issues of resource management and administration throughout government

The causes of this concentration of power in our Canadian system are complex:

- The need for a central source of direction and authority to counter-balance the natural forces of fragmentation in our country
- The information revolution, which has both accelerated the process of decision-making and vastly increased the expectations of citizens as to what their government can do for them, and when they are entitled to expect results
- The media's tendency to personalize issues, and to demand instant answers for a television audience that has become used to instant gratification
- The internationalization of issues which accentuates the need for a single point of leadership and decision-making on a range of issues that otherwise would be handled by many Ministers

You can think of other factors, I'm sure.

The question is, what does all this mean for Parliament and Parliamentarians?

The first thing to bear in mind is that, with certain obvious exceptions (Finance's fiscal and tax policy responsibilities, national unity, major foreign or national policy) the central agencies seldom carry direct responsibility for a policy file.

Rather, their role is to influence and coordinate the policy initiatives of line departments. This follows from the PM's key responsibility in our Westminster system, which is to set direction and priorities for the government.

So the role of "influencing" policy can be a powerful one indeed. It can mean:

- Setting priorities
- Determining the allocation of resources to new initiatives
- Settling disputes between Ministers or between departments
- Marshalling the resources of government behind a major new initiative
- Coordinating the work of line departments in a whole sector of activity – energy (the NEP), foreign affairs (the Peace Initiative), social policy (the Social Union)

These central agency activities are essential to effective government. Moreover, Canadians expect that their government will work in this relatively centre-focused way.

- (Note that Americans, by contrast, have no such expectation. Their President does not have the role, powers or capacities that a Prime Minister enjoys.)

This also helps to explain why Canadians expectations of Parliament are relatively modest – why it is mostly Professors and Parliamentarians who care about the increasing irrelevance of the Parliamentary process to the policy process in government

Bottom Line: What can Parliament do?

The fact that this central agency role is seldom direct or visible (at least to Parliamentarians) means that it can be hard for Parliament to get a handle on it.

After all, as I said, on almost every file, there is a non-central agency Minister responsible. By the conventions of our Constitution, Parliament does not concern itself – has no right of access – to the processes of cabinet decision-making. And that is where the central agencies play their role.

A further point – by convention, neither the Prime Minister nor his or her officials appear before Parliamentary committees - a further obstacle to reaching out to a key central agency.

So what can Parliament do to engage the central agencies more effectively on policy matters? Let me offer a few suggestions.

First, Parliament needs to pay attention to its own policy capacities and support.

- MPs can only play an active and substantive role on policy – especially “horizontal” policy – if they are strong on policy issues, and strongly supported with information and advice that shows Ministers and central agency officials that they are (a) serious and (b) a serious interlocutor.

Second, Parliament must respect the principle that the internal workings of government decision-making are “private” in a constitutional sense. This means:

- Leaving it to the Government to decide how it will engage Parliament and Parliamentary committees on these major policy issues.
- The objective is not to summon and interrogate central agency officials; rather it is to signal to the government that Parliament is concerned about the same large policy issues that preoccupy Ministers and officials.

Third, Parliament can help to alert Canadians and the press to the larger issues, again so that Ministers and their officials – including central agency officials -- become more conscious of the need to respond to the public on these issues.

And finally, Parliament can work with central agency officials – as it has been working with the Treasury Board Secretariat – in an effort to make government reporting more transparent and more useful to both Parliament and the public.

So long as the accountability process is focused in Question Period, the Government will always be in the driver’s seat. If Parliament can shift the focus to substance, it will be

able to engage Ministers and especially officials in a deeper and more constructive dialogue on matters of policy.

And from that, Canadians will benefit greatly.

Thank you