

PRIME MINISTERIAL
POWER IN CANADA

*Its Origins under
Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden*

PATRICE DUTIL



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C.D. HOWE SERIES IN CANADIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

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The series originated with a grant from the C.D. Howe Memorial Foundation and is further supported by the Bill Graham Centre for Contemporary International History.



C.D. Howe Series in
Canadian Political History

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Dutil, Patrice A., author

Prime ministerial power in Canada: its origins under Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden / Patrice Dutil.

(C.D. Howe series in Canadian political history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3473-5 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3475-9 (PDF)

ISBN 978-0-7748-3476-6 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3477-3 (Kindle)

1. Power (Social sciences) – Canada. 2. Prime ministers – Canada. 3. Canada – Politics and government. 4. Cabinet system – Canada. 5. Canada. Parliament – Powers and duties. I. Title.

JL99.D88 2017

320.471

C2017-901092-1

C2017-901093-X

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.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Perpetua and and Minion by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Joanne Richardson

Proofreader: Frank Chow

Index: Christine Jacobs

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca

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FOREWORD

Patrice Dutil has written an important study of prime ministerial power in Canada. Drawing on a deep knowledge of Canadian history, a personal familiarity with government operations, and a close reading of international studies of prime ministerial and presidential power, he parts ways with political scientists and journalists who assert that “governing from the centre” suddenly began in the 1970s. He also avoids careless and over-simplified generalizations about the centralization of prime ministerial power, instead looking for answers that focus on how politics and administrations have evolved.

In making his arguments, Professor Dutil establishes the fundamental importance of political history, which he notes has fallen by the wayside in both Canadian and American universities. As this book was in preparation, historians Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood drew attention to this state of affairs in a *New York Times* article titled “Why Did We Stop Teaching Political History.” Written during the corrosive American presidential campaign of 2016, the authors point to continuous references to Roosevelt and the New Deal, Reagan and the new conservatism, and to even Andrew Jackson made during the campaign, but observe that “the public’s love for political stories belies a crisis in the profession. American political history as a field of study has cratered.” Few professional historians now teach it; few courses are offered. Because of this, the United States has lost “a vital part of this country’s continuing democratic discussion.” In the

continuous news cycle of American modern politics, the voices of professional historians are faint at a moment when conspiracy theories and metahistorical fantasies abound.

Curiously, history and precedent get their greatest exposure today in the work of professional economists. The Nobel prizewinner Paul Krugman regularly references history – not just of the relatively recent past but of the classical era – in his columns in the *New York Times*. Another American Nobelist, Joseph Stiglitz, is also not immune to history’s explanatory power. One wishes that Canadian economists, as well as historians, would do the same, and thereby re-establish the relevance of history, which in Canada, as elsewhere, is in decline.

In *Prime Ministerial Power in Canada*, Dutil does establish this relevance. His administrative, institutional, and political history of the office of prime minister under the tenure of John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier, and Robert Borden illustrates how the three prime ministers shaped the institution and how it, in turn, adapted to broader societal change and, importantly, to the different “styles” of Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden. Dutil shows how Macdonald established “a pattern of habits, mindsets, and structures” that created an institutional foundation for the new nation and fostered the legitimacy that led to its permanence. Laurier and Borden followed the pattern set out by Macdonald and altered it in response to their own styles and dramatic changes in technology and focus. These were formative and decisive years for the institution, so much so that a time traveller to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s office today would see the “habits, mindsets, and structures” established by Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden.

In making the argument for the continuity of the power of the prime minister’s office, Dutil probes areas where too few historians have ventured. Using innovative methods, he investigates how government was structured, the degree to which prime ministers set budget priorities, how patronage was dispensed, how departmental policies were set, and how decisions were made. With exceptional knowledge of the relevant secondary works, as well as familiarity with the important primary sources, Dutil reveals how the prime minister’s office gained strength, and how its occupant was central to the major decisions of government.

FOREWORD

Prime Ministerial Power in Canada makes an important contribution to the international literature on political institutions, and Dutil effectively links his work to that broad tradition. It should be essential reading not only for Canadian political historians but also for all Canadians participating in the “continuing democratic discussion” that must inform our national debate over the function, size, cost, and effectiveness of our political institutions.

