

Brand Command

Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control

ALEX MARLAND



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

Sample Material © 2016 UBC Press



Communication, Strategy, and Politics

Thierry Giasson and Alex Marland, Series Editors

Sample Material © 2016 UBC Press

© UBC Press 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Marland, Alexander J., author

Brand command: Canadian politics and democracy in the age of message control /
Alex Marland.

(Communication, strategy, and politics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3203-8 (hardback). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3205-2 (pdf). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3206-9 (epub)

1. Communication in politics – Canada. 2. Branding (Marketing) –
Political aspects – Canada. 3. Democracy – Canada.

I. Title. II. Series: Communication, strategy, and politics

JA85.2.C3M37 2016

320.97101'4

C2015-908482-2

C2015-908483-0

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca

Sample Material © 2016 UBC Press

Contents

List of Appendices, Figures, and Tables / ix

Preface: Branding, Message Control, and Sunny Ways / xiii

Acknowledgments / xxv

List of Abbreviations / xxix

- 1** The Centralization of Communications in Government and Politics / 3
- 2** Marketing and Branding in Politics / 28
- 3** The Tumultuous Digital Media Environment / 61
- 4** Public Sector Brands / 102
- 5** Communications Simplicity and Political Marketing / 135
- 6** Brand Discipline and Debranding / 165
- 7** Central Government Agencies and Communications / 201
- 8** Branding in Canadian Public Administration / 243
- 9** Politicization of Government Communications / 287
- 10** The Fusion of Party and Government Brands / 326
- 11** Public Sector Branding: Good or Bad for Democracy? / 350

Sample Material © 2016 UBC Press

Appendices / 380

Glossary / 405

Notes / 415

References / 437

Interviews / 479

Index / 483

1

The Centralization of Communications in Government and Politics

By most accounts, Canadians have been unhappy in recent years with their system of government. One public opinion study found that their foremost dissatisfaction is a perception that too much power rests with the prime minister.¹ Another found that making government accountable to Parliament is among the most important political issues.² The displeasure appears to be connected to a new style of disciplined communications management known as branding.

Branding is increasingly practised in politics and governance worldwide.³ Branded communications save time for both the sender and the receiver by simplifying information for a disparate audience. Complex topics are distilled into message themes. A strategy of repeating visuals and core messages delivers efficiencies in a digital society bombarded with stimuli. However, branding threatens idealized notions of democratic government and party politics. It harmonizes and dumbs down. It requires strict message control and image management. Above all, public sector branding contributes to the centralization of decision making within the prime minister's inner circle.

Complaints about centralized power are chronic in Canada. Portrayals of the prime minister as an autocrat date at least to Richard B. Bennett. In 1930, Bennett was simultaneously prime minister, minister of finance, and secretary of state for external affairs. The Conservative PM was caricatured as a one-man show. In one joke, he was spotted talking to himself and thus holding a cabinet meeting; in cartoons, cabinet was comprised of his

clones.⁴ Nearly a century later, Canada's head of government is still lampooned as overly powerful, but the matter has reached a point of serious concern. Notwithstanding the optimism that accompanied the ascendancy of Liberal prime minister Justin Trudeau, an ominous turn has occurred, one that draws power from the manipulation of information and new communications technology. Among the countless examples of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper's adversarial approach to communications are the following media depictions:

Controlling the message, that's the communications strategy the prime minister has banked on ... Scrums have been cut back, or eliminated; bureaucrats can't talk without an okay from the Privy Council Office; cabinet ministers need PMO approval before talking to reporters ... Reporters looking for more than a photo are kept outside.⁵

There's a whole infrastructure at every level of every department, of people whose job it is to manipulate and massage media. Highly paid people ... hundreds of people. Their only job every day is to manipulate a message.⁶

Stephen Harper is famously scripted. News conferences are rare and tightly controlled. His answers in Question Period are deliberately repetitive, and often aimed at not saying anything interesting at all.⁷

The Conservatives know how to craft a message. Keep it simple. Keep it short. Reinforce everything all the time. Make the party's four themes lock together: balanced budget, low taxes, smaller government, personal security. Mix in a little patriotism and Stephen Harper as a tried and trusted leader, and you have the Conservative campaign long before the election is called. All parties try tight messaging; the Conservatives do it best. That's the macro-campaign. Then there is the micro-campaign: the targeted pitch to specific slices of the electorate backed by domestic and foreign policy signals.⁸

The narrative of the democratic toxicity of central authority combined with political marketing extends to bookshelves. Popular press books by Ottawa journalists (including *Party of One: Stephen Harper and Canada's*

Radical Makeover; Harperland: The Politics of Control; Kill the Messengers: Stephen Harper's Assault on Your Right to Know; and Spinning History: A Witness to Stephen Harper's Canada and 21st Century Choices) depict Harper as a political overlord whose power was derived from information control.⁹ Former Conservative MPs vex about the central influence over the legislative branch in *Sheeple: Caucus Confidential in Stephen Harper's Ottawa* and *Irresponsible Government: The Decline of Parliamentary Democracy in Canada*.¹⁰ The perception of a communications puppeteer is fuelled by popular culture, which stereotypes politicians as self-interested actors who will stop at nothing to further their own ambitions. Harper was often portrayed as animatronic in comedy sketches and editorial cartoons, including as Darth Vader, the merciless cyborg of the anti-democratic evil empire from the *Star Wars* film series (Figure 1.1). The frame fits Harper's personal brand as well as the broader trends of presidentialization and centralization. The label of *The Friendly Dictatorship*,¹¹ which refers to Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's top-heavy style of governing, has darkened. The same fate awaits Justin Trudeau and his successors.

