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►► Balance: The Key to Good Governance and Policy Making

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Wayne Easter is someone who should know. He's spent 28 consecutive years as a Liberal MP from Prince Edward Island, served as a cabinet minister and witnessed up close the operations of four administrations, both Liberal and Conservative. During his time in politics, Easter was in Cabinet as Solicitor General, and in recent years has been the chair of the Commons Finance Committee. Having announced he's not seeking re-election, Easter has been unshackled from the typical constraints of an MP and now feels free to speak his mind and say what he believes. That is certainly what he did in a recent interview.

"I think there's far, far, too much control in the Prime Minister's Office, right throughout the whole system," Easter told the Hill Times. "It actually started with (Paul) Martin, intensified with (Stephen) Harper, and is actually much the same under the current Prime Minister." As Solicitor General in the Jean Chretien government, Easter says that in Chretien's time cabinet ministers had far greater freedom, and subsequently far more responsibility. "Either you did your job, or you weren't there. It was that simple. And Chretien basically made that very clear to you."

The core of Easter's critique is that excessive control exercised by PMO effectively undermines the role of cabinet, ministers and parliamentary

committees. He says it's a recipe for trouble because if ministers are not responsible for decisions, or held to account for them, our system of governance is not working as intended.

The argument that power has steadily become more centralized is nothing new. However, the potential harm that today's scope and scale of centralization poses for our Westminster system government is, and deserves greater public scrutiny and discussion. Elections are an opportune time for such a reconsideration by all political parties.

Indeed, following the 2015 election, the Public Policy Forum initiated such a discussion with the publication of a Report entitled "Time for a Reboot: Nine Ways to Restore Trust in Canada's Public Institutions". The Report cited "an extraordinary centralization of authority, weakening the foundations of our democracy." It went on to warn that Canada's public institutions—Parliament, Cabinet and the Public Service—no longer play the roles they were designed to play and this will erode the public's trust in them and their long-term effectiveness.¹ These concerns about centralization and "control from the center" have been echoed in two books of interviews with defeated or retiring MPs of all parties—"Tragedy in the Commons" (2014) and "Real House Lives" (2018)—by the non-partisan Samara Centre for Democracy.

“At the core of our Westminster system is balance, accountability, respect and transparency, to be maintained across the four pillars of the system: cabinet government, effective Parliamentary committees, a competent and professional public service and an effective free press.”

Why does this matter? At the core of our Westminster system is balance, accountability, respect and transparency, to be maintained across the four pillars of the system: cabinet government, effective Parliamentary committees, a competent and professional public service and an effective free press. Each of those pillars can potentially be eroded, and the system unbalanced, by excessive centralization of power in the Prime Minister and his staff. It underscores Easter’s perspective that centralization in the PMO has diminished the capacity for debate and the clash of ideas in the policy process across the federal government to the detriment of good governance.

This is anything but an arcane “inside baseball” subject with little relevance to average Canadians. It is at the heart of public trust in government. Indeed, trust in our public institutions of governance is the foundation for the legitimacy of our democratic system and the public policy process.

In the wake of the PPF report, the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School issued a 2015 Policy Brief that looked at how to restore balance and respect in our system of governance. And, early in his new administration, Justin Trudeau issued a directive on “Open and Accountable Government” which, among other things, committed to ministerial responsibility, collective decision making, respect for the nonpartisan public service and accountability to Parliament. Yet, Wayne Easter and many of the MPs interviewed by Samara expressed frustration at a continuation of strongly centralized governance, rooted in the Prime Minister’s Office and unelected staff.

So, six years later, with another federal election set for Sept. 20, it’s time to revisit the subject and assess the “state of our governance” and what can be done to improve it. The issue is more relevant than ever given the pandemic of the last 18 months and the increased role governments at all levels have played in the lives of Canadians.

►► Setting the context: why centralization is pervasive and pernicious

As the PPF report reminds us: “Parliamentary systems are widely lauded for their constitutional flexibility, executive accountability, and for their ability to accommodate diverse and competing interests. They enable a strong executive to deliver on its mandate while offering meaningful representation to minority groups. They balance democracy and efficiency, authority and accountability, and stability with the ability to adapt to change.”