ROBERT BOTHWELL AND JOHN ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

In the insufferably humid atmosphere of Ottawa on 30 July 1903, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier stood in the House of Commons to present a bill that would fund a new transcontinental railway.¹ His minister responsible for railways, Andrew Blair, had resigned on a point of principle two weeks before, refusing to table the bill that would allow for a second coast-to-coast line. Laurier would have none of it and pressed on. “We cannot wait because time does not wait,” he hectored the House on that Thursday before a packed public gallery. “We cannot wait because in these days of wonderful development time lost is doubly lost. We cannot wait because at this moment there is a transformation going on in the conditions of our national life which it would be folly to ignore and a crime to overlook.”² In Laurier’s imagination, Canada had to ensure that the unprecedented number of immigrants be transported to the west and, for that to happen, the country needed more railways, not fewer. For Blair, the venture was too costly and too risky. If Blair would not table the enabling legislation, then Laurier himself would do so; and he did so with despatch. If it meant that the House sat in the heat of summer, so be it. Laurier loved long sessions that stretched into the summer anyway.

It was a riveting sight. Laurier, dressed to the nines as usual despite the suffocating afternoon sitting, restlessly reached for various slips of paper layered on his desk and shuffled files as he spoke. He knew the subject in and out, and in fact had been far more implicated in the negotiations than had his minister. But it was still a tense, emotional moment because it was

his own minister, and a friend, who had condemned the project. He defended it as Blair looked on. The Canadian Pacific Railway did not suffice, he said: “The men of 1867 built for the condition of things which they found in 1867; but we the men of 1903 have to build for the condition of things which exist in 1903, and not only for that condition of things, but also for a condition of things that we see up in the near future.”³ Then he turned towards Blair, detailing the trajectory the new railway line would take in travelling through more southern parts of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick before it snaked through previously unserved parts of Quebec. “I have already taken issue with my late colleague the ex-Minister of Railways and Canals,” Laurier reproached, “and once more I beg to take issue with him upon this point.” He was staring down a man who had resigned as premier of New Brunswick in 1896 to join him when he was a neophyte prime minister. Blair, now sitting as an independent member, had been defeated. He had dared to challenge Laurier, but there was no winning against a prime minister in full force. Only his newspaper, the *Telegraph* in St. John, could criticize the prime minister, and then only timidly. This was a truth long before 1903; it would continue to be so for more than a century afterwards.

Scholars, as much as casual observers of Canadian politics, have long marvelled at the autonomy and discretion of prime ministers in this country. Taking full advantage of unwritten rules and borrowed conventions, the occupants have assumed enormous levels of power even when compared with other Westminster parliaments.⁴ In command of majorities in legislatures until the 1920s, they acquired tremendous latitude. Even in minority parliaments since then, Canadian prime ministers have been allowed to govern remarkably unfettered by formal agreements with opposition parties. That being said, the phenomenon has to be approached with an eye for all the evidence. Prime ministers do not totally dominate cabinet or party, at least not for long. The historical record shows that they often make decisions on their own, on large and small matters. But they also address and accept views that are not their own. On some occasions, they have had to yield on issues in order to win support for greater stakes. This ability to compromise, to consult and ensure a measure of consensus in cabinet, has been common to every prime minister since the time of Sir John A. Macdonald. Unmistakably however, prime ministers in Canada

have been far more than “firsts among equals.” It would be more accurate to label them as *plurimum inter pares* – the greatest among equals.

Over the past twenty years, it has come into fashion to argue that the ascendancy of prime ministers has given them unprecedented degrees of power – to the point of total domination. Notions of “governments of one” abound, each observer pretending that he or she has uncovered a new phenomenon. If such a theory of dominance were to hold water, it would follow that the nature of the “centralization” or “concentration” (to use the words currently in vogue) experienced nowadays would have a source, a particular origin. My argument is that indeed it has: and that it was *made* this way by the three men who dominated Canadian politics in the first fifty years of Confederation. John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier, and Robert Borden each took steps to centralize power in their own way, borrowing from precedent, adding new structures, bringing new substance to various processes, and impressing the act of governing with their own style. Their managerial actions – far more than their political manoeuvres – created governance habits that, in turn, became legacies of the office. Their successors carried on essentially in the same manner, even as Canada entered a new era and began to forget their predecessors. Their approach to the office indelibly shaped it to the point at which few questioned it – that is, until the last third of the twentieth century. Scholars have too easily forgotten that the *New York Times* described Macdonald as “almost the autocratic ruler of the country.”⁵ And it is well to remember the old joke told of how R.B. Bennett was seen walking from his suite in the Chateau Laurier to Parliament Hill, mumbling to himself: the observer noted matter-of-factly that the prime minister was simply having a cabinet meeting. The biting caricature in the *Winnipeg Free Press* of Bennett presiding over a cabinet of his clones drove the point home with an artistic touch. It also set a model for succeeding cartoonists.