This sort of image is inevitable given that a prime minister is concurrently the head of a governing political party and the head of the non-partisan permanent government. As a partisan, that individual brings a political ideology and an agenda to governing. As the head of government, the prime minister must respect the rule of law and institutional processes and the apolitical public service bargain. Wearing either hat involves constant effort to manipulate the machinery of government to generate support for a political agenda. Communications management leads to partisan elites attempting to steer policy in directions contrary to the advice of civil servants.¹²

In Canada and elsewhere, the centralization of communications feeds worries about the politicization of an independent civil service.¹³ Unlike political personnel, permanent staff members are hired through a merit system that rewards formal qualifications and public administration expertise. They are seen to prioritize evidence-based decisions that follow documented processes and embody professionalism. In theory, their neutrality upholds a greater good and is not tinged with the stain of politics. However, civil servants toil in obscurity. They are not elected, nor are they



FIGURE 1.1 Common frame of Prime Minister Harper’s personal brand | Reprinted with permission of Michael de Adder; originally appeared in the *Hill Times*, October 3, 2014, 43.

directly accountable to the public whom they serve. Their worldview may differ from that of elected officials. This intersection of ideas, values, and norms constitutes a cultural divide between civil servants and their political masters.

Public administration specialist Paul Thomas explains that “there have always been planned, concerted, and extensive efforts by the PMO to maximize favourable publicity, to minimize bad news, and generally to enhance the image, credibility, and favourable approval ratings for the prime minister of the day.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, the political management of government communications has become such a serious matter that it contributes to the defeat of the government. In 2005, after the release of

the first report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program and Advertising Activities (the Gomery Commission), Paul Martin's Liberal minority government fell over revelations of the illegal funnelling of public funds to Liberal-affiliated advertising agencies during the Chrétien era. That episode, discussed in Chapter 7, demonstrates how strategic communications become embedded within government. Once embedded, they become institutionalized within the public service and then centralized.¹⁵ In 2011, Harper's Conservative minority government refused to disclose spending breakdowns to the opposition regarding corporate tax cuts, crime legislation, and fighter jet purchases. It claimed that the principle of cabinet confidence shielded this information, which the opposition wanted to use to inflict maximum communications damage. The government was found in contempt of Parliament and then fell. The Conservatives nevertheless won a majority of seats in the ensuing election, an episode that implies that the fundamental tenets of responsible government are waning against the supremacy of brand control and political marketing tactics. Conversely, an anti-democratic image contributed to their election defeat in 2015, proving the limits of a brand command.

Much of what is treated as new in Canadian political communications is borrowed from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. American politics in particular is the world's laboratory for political marketing. This has featured the rapid response unit in Bill Clinton's campaign war room and its thematic messaging strategies.¹⁶ The George W. Bush White House reduced the number of media spokespersons and pursued narrowcasting with target groups. Public relations (PR) staff obsessed with photo-op set design, highlighted the president's common values, and avoided visuals of protesters in the name of security.¹⁷ Political scientist Ken Cosgrove's observations about the American conservative movement during that era reads like a description of recent party politics in Canada:

The brand strategy's use has let Conservatives produce a consistent message about themselves to their audiences, to reposition that message when necessary, and to build lasting relationships with their audience targets ... to produce politics and politicians that fit a consistent brand story, with limited two-way communication featuring a lot of emotion, strong language, and potent pictures but little discussion of substance.¹⁸

Branding information and lexicon began appearing more often in academia and the media when Barack Obama ascended to the US presidency.¹⁹ The Obama brand was built using Web 2.0 and ushered e-politics into the mainstream. The website my.barackobama.com, commonly known as MyBO, acted as a social network while providing a controlled engagement platform that bypassed the mediation of the mainstream media. His campaigns collected information from millions of supporters regularly sent electronic messages and links to online videos.²⁰ As president-elect, Obama's brand converged with the communications infrastructure of the executive office. His political team has been tweeting from @BarackObama since 2007; his administration tweets in his name as president from @WhiteHouse. Obama's digital presidency has encompassed a number of firsts. In 2009, the White House began issuing a digital photo of the day featuring the president, and in 2010 it began producing a weekly video called *West Wing Week* posted to YouTube and the White House website. In 2012, Obama participated in online Twitter Q&A sessions live streamed, and he fielded questions on the social news website Reddit. In 2014, the White House created infographics to present information online as visuals, including the use of emojis (moving character pictographs).²¹ Today's objective is to communicate with citizens on their mobile phones and encourage sharing of simplified information via social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Recipients are encouraged to provide their email addresses and zip codes to receive more infographics. Other examples point to trends that public sector elites face strenuous communications situations and use digital media to engage followers with controlled simplicity without relying on the press gallery. Along the way, senior political strategists such as James Carville, Karl Rove, and David Axelrod become household names, as do White House press secretaries.

Pivoting toward the latest communications tactics and spinmeisters is reflected in popular culture. For instance, the public administration satire of minister-deputy minister relations in the classic 1980s BBC sitcom *Yes Minister* was reinvented for the 2000s. *The Thick of It* revolves around the tirades of Malcolm Tucker, the unseen British PM's cunning and foul-mouthed director of communications. A typical backroom scene in government is depicted as follows:

Sample Material © 2016 UBC Press

[8:30AM DAILY COMMUNICATIONS MEETING]

TUCKER: “Morning, morning, morning. Alright, I wanna have a little bit of a think about some of our presentation issues with regard to yesterday. There seemed to be a bit of a problem with Liam on *Newsnight*. I would like to know: why did we have a minister on last night who did not appear to know the lines?”