But a key factor in their success, as the PPF report highlighted, is respect for balance among the pillars of the Westminster system of governance, and excessive centralization undermines both the pillars and the balance among them.

Having said that, some movement towards centralization has been inevitable in recent decades, given the global forces impacting on Canada’s economy and security, the increasing importance of trade agreements and most particularly the control of government messaging in the era of social media where citizens can engage in real time as part of the public debate on policy issues and priorities. So, the issue is not so much that some centralization of government is wrong, but rather the degree and extent to which it has taken place and its consequences for governance.

What exactly do we mean when we talk about concentration of authority and centralization of power?

First, and this is not unique to Canada, Prime Ministers have become much more than first among equals around the Cabinet table. They control appointments—cabinet ministers, parliamentary secretaries, the government house leader, the government party whip, chairs of parliamentary committees, senators, judges, Governors General, and senior public servants. They control the agenda of government through the Speech from the Throne and ministerial mandate letters. And they control the core messaging of the government, as we witnessed during COVID where it was the Prime Minister, not the Health Minister, who delivered the daily health briefings.

Second, the PMO role has expanded enormously. It now develops and screens government policy initiatives, devises communications strategies, appoints ministerial chiefs of staff, and vets ministerial speeches and departmental press releases. It is the locus of authority where all decisions—large and small, good and bad—are made. It has also become the primary access point to government for media and the social media hub for the government.

Third, Cabinet has become, as a result, a shadow of its former self. We have moved from cabinet government, where cabinet was the main forum for discussing and responding to the key issues facing the country and the government, to a hybrid form of executive government centered on the Prime Minister and PMO where even the unique role of the Minister of Finance around the cabinet table has been diminished as PMO exerts much more control over the budget process and fiscal matters. Whereas at one time the Finance Department was seen as a counterweight of fiscal probity within

government, it is now regarded increasingly as more of an adjunct to the will of the PMO.

Fourth, the permanent Public Service, a core pillar of Westminster governance, is increasingly becoming an “administrative service” and less the provider of fearless, non-partisan and evidence-based policy advice that is core to good policy making. The policy advice role is more and more the domain of political aides in the PMO and ministerial offices. This ever-stronger “political service” is effectively supplanting the public service, rather than complementing it as the Westminster balance doctrine would suggest. As a consequence, the role of PCO is also eroding as the relationship of senior public servants to PMO and political staff in their minister’s offices becomes relatively more important.

The Canadian Public Service has long been considered among the best and most professional among major democratic nations, with a code and obligation of strict non-partisanship which must be rigorously respected and constantly upheld. But these developments under-utilize its exemplary skills and professionalism and, if sustained, will be a decidedly negative influence on the culture and effectiveness of the Public Service of Canada over the longer term.

An example, which began during the Harper government, was the advent of “four-corner” meetings. Instituted by the Prime Minister’s Office, they include PMO staff, PCO officials, public servants from the relevant department, and political staff of the minister, who came together, ostensibly to confer and to coordinate but in practice, in many instances, to make decisions on policy and its execution. These meetings had the effect of ensuring that advice from the Public Service was vetted by political staff before it got to ministers. The practice, which continues to this day, created a dynamic where the public service function became more one of facilitation and less of independent advice that matters.

Fifth, Parliamentary Committees are meant to hold the government to account, something which is never convenient or necessarily pleasant for the government of the day but essential for healthy and vibrant governance. Unfortunately parliamentary committees are weakened by constant pressure from party whips and House leaders to follow narrow, and partisan, agendas. Few observers of recent parliaments, or MPs in the Samara exit interviews, would describe the committee system today as working effectively or as intended, with too many recent examples of procedural obstruction by the government and grandstanding by the opposition to the detriment of public accountability on issues deserving of serious examination.