Some would argue that political success helps explain the success of prime ministerial dominance. Because of their agility in forging electoral coalitions within parties, fortuitous timing, and sheer personal supremacy, prime ministers have, in turn, been able to shape structures and processes to their advantage. There is no doubt that the political success of these men has been amply documented. But what if the causal link were flipped? What if it were indeed the ability to shape institutions and processes that

worked to further entrench prime ministers? What if it were administrative prowess that helped re-elect prime ministers and their parties? This ability to manage the state's administration and to harness its structures to the exclusive advantage of the prime minister has not been sufficiently explored, either here or in other Westminster systems. And, in this respect, Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden have left Canadian governance with an important heritage – one worth exploring at length.

Historians have had much to say about prime ministers as politicians but much less to say about them as managers of public policy or as administrators of the civil service. From the beginning, my working title for this book was “Men at Work” – a study of the mundane actions that, day to day, accumulate power and prestige – because I considered that this aspect of prime ministerial power had been disregarded. This neglect has left an important void in the understanding of how these men used their office and shaped it for their successors. John A. Macdonald once likened government in Canada to a binding cord, but he could have said the same about prime ministers. Without this individual's leadership, the government would fall apart, “like a bundle of sticks ... helpless, powerless and aimless.” While Canada's prime ministers have been the subjects of numerous biographies and political studies, their administrative styles – how they tied the cords so that the particular sticks of government would be purposeful – have never been explored. In the absence of this understanding, we are susceptible to the notion that power has been centralized (or even presidentialized, as some would say) in the hands of the prime minister for only the past fifty years or so. In other words, the degree to which prime ministers in this country have been able to govern with practically no opposition from their colleagues or from Parliament was accomplished by an interplay of structures; the policy substance they contributed; and the personal style with which they came to make decisions, implement them, and evaluate them. Today, scholars point to the “prime ministerialization” of government as a new phenomenon and see as key indicators the rise of the prime minister's personal staff, an obsession with personalized communication, and dominance in cabinet. These habits were very much a part of the prime ministership between 1867 and 1920, albeit on a scale that matched the place of the news media in the politics of the time. Social media and 24/7 cable news were unimaginable

(radio was in its infancy in the last years of the Borden government), but the tendencies were already pronounced. Since then, the political plant has grown stronger and thicker.

Prime Ministerial Power in Canada stands at the intersection of a number of schools of thought and, indeed, fields of research. My intention is to test the arguments of a particular “concentration of power” thesis by closely examining the evolution of the administrative philosophies and practices of Canada’s prime ministers. I also test the hypothesis that prime ministers had their own strong, “centralizing” grip on power, which they achieved mostly by reinforcing innovative administrative techniques that progressively allowed the state to expand partnerships with the private sector and non-profit organizations, developing expertise within the public service in various disciplines and subjects, and improving the implementation of policy. I apply questions originating in the field of political science and public administration but examine them through a historical lens.

In his insightful little book *Thinking Politically*,⁶ Jean Blondel specifically presents the problem of a prime minister’s influence as difficult to measure. This struck me as a young undergraduate in the late 1970s and has stayed with me as I’ve observed generations of prime ministers and premiers, both here and abroad. In *Prime Ministerial Power in Canada*, I try new ways to document administrative influence and to show how it has made an impact on policy and on politics. At the same time, I give a historical turn to a set of political science questions. I combine primary research and incorporate more recent insights from both history and public administration. I seek to make sense of prime ministers as administrators and thinkers. I am invariably selective, and I risk underplaying a good deal of subtlety, but I argue for a deeper coherence. *Prime Ministerial Power in Canada* has three parts, focusing on structure, substance, and style, respectively, so that the interested reader can enjoy individual and group portraits and engage with me in this new exploration.

Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden saw that their habits were ingrained in the institutional memory retained by cabinet ministers, high-ranking officials, and the press. They created an administrative tradition that emphasized that institutional continuity was made possible by ensuring compliance with the wishes of the prime minister, and here it is easy to note how Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden incarnated their parties, led their

parties' electoral campaigns personally, and sought personal mandates.⁷ Macdonald could run on the slogan "The Old Flag, the Old Policy, the Old Leader" without blushing. He spoke the truth. In 1908, Laurier brazenly ran on the slogan "Let Laurier Finish the Job." Borden stood atop the Union Party in 1917 without an opponent. In other words, so long as the institution was legitimate, it could enforce a certain compliance with the rules that it was entrusted to govern.