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER: “It’s not all his fault, Malcolm. We grilled him beforehand. He’s got a new baby. He’s not getting enough sleep.”

TUCKER: “I don’t care if he’s got a new baby. I don’t care if he’s tired. He looked like he didn’t know what he was f**king talking about! Now, I *know* he doesn’t know what he’s f**king talking about, but he’s got to appear as if he does, right? And that is your job! [points to communications personnel in turn] And yours, and yours, and yours, and yours! With all your respective ministers! Give them the lines, right?”²²

Disrespect for parliamentarians is rampant. In one scene, Tucker (played by Scottish actor Peter Capaldi, of *Doctor Who* fame) tells a minister that a letter of resignation has been prepared, and that a news conference has been booked for twenty minutes at 10 Downing Street, so that the minister can say that he is resigning even as the press is told by Tucker that the minister is being forced out. In another, a member of Parliament wants to start a policy debate, which Tucker dismisses out of hand because the MP is “so backbench that you’ve actually f**king fallen off.” The character is loosely based on Prime Minister Tony Blair’s director of communications and strategy, Alastair Campbell, and satirizes New Labour’s control freakery (discussed in Chapter 4).

When research about marketing in the 2015 British election becomes available, it is likely that Australian political consultant Lynton Crosby will figure prominently. Crosby helped to guide John Howard’s Liberal Party of Australia to multiple election victories, leveraged that experience to manage the campaigns of London Mayor Boris Johnson, and strategized for David Cameron’s British Conservative Party. News reports indicate that Prime Minister Cameron became convinced that only Crosby could instill the implacable message control needed to achieve election victory.

With the leader's authorization, two years before the campaign started, Crosby set about drawing on polling data and microtargeting to focus the Conservatives on core messages. Everything else was dismissed as a distraction. Crosby maintained a grid of daily announcements – a practice that was employed by the Blair government²³ – and ensured that the Conservative prime minister's communications aligned with a weekly theme. He periodically addressed parliamentarians and urged them to stay focused on approved messages. Issues and remarks that deviated from the script were dismissed as “barnacles on the boat” that needed to be scrubbed off, backbenchers were told that their job description did not include acting as political commentators, and whenever someone went off message he or she was reprimanded with an acerbic “not helpful” text message.²⁴ “One Vision” by Queen was the party war room's campaign song (“One man, one goal, one mission. One heart, one soul, just one solution. One flash of light, yeah, one god, one vision”). Crosby has also periodically offered strategic counsel to Canada's Conservative Party, including during the 2015 election campaign.

The influence of the Australian Liberal Party on the political marketing and message discipline of the Conservative Party of Canada is identified in Chapter 5. The point is that public remarks made by an Australian, British, or Canadian MP or candidate who holds a formal association with the party – whom we can refer to as “brand ambassadors” – are expected to stick to an approved script. The path-breaking marketing practices plied in US politics become partisan glue when deployed in the parliamentary system of government.

As in Britain, Canadians are fed a diet of news decrying how their government obsesses over communications management. This is framed as subversive to democracy and against the public interest. It is far easier for people to believe that political power is concentrated in elites than that political power is diffuse and elites face constraints. Neither approach is absolute. We are all predisposed to the former because political communications inflate the importance of political leaders, especially the head of government. A leader is a central actor whose role as the organization's primary spokesperson magnifies his or her perceived authority. This crescendo infuses a perceptual bias about politics and government: principals

and their agents are purportedly micromanagers who inflict their will upon the rest of us.

The study of such institutional and perceptual biases has long been upheld as necessary to understand opportunities for, and limits on, political power. The challenge is to differentiate reality from imagination. Researchers must navigate the hyperreality of images and signs, as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard would put it, along with figuring out where the genuine ends and simulations begin.²⁵ A further challenge is that communications decisions are secretive, presenting researchers with the puzzle of finding ways to measure the unmeasurable.²⁶ This is especially true when examining the communications behaviour of public sector elites in Canada.

We lack a focused study of how political communications work in Ottawa. We need a theory for why they create a contagion of pulling everything toward “the centre” – a term with so many different and sinister connotations that in this book it refers to a transcendental concept, usually encapsulating the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and Privy Council Office (PCO). We do not understand the requisite components of media management and political marketing, including the use of “symbols and brands to convey a positive image of the prime minister and the government.”²⁷ The processes of government communications and the relationship of those processes with executive power beg attention. In particular, we need to comprehend the role of senior partisans and mandarins in the congelation of messaging. We must understand the extent of orderly control over information disclosed to the Canadian public.

An underappreciated reason for power gravitating toward the leadership circle of government and political parties is how elites are responding to disruptive communications technology. The growth of digital media is speeding up the news cycle as the number of platforms and voices increases. Informed and ill-informed critics subject the government to a relentless barrage of questioning in an atmosphere in which public officials are presumed guilty.²⁸ Public administration operates in an environment “more congested, complex, turbulent, intense, unpredictable, and risky” than ever before.²⁹ The changes have been so profound that they are characterized as digital media shock (see Chapter 3). A consequence of this

technological revolution and abundance of open sources is the emergence of intense information control and image management techniques.

A brand-centric approach to power involves the strategic unification of words and visuals. At the most basic level, a branding philosophy holds that communicating disjointed messages in a haphazard style is less likely to resonate with intended audiences. Conversely, core information repeatedly communicated in an uncomplicated, consistent, and efficient way to targeted subgroups is more likely to secure support for the sender's agenda. Branding strategy positions the sender as unique, reassures audiences, and communicates aspirational, value-based, and credible messages.³⁰ Repetitiveness and symmetry are crafted to pierce the clamour. A "less is more" approach to communication reinforces information and messages and does so in a resource-efficient manner that accentuates visual imagery.

Branding balances the information demands of the impassioned and the uninterested. It communicates cues and signals to distracted audiences while stoking emotional connections with those who are most loyal. It involves marketers maximizing their communications investments by promoting messages designed to differentiate the brand and to resonate on an emotional level with target audiences. It understates or ignores the brand's flaws. It turns a humdrum interaction into a memorable experience. The resulting brand loyalty felt by the most ardent supporters is such that they can be impervious to missteps and to courting by competitors. An organization requires tenacious leadership to assert branding objectives over the demands and criticisms of other actors. The more fractured that media become, the more that party strategists and senior public servants seek to standardize and centralize their messages. The more that message cohesion, discipline, and centralization are practised, the more that society makes political choices based on images of politicians rather than on policy details. In politics, the brand unifies everything. The rest of us need to look at political leaders, party politics, the media, and public administration through a branding lens to understand this.

This book's theory of public sector branding follows American media scholar John Zaller's contention that political battles are waged primarily through media management. It accepts his premise that "the form and content of media politics are largely determined by the disparate interests

of politicians, journalists, and citizens as each group jostles to get what it wants out of politics and the political communication that makes politics possible.”³¹ This jostling is responsive to a fragmented media landscape and to audiences with shortening attention spans. It also accepts American political scientist Samuel Popkin’s concluding remark in his seminal study of political communications: “Ask not for more sobriety and piety from citizens, for they are voters, not judges; offer them instead cues and signals which connect their world with the world of politics.”³² Or, as Zaller puts it, those who follow politics and government must recognize that most citizens do not wish to invest much energy in monitoring political events. The general public’s overriding messages to elites are “Don’t waste my time!” and “Tell me only what I really need to know!”³³ The likes of Zaller and Popkin recognize that we live in a society in which visuals can dramatically reinforce or shift public opinion and public policy.³⁴

In Canada, for all the attention paid to political communications, and to the concentration of power in the centre of government, there is no comprehensive resource that interprets both through a branding lens. Canadianists write about communications control by the executive branch. They pay heed to the message uniformity that pervades the legislative branch through party discipline. They touch on the consistencies between the brands of the governing party and the government. Canadian political parties and first ministers are treated as brands, as are Canadian cities. Some scholars look at Canada’s international image and at the branding of public policy. Public sector advertising attracts much more interest, absent of branding theory. The idea that communications play a formative role in the centralization of political power has not yet been explained as a branding phenomenon. The relationship between branding strategy and technological change is also poorly understood.

An overarching research objective for *Brand Command* is to consider the digital communications environment for political parties, public administration, and journalism at the federal level of politics in Canada. It builds on *Political Marketing in Canada* and *Political Communication in Canada: Meet the Press and Tweet the Rest* by seeking to address three overarching questions.³⁵ First, *what is public sector branding?* Subsidiary questions include: Does public sector branding differ from long-standing practices of communicating? Why are visuals so important in branding?

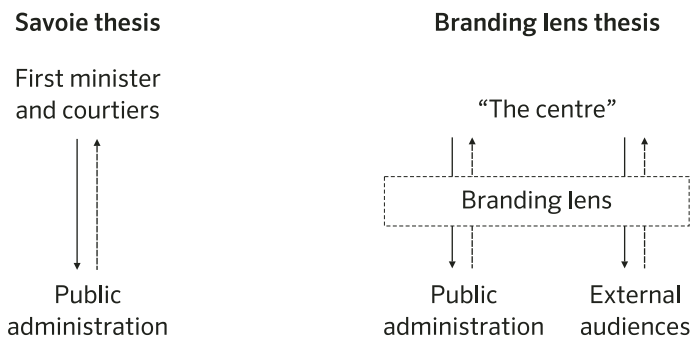
How is branding different from framing, image management, and political marketing? Which forms of public sector branding exist? What does it hope to achieve? Why does it appeal to public sector elites?

Second, *how is branding and communications control practised in Canadian party politics and government?* Among the areas of enquiry related to this overarching question are how is control of information and media practised by political and government communicators? Which instruments are used within the federal government to achieve brand image consistency? How does branding hasten the concentration of power and decision making within central agencies? How does branding contribute to the fusion of political government with permanent government? How is branding a tool of the concepts of New Public Management and New Political Governance? Does branding constitute propaganda?

Third, *what are the implications of a branding lens for Canadian politics and government?* This theme encompasses an array of questions. What does a branding philosophy mean for electioneering and governance? What are the implications of the centralization of decision making in government? How concerned should we be about the hypermanagement of public officials' interactions with the media? Are targeting and narrow-casting better or worse for democracy than mass communication was? Is all of this a net positive or negative for Canadian democracy? What can be done about it?