As well, as part of the balance equation for good governance, agents of parliament such as the Auditor General play an important role in holding the government to account and ensuring spending transparency and need to be recognized for such. Indeed, their prestige has actually increased over the years to the point that public trust in these non-elected officials exceeds trust in government—which is not a healthy thing for democracy.

And sixth, despite the prescience of the architects of the Westminster system, they did not anticipate the social media revolution and the scale and scope of its impact on communications generally, and particularly on politics and the political process.

It is becoming very clear how much social media can influence politics and governing—referendum (Brexit), elections (Trump), political unrest (U.S., many examples), political issues (COVID masks, anti-vaxxers) and political correctness campaigns to name a few. Disinformation was not invented by social media, but it has been enormously amplified by it. Special interest groups have weaponized social media, as have groups on the left and right of the political spectrum, leaving the moderate middle increasingly hollowed out as a political voice.

Social media, combined with big data, AI and micro-targeting, have enabled centralization in government. In a social media-infused world, the PMO does not have the same perceived need for the information networks and voices of cabinet ministers and MPs in order to manage issues. Further, social media has significantly reinforced short-termism in politics, as Twitter and other social media platforms are designed for short, clear simple messages rather than complex policy challenges and evolving economic, fiscal and social trends. This contributes to tough, longer-term issues being put off until another day in favour of micro political issues that better fit the social media format.

It is almost impossible to overstate how the media environment of today, where social media and the relentless 24/7 news cycle drives the news agenda, has affected government. The political need for governments to “control the agenda” has led governments to exert control over how, what, when and whether it communicates to the public. Inevitably, PMO becomes the communications funnel through which all government communication flows.

►► Is this the future, or is there a better way forward?

Basic physics suggests that an unbalanced system lacks stability, and the stability of our Westminster system of governance is not immune to these forces. Excessive centralization of power and control puts that balance at risk, eroding public trust in the institutions of governance and reducing the effectiveness of the government. Unfortunately that describes the state of governance in Canada today.

But the good news is that renewal is possible, and it does not require constitutional amendments or complex legislative and electoral reforms. What it takes is the will and commitment of all political parties to eschew excessive centralization and, if they form the government, to embrace the values and balance of the Westminster system.

Echoing the still applicable recommendations of the PPF report, what Canadian political parties should agree to, and future federal governments give effect to, are:

- Restore effective cabinet government, where the big issues are explored, policies are debated, and decision-making is both collective and ministerial;
- Allow ministers to be ministers again, where they have an input into their mandate letters, choose their political staff, and are clearly accountable to Parliament and the public for their portfolios;
- Restore a PMO that coordinates not controls, where it effectively supports the prime minister while respecting the value of balance and decentralization among the institutional pillars of government;
- Re-empower a strong and impartial public service, one that is motivated, encouraged and able to provide fearless, non-partisan, evidence-based advice on policies and programs;
- Create accountability for the political service similar to that of the public service; and,
- Equip parliamentary committees with the tools, resources and procedural independence to hold the government to account.

Hardly radical, but impactful, effective and needed. After the election, the government of the day should table with parliament its intent to re-invigorate the principles of Westminster governance, and receive the strong support of the leaders of the other parties. It is a signal worth sending to all.

Excessive centralization of power is a stealthy and corrosive threat to trust in our institutions and the health of our democracy. Combined with today's pervasive social media environment, it enshrines short-termism in policy priorities and permanent campaigning in governing. With a federal election underway, it is the time to put governance on the electoral agenda of all political parties.

►► Conclusion

Democracy is about more than free and fair elections. It requires representative and effective institutions. It demands respect for the rule of law. It needs a system of checks and balances, set by law or convention or both. It requires a professional and effective public

service. It is nurtured by an independent and diverse media. And it is anchored by an informed and involved citizenry.

Good governance benefits all Canadians and enhances Canada's stature internationally. But we can never take it for granted, or be complacent about it, in this rapidly changing and uncertain world. Canada is rightly proud of its democracy and public institutions. At the same time, our governance process is not living up to what Canadians should expect and demand. Now is the time for a reset to meet those expectations.

¹ See https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PPF_TimeForAReboot_ENG_v6.pdf

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