The role of prime minister has always had, in theory if not in constitutional language, a strong managerial and public-sector leadership component.⁸ The prime minister is, in effect, the "administrator-in-chief" of the federal government. The job description of the prime minister offered on the Privy Council Office's website gives only a hint of this: "The Prime Minister is the head of the government and chair of Cabinet. The Prime Minister's main areas of responsibility include: providing leadership and direction to the government; organizing the Cabinet, including the composition of portfolios and mandates; and recommending the appointment of individuals to key positions."⁹ In other words, the prime minister exercises tremendous control over those who are in senior leadership positions in both cabinet and the public service (and agencies). The power of the prime minister, in this regard, becomes part of a longer narrative of how governance is framed by structure, substance, and style.

The discussion of prime ministerial power to this day has mostly drawn on anecdotes and impressions. I'm convinced the field has to go further. Good stories are effective when it comes to illustrating a trend, but the trend has to be documented. In this book, I try to do that and to lift the curtain to reveal what was behind the prime ministerial actors.

In Part 1, "Structure," I examine managerial philosophies and predispositions and how they might have impelled prime ministers to make changes to the administrative apparatus of the Government of Canada. One expression of this, for instance, is the creation of various departments and branches. Another is the composition of cabinet. Observers of cabinet making in Canada have been positively obsessed with regional and denominational representation, leaving aside completely the background and competencies of the men who were finally selected. This, surely, is an aberration. Macdonald and Laurier, in particular, laboured hard to assemble their teams, but a major consideration certainly involved selecting

individuals who could actually get the work done. Cabinets were kept small in order to build solidarity and to preserve their discretion. They were also kept small because they acted as chambers to assess policy and to conceive of directions. They could also be easily monitored. Nothing could be worse than having administratively incompetent people. This was not a secondary consideration but one of the very first order. In discussing cabinet, Donald Creighton offhandedly noted that “ability, popularity, political influence and authority” were “no doubt factors,” but he focused on the last three in his discussion of cabinet making.¹⁰ Ministerial ability mattered more than these three and deserves closer scrutiny. Even more important, I examine the corps of deputy ministers – the most authoritative technocrats available to the government – to examine their provenance. Each prime minister took a particular approach to selecting these men, and their choices structured the tone and substance of the discussions that surrounded the decisions of cabinet. These choices reveal much about prime ministerial attitudes towards administration.

In Part 2, “Substance,” I look at how the prime ministers brought policy intelligence to bear on shaping their governance. Using public accounts, I examine the budgetary imprints of the various prime ministers. I also look at how they interacted with the bureaucracy, particularly when it came to the thorny issue of patronage. On this issue, I part ways with most observers who essentially see patronage as a key to electoral success. I tend to see it as essential to administrative success – something that the elite in this country had realized long before Confederation. Whether it was in the Maritimes or Upper and Lower Canada, the distribution of patronage was a key political concern because it created a tie between the central government and local communities. Even after Confederation, in a country with only a sketchy communications infrastructure, handing out jobs to political favourites in the hinterland was a small guarantee, maybe a pious hope, that the beneficiary might actually work to accomplish Ottawa’s policy and program objectives. It was part of the political structure of the country, but I treat it as a substantive policy issue. Starting in the 1870s, many argued that changes had to be made to the way the government hired, both for the “inside public service” (i.e., employees working in Ottawa) and for the “outside public service” (i.e., individuals hired to work outside the capital, many of whom were contractual or seasonal).

Prime ministers had to be concerned about patronage, but not as much as we've been led to believe. Patronage was just as essential to administrative success as it was to electoral success, so it is not surprising that prime ministers resisted (without too much trouble) demands to see these policies changed. Without patronage, the prime minister could lose a part of his legitimacy; so, for that matter, could the state. Through patronage, prime ministers institutionalized their authority, and this was not going to change until either a new mechanism could be found to replace it or new instruments could be secured to ensure the centrality of their office.

In this section, I also examine prime ministerial approaches to managing crises through a series of case studies that focus on dismissing a minister and on choosing (or not choosing) to go to war. These crises involved more than personality differences: they involved genuine collisions of substantive policy views that could have been managed in many different ways. In all cases, the prime ministers proved triumphant and, in so doing, revealed how they wielded power.

Structures and policies are important, but, when it comes to understanding how prime ministers ensure that their place remains central in the decision-making chain, the style by which they are approached is just as critical. Part 3, "Style," tries to take its measure as it was expressed by the three prime ministers. This goes beyond their sartorial tastes or the habit of the time of addressing friend and foe alike by their last name – even after years of acquaintance. Like many historians, I am preoccupied with the human dimension of leadership – the vagaries of political leaders' personalities, their emotional states, their flawed information processing, their willingness to take risks and to operate in a fog of facts and impressions. Power entails more than the manipulation of structures and policy – if it did not, more people would have access to it. This comes down to style, and Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden each had their own strengths.