To understand Canadian public sector elites' communications behaviour in the twenty-first century is to understand branding. How the media treat the political class, and how politicians treat each other, have implications for Canadian democratic government. Alarmism about the centralization of power and communications deserves to be balanced with an empirical attempt to recognize the circumstances and institutional factors that motivate elites' actions. There are concerns about the challenges facing professional political journalism and the implications for a healthy democratic society.³⁶ The withholding of information leads interest groups to issue open letters calling for reduced micromanagement of government communications.³⁷ Media coverage of political strategy is thought to increase mistrust of public officials and generate disdain for the media themselves.³⁸ These vexations contribute to the so-called spiral of cynicism

FIGURE 1.2
The Savoie thesis and branding lens thesis



hypothesis that describes citizen disengagement.³⁹ It is only by attempting to uncover the alleged justifications for political actors' attempts to control communications that we can arrive at pragmatic remedies. *Brand Command* submits that the reasons increasingly centre on the supremacy of the brand in an accelerating media environment.

The idea of a branding lens extends what is known as “the Savoie thesis” (Figure 1.2). Public administration specialist Donald Savoie is a proponent of the centralization of power thesis, as expressed in a number of works.⁴⁰ By his account, cabinet is foremost a sounding board for the prime minister, who pays more heed to an inner circle of handpicked courtiers. The government is beholden to the cadre of influential ministers and senior political staff who dispense orders with the weight of the prime minister's authority. The Savoie thesis is a popular model that fits with the so-called presidentialization of the Westminster system of government. This holds that institutions revolve around the first minister rather than cabinet or Parliament. The waning relevance of parliamentarians leads to the abandonment of the *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”) principle in favour of a cabinet headed by a commander-in-chief.⁴¹ The presidentialization thesis itself builds on the notion of an imperial presidency. This describes the growth of the American president's staff and how power exceeds that executive office's constitutional authority.⁴² The Savoie thesis is also consistent with

the unitary system of command espoused by New Labour Party architect and political strategist Philip Gould.⁴³ Finally, it captures the negativity and fear-mongering promulgated by critics about “the centre.”

Not everyone is convinced by the Savoie thesis of centralization or arguments about the presidentialization of the parliamentary system. Political scientists Herman Bakvis, Graham White, and others bristle at the suggestion that Canada’s federal ministers are little more than conduits. Bakvis makes a compelling case that powerful regional ministers act as both enablers and constrictors of the prime minister’s power.⁴⁴ White enumerates the many components of “a constricting web” of forces that limit executive power, among them international agreements and a less deferential public.⁴⁵ J.P. Lewis suggests that in reality Canadian cabinets operate within a hybrid autocratic-collegial decision-making model.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Matthew Kerby demonstrates that the prime minister faces considerable constraints in cabinet formation and reshuffling.⁴⁷ Even though premiers are sometimes political overlords, there is no consensus on the Savoie thesis at the provincial level either.⁴⁸ Moreover, the idea that the Westminster system is becoming presidentialized is challenged. Keith Dowding argues that we must not equate it with the personalization of politics (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) and the decline of political parties, phenomena present in both presidential and parliamentary systems of government.⁴⁹ For his part, Harper maintained that the notion of him as a one-man band was overblown.⁵⁰ Chrétien echoes this position, writing in his memoirs that “prime ministers cannot – must not – get bogged down in the details of government or try to micromanage the business of the nation. Rather, it is their job to establish priorities, develop strategies, supervise crises, handle the toughest problems, *communicate the complicated issues in simple ways*, and delegate as much as possible to their ministers.”⁵¹ There is more truth to these comments than critics think.

The Savoie thesis needs updating. The many other Canadianists who write in this area do not examine with any rigour the important role of political communications, which I argue here play a formative role in centralization. Writing before Web 2.0, Savoie comments on the “enormous pressure” that television places on government, prompting complaints from political elites.⁵² More recently, he observes that the media have

“changed substantially” and that the advent of permanent campaigning has “shifted” where power is located.⁵³ In his latest book, he muses that social media has “strengthened” the power of the prime minister and agents, and that politicians believe that reacting quickly is necessary to be “in command of the situation.”⁵⁴ White notes that “seasoned Ottawa watchers” believe that Savoie *underestimates* centralized power because the “centre’s control over government communications and ‘issues management’ – the polite term for political firefighting – is even more pronounced” than it is over most matters of policy.⁵⁵ In the provinces, even weak premiers gain control from the growth of central agencies and from the executive oversight of “communications and legislative agendas.”⁵⁶

This book does not seek to test the Savoie thesis. Rather, it is concerned with establishing that changes in communications technology are enabling the centre to enforce communications control and to implement branding strategy. This examination will provide both believers and disbelievers of the Savoie thesis with a basis for further assessment of whether the centre has too much power – and in particular a better understanding of the institutional conditions and processes related to political communications and elite behaviour. *Brand Command* argues that the causes of centralization are systemic, not individualistic. In this light, Trudeau’s pledge to empower cabinet and buck the forces of centralization seems idealistic. Branding strategy seeks to influence public impressions and to set and advance agendas. It is accompanied by an organizational willingness to exploit opportunities to penetrate a communications cyclone and a motivation to achieve resource efficiencies. In interviews conducted for this book, many respondents pontificated, unaided, along the following lines: “Disseminating a message in the clutter or bombardment of information that you get today is a huge challenge ... One of the solutions to that is consistency of messaging, which probably explains to a large degree the centralized approach that government has taken to its communications” (respondent CS 20).

A branding “lens” borrows the term from the public policy lenses that train analysts’ focus on a topic. A memorandum to cabinet in the government of Canada requires that government officials treat public policy with a privacy lens, a bilingualism lens, and a gender lens. Perspectives such

as legal risk assessment, horizontal policy impacts, environmentalism, regionalism, private and voluntary sectors, and international considerations must be considered.⁵⁷ Unlike those formalities, a branding lens does not exist on paper. It is an evolving yet consistent and unifying approach to communications. Like an ideology, the brand is a state of mind, and its conduits share a purpose that they might not be able to articulate. It is a point of view and a way of being held by those closest to power. Above all, as a strategy, the priority is staying true to the “master brand,” a macroterm used throughout this book to refer to a core philosophical stance as distinct from the many microbrands that are components of the brand writ large.⁵⁸ The master brand should be constant over time. That umbrella must be supported by specialized and changing sub-brands. Internal exchanges between the centre and the civil service pass through a branding lens, as do external exchanges between government and its audiences. This is more than just the prime minister’s entourage – it is an unspoken mentality that envelops the entire upper echelon of government.

This book submits that branding-related considerations play a prominent role in the business of government and politics and offer analytical value. A political observer who unlocks the governing party’s desired master brand has a tool to decipher and perhaps even anticipate the behaviour of public sector elites. A branding lens is thus potentially a good theoretical tool because it meets the criteria of simplicity, predictive accuracy, and importance.⁵⁹ It is also a foundation for figuring out what must be changed to improve the democratic nature of Canadian government. The Reform Act – discussed in Chapter 2 – is a good start. However, a branding philosophy is so powerful that more must be done.

This matters because branding theory offers a new avenue to interpret the centripetal behaviour of elites. Throughout this book, as in public administration, politics is found at the intersection of partisan and non-partisan actions. “Political elites” are the partisans who work among the upper echelons of political parties and/or government. “Public sector elites” expands the concept to include the non-partisan senior mandarins subservient to cabinet within the confines of the law and the subjectivity of communications ethics. Likewise, a “political brand” refers to a partisan entity, while a “public sector brand” encompasses parties and government.

Whether decisions made at the top of the government pyramid are excessively partisan, and whether implementation of those decisions contravenes expectations of political neutrality within the public service, are often grey areas. I argue here that we are heading toward a single brand that unifies the government, the governing party, and the first minister in the public eye. Those who doubt that the first minister is all powerful must confront the adage that perception is reality.

Interest in studying public sector branding is growing with its practice. Margaret Scammell of the London School of Economics argues that “branding is the new form of political marketing. If market research, spin, and advertising were the key signifiers of marketed parties and candidates in the 1980s and 1990s, ‘branding’ is the hallmark now ... The brand concept has analytical value. It is not simply a fashionable term for image.”⁶⁰ Establishing that branding is a tangible and important phenomenon in Canadian politics and government requires a philosophical and theoretical foundation. Theory will provide the basis for understanding the nature of enduring relationships between public sector elites and democratic institutions in a changing media environment, regardless of who is in power.

However, documenting the internal processes of branding is fraught with difficulty. The extensive access to internal government operations enjoyed by the authors of *The Superbureaucrats: Structure and Behaviour in Central Agencies* is a relic of a distant era.⁶¹ Their 1970s observation of the inner workings of central agencies of the government of Canada peeled back layers of bureaucratic structure that is beyond reach today. The communications control and secrecy encouraged by branding strategy inhibits researchers’ ability to obtain data.⁶² Trade secrets are rarely divulged. Invisible processes by communications principals, strategists, and messengers cannot be easily uncovered. This research obstacle is an unfortunate if expected outcome of a branding philosophy that espouses that those on the inside should not talk freely, or at all, with outsiders. Those who do so will be guarded about what they disclose.

In Canada, monographs about elites’ role in political communications tend to be atheoretical. Reflections authored by practitioners, such as *The Way It Works: Inside Ottawa* and *Harper’s Team: Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Rise to Power*, offer one-sided accounts that would otherwise

not come to light.⁶³ No Canadian political insider has written about elite communications since *Close to the Charisma: My Years between the Press and Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, with the possible exception of *Kicking Ass in Canadian Politics*.⁶⁴ Participant observation is limited to *Inside the NDP War Room: Competing for Credibility in a Federal Election*,⁶⁵ though here *Harper's Team* warrants a second mention. Journalists' works, such as *The Friendly Dictatorship* and *Harperland*, tend to be descriptive and selective, weaving together what has already been reported along with a spattering of new information. A pleasant exception is Susan Delacourt's *Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them*, which traces the evolution of commercial and political sales tactics to argue that the political class treats electors as consumers.⁶⁶ For the most part, we must turn elsewhere for theory, such as American studies *Image Bite Politics: News and the Visual Framing of Elections* and *Branded Conservatives: How the Brand Brought the Right from the Finges to the Center of American Politics*, which argue that political communications are trending toward management of consistent, simple visuals.⁶⁷ An important Canadian study is *Making "Pictures in Our Heads": Government Advertising in Canada*, wherein Jonathan Rose documents the persuasive nature of government advertising in a mediated democracy, under the pretense of information campaigns.⁶⁸ In all instances, writers are confronted by data limitations.

There is no agreed way to study public sector branding. Methods for studying and measuring private sector branding are a source of debate in marketing literature.⁶⁹ Although there are efforts to quantify brand value, for the most part brand research tends to be a qualitative undertaking because of the need to understand layers of information.⁷⁰ Examining the ways that branding pervades an organization begins by recognizing its orientation toward a branding philosophy. In Canadian politics and government, the unanswerable question looms of whether principals impose branding on agents and organizations or to what extent branding is thrust upon principals. Researcher access to a sitting prime minister is implausible. His or her public comments are of limited value because of strategic calculations and selective reporting. As a result, assessing the prime minister's role in communications is "necessarily speculative," as media scholar Fred Fletcher once observed.⁷¹ This begs a study of organizational behaviour, including information about human

resources, management structures, internal processes, and hierarchy, at the top of which we find the prime minister. We must be satisfied with qualitative data obtained from avenues other than the principal, necessarily supporting theory with description.

Brand Command focuses on Stephen Harper's leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada. This encompasses the first five federal election campaigns contested by that newly constituted party and its first permanent leader between 2004 and 2015. Studying Harper's tenure is rather pertinent to research about public sector branding. As a government, the Conservatives imprinted a neoliberal policy agenda underpinned by a master brand comprised of strong economic stewardship and tough-on-crime measures. Public administration scholar Peter Aucoin remarked that the first term of the Harper administration is an exemplary case of New Political Governance (discussed in Chapter 9).⁷² Delacourt describes Harper as "Canada's first marketing prime minister,"⁷³ and Tom Flanagan refers to his former colleague's "razor-sharp intellect, cunning strategic sense, and ruthless determination."⁷⁴ Historian Allan Levine, author of *Scrum Wars: The Prime Ministers and the Media*,⁷⁵ opines that "Harper is as skilled a politician who has ever been prime minister. He understands completely the way in which power has to be exercised in the age of social media and how errors of judgment and personal foibles can be costly. In short, he knows control-freakish behaviour can be rewarded."⁷⁶ Studying the Harper era matters because the early twenty-first century has been a period of profound innovation in information and communications technology. In the television age, repeating key messages was necessary because the media reduce long interviews, lengthy speeches, Question Period discourse, and other exchanges to succinct sound bites of less than ten seconds.⁷⁷ In today's hybrid media environment, communicating simple visuals is necessary because the media and citizenry diminish complex events to image bites – short clips of visuals without original sounds.⁷⁸ In this respect, Harper's tenure encompasses a formative time period and a leader deserving of study.

This forms a grounded theory case study. Theory is developed through asking new questions and documenting events not readily explained by existing theory, which leads to the formation of generalizations that have broader application.⁷⁹ *Brand Command* employs a descriptive method

of examining past work and capturing events of historical value, with an element of storytelling. As the works of theorists ranging from Sun Tzu to Machiavelli and Maurice Duverger to Savoie show, the value of the descriptive approach rests with its identification of principles as an origin for categorizing observed phenomena.⁸⁰ Deductive reasoning is applied to those phenomena to develop enduring theories about elites and their relationship with political institutions. The methodological risks of oversimplification, ivory tower assumptions, and inability to account for infinite variables are tempered with experienced observations and mixed methods research. The deductive approach raises important questions about ethical interpretations of political conduct, and it advances the words and concepts of politics (see the Glossary).⁸¹ A formative study of public sector branding must also be concerned with a practical approach to research. A practical approach involves the study of people or groups who seek power, or its smooth and effective operation, and who enlist technical experts to achieve their objectives.⁸² Observations must be detached and tempered. This limits overstating the assumed effects of practices by winners and undervaluing those employed by losers.

In *Brand Command*, theory is built on mixed-method data that reveal internal communications processes and planning instruments. The first source of data is internal political party documents, principally those associated with Harper. Files were obtained through the Thomas E. Flanagan Fonds at the University of Calgary library archives (see Appendix 1). Flanagan is a prolific professor who, alongside Harper, held a senior role in the Reform Party of Canada from 1991 to 1993. He managed Harper's successful leadership campaigns for the Canadian Alliance Party in 2002 and the Conservative Party of Canada in 2004. Flanagan was the Conservative campaign manager in the 2004 federal election and the party's senior communications adviser during the 2006 federal campaign. He is among a select group of senior political elites in Canada who has made his personal records available for public access, joining stalwarts such as John Diefenbaker (via the University of Saskatchewan) and Keith Davey (via the University of Toronto). The Flanagan fonds comprise internal party memos, planning documents, minutes of party meetings, as well as printouts of private emails among party executives, including a small number authored

by Harper. The research value and limitations of these records, as well as verbatim examples, are found in Appendix 1.

The fonds are an unfamiliar resource to students of Canadian politics, except those who are aware that they were mined by Flanagan for *Harper's Team*. Documents associated with communications were retrieved from the fond categories of election planning and leadership campaign planning. Some of them were manually reviewed at the University of Calgary library, after which nearly 2,500 pages of photocopied files were examined off-site. The socio-anthropological nature of this ethnographic review included reading private emails that capture how people operated in their environments at certain moments. They are an exceptional source of historical data that provides a window to the hidden world of political elites' exchanges on the windy road from fringe party to official opposition to government. They reveal that managerial time is mostly spent sorting out daily minutiae and that communications deliberations are top-down, horizontal, and/or bottom-up. These party files were supplemented by a search for information available on the Conservative, Liberal, and New Democratic Party (NDP) websites in 2014, which uncovered a handful of relevant internal files concerning election readiness.

The second main source of data is a large body of email exchanges in English and French between federal public servants and associated internal government documents. In 2012, requests were submitted under access to information legislation to fifteen government of Canada departments and agencies, totalling 109 submissions. The searches ranged from seeking any information about branding to specific requests concerning use of the Canadian flag, images of hockey, colour schemes on websites, design of photo-op backdrops (i.e., portable background decor), involvement of celebrities in media events, and the Economic Action Plan. This generated over 4,000 pages of internal emails and documents that were manually examined. Not available is content deemed by government censors to be confidential, including anything requested from the PMO, exempt from the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Details of the search are provided in Appendix 2. Additional government files were located in 2014 via searches of the government of Canada website for content about branding and marketing and through the Open Government initia-

tive (data.gc.ca) to obtain other applicants' completed access to information requests. This procured additional information about communications policies, media relations activities, reports on advertising and public opinion research, the Federal Identity Program (see Chapter 8), and the Economic Action Plan. This quasi-systematic historical research was supplemented by a smaller number of government documents provided by some of the political staff and public servants interviewed, including some files that originated from the PMO and ministers' offices (MINOs). As well, hundreds of pages of PMO emails, which were presented as evidence in 2015 during Senator Mike Duffy's trial, were reviewed. This was a pragmatic if imperfect way to document internal processes and trends.

The third main source is data obtained via in-depth interviews with political party and government insiders. Between 2010 and 2015, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seventy-seven federal political party representatives, federal civil servants, federal political exempt staff, journalists, and communications consultants.⁸³ Sometimes I spoke with them more than once, other times as dyads and triads, and on occasion I followed up to clarify points. Given the difficulty of identifying and accessing public sector elites, I used a combination of convenience, purposive, snowball, and quota sampling. Greater access to members of Harper's entourage who had held varying ranks within the Conservative Party of Canada and/or its forebears was possible because of vouching from Flanagan. Invitees who declined to be interviewed communicated a preference not to speak while Harper was in office or did not acknowledge the request. I observed no commonality among those who agreed or declined to be interviewed. Discussions began with broad, open-ended questions – such as, “If you were to pick up a book about branding in Canadian party politics and government, what would you expect to be in it?” – before moving into a conversational format. This wide net enabled a search for information about political communications circumstances and about known and unknown processes. Each interview was transcribed, and key themes were identified by reviewing the transcripts.

Given the possibility of political retribution, such as the backlash experienced by a respondent identified in *Harperland*,⁸⁴ I have chosen not to associate names with quoted information, other than party leaders

and a handful of public figures. Similarly, the authorship of most emails deposited in the Flanagan fonds and those obtained through access to information legislation have not been disclosed. Savoie took a similar approach concerning the unstructured, in-depth interviews that formed the basis of *Governing from the Centre*, rationalizing that “it would have been entertaining to attribute particular quotes directly. It would also have been inappropriate.”⁸⁵ A list of interviews is found at the back of the book. When information is attributed to respondents, they are identified by the corresponding assigned acronym and number (e.g., CP 1, CS 5, CM 2, CI 6) to denote a communications principal, strategist, manager, or intermediary (see Figure 2.9).

The final main source of data is a manual review of over 900 news items from 2006 to 2015 in English media about political communications in Canada. They were collected through a wide-ranging initial capture of news stories from 2006 to 2008 using the Factiva news search engine. Keyword combinations included at least one of Conservative or Stephen Harper and at least one of advertising, branding, communications, or image. Specific searches for media reports about Message Event Proposals and the Economic Action Plan were conducted in 2014. They were supplemented with casual online scanning and archiving of relevant stories appearing in major Canadian news outlets and the *Hill Times* from 2009 to 2015. In addition, communications-related blog entries by Ottawa-based journalists with the CBC, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *National Post* authored between 2009 and 2011 were collected. This captured a number of additional details that did not receive mainstream news coverage.

In this book, I take a broad conceptualization of branding to bring together many aspects of political communications and to provide the basis for further study. *Brand Command* offers the basis for a theoretical framework that can be applied to other cases. Readers are asked to prioritize broad theory and institutional processes over personalities, events, and minutiae. They should also consider that everything intensifies under the microscope of an election campaign and political scandal.

The book deals with theory before delving into an enumeration of communication practices within Canadian political parties and government. Chapter 2 introduces the concepts of political marketing and branding

alongside centripetal tendencies in Canadian politics and parliamentary government. Chapter 3 argues that recent changes in communications technology are of such a seismic scale that norms of political communications have been shocked. It then reviews an array of journalism concepts. These concepts serve to establish that political communications involve intense jockeying between political and media elites, all of whom have their own motivations. Chapter 4 theorizes that a number of types of brands exist in the public sector. A short case study looks at the special characteristics of the Trudeau brand. Chapter 5 serves as a wake-up call to those who pay close attention to the political sphere. It emphasizes that the majority of Canadians really are not that concerned with daily political minutiae and engage only in surface information processing of public sector issues. Chapter 6 summarizes ways that political parties engage in media relations and practise political marketing, with growing consideration given to branding. Chapters 7 through 10 train attention on the government of Canada by presenting an inventory of federal government communications policies and practices, last published in 1995.⁸⁶ Chapter 7 itemizes the communications functions of central agencies and communications actors within government. This itemization provides a foundation for Chapter 8's summary of the components of communications and branding in government, for instance by examining government advertising and public opinion research processes as well as corporate identity. In Chapter 9, the inner workings of the political coordination of government communications are revealed. The fusion of political priorities and public administration is laid bare in Chapter 10, bringing together branding architecture within government. This includes cataloguing planning instruments such as the Message Event Proposal and communications calendars. A short case study of the Economic Action Plan demonstrates the outcome of government-wide coordination steered by central agencies and their planning instruments.

The book concludes by examining the implications of top-down communications congealing into publicity and persuasion, under the auspices of branding strategy. Chapter 11 presents thematic findings and opines about the positive and negative implications of public sector branding for Canadian democracy. It positions the implications of a branding lens and

offers some regulatory suggestions before presenting areas for future study. All told, this comprises an assessment of public sector branding that considers the perspectives of both the permanent government and the political government in Canada's parliamentary system.