Macdonald was named prime minister on 1 July 1867 at age fifty-two and, aside from a four-year interregnum, was prime minister until he died in harness in 1891. At Confederation, he had been in politics for almost twenty years and had practically dominated the affairs of the United Canadas since the mid-1850s. His party was elected in the fall of 1867 to form the administration, and he would be re-elected five times.

Having struggled early in life, Macdonald matured quickly. He personally suffered all sorts of travails, ranging from illness in the family (most notably Isabella, his first wife), deaths of children (he witnessed the murder of his older brother and saw the death of his first son), a gravely disabled daughter, and the repeated threat of financial ruin. From his mid-thirties until his late fifties, he drank heavily. Highly intelligent, Macdonald could have succeeded in anything he turned to; he was an especially attractive man to many segments of the population, and he knew it. He had what struck many people as an honest approach to life, and he won the trust of those around him. An extrovert, his social acquaintances always found something refreshing in him, something spontaneous and unexpected. He could be secretive and was often reticent to express his feelings, but he had a knack of creating both close friendships and casual companionship. If he lived today, management gurus would say that his EQ matched his IQ.

He brought this combination to his work. Macdonald had a passion for politics and was happiest when making decisions. He hoped that everything could be clear-cut, whether in business or politics, but of course it seldom was. From an administrative perspective, Macdonald was idealistic and creative, open to new ideas. His administrative success came from an ability to see the many sides of a problem, and, using his innate sense of timing (which included waiting until a good political window could be opened), Macdonald got things done his way. Macdonald worked hard all his life, which was another reason colleagues were so willing to trust him. Still, his commitment to accomplishing ambitious goals always got him noticeable results. Work wore him down, but he fought the fatigue with humour. He worked hard and got involved in all manner of government issues because he did not trust others to do the job. He was, by and large, rewarded for his efforts. After 1878, each succeeding election was won by a larger plurality, and he had close to 50 percent of the vote in his triumphant last contest in 1891, just months before his death. The pastoral Canada he had helped create in 1867 was now a land of mining, industry, and commerce, linked from coast to coast. It had survived a long depression in the 1870s, economic slowdown in the mid-1880s, and was on the verge of another dogged depression when John Abbott inherited Macdonald's mantle. Canada was increasingly electric: people used phones and delighted in

phonographs. The insider's insider of Canadian politics had shaped the Canadian state with his own hands. He had won the respect and admiration of most of the people of Canada. "He was fond of power," Laurier said in his eulogy of Macdonald, "that may be the turning-point of the judgment of history. He was fond of power, and he never made any secret of it."¹¹ On Laurier, who watched Macdonald in government from the opposition benches for more than twelve years, the lessons of management and command were not wasted.

Laurier came to power six months before his fifty-fifth birthday, in June 1896, with the feeling that he had a lot to prove, even in middle age. That fire burned in his heart to his dying day, and it animated his strong desire to leave a legacy. Except for a few months when serving as a minister in Alexander Mackenzie's government some eighteen years before, he had never accomplished much. He was an insider's outsider in the sense that, while he had quickly asserted himself among the French Canadian elite, he had remained an outsider in the politics of English Canada. His journey had been long. He had excelled at school but was always threatened by health problems. As a result, the adult Laurier took care of his body, mind, and soul. He took measures to develop his learning, maturing into a strong, emotionally and physically balanced individual who disciplined himself to follow a careful diet. Laurier, like Macdonald, enjoyed family and fun but, unlike Canada's first prime minister, no one ever saw him drunk. If Macdonald was a grinder, Laurier seemed to take more pleasure in living a comfortable life. As Robert Borden remembered him, a few character features stood out: "a magnetic personality, his wonderful intellect, imagination and compelling eloquence."¹²

Like Macdonald, Laurier had many dreams and aspirations. As an enterprising person, he could have succeeded as a journalist or as a lawyer (things he tried to do), but he had difficulty in deciding which goal or cause to pursue. He was practical, logical, and stubborn; he was determined and dedicated to living a successful life. Like Macdonald, a man he admired greatly and whom he imitated when it came to administration, he was passionate about politics and could sometimes be impulsive. He loved the challenge of politics and was willing to make sacrifices in order to win. By 1887, he had won over English Canadian Liberals. But his political mettle really showed in his ability to unite the Liberals in Quebec, once divided

by the two Honorés. In that contest, one camp, more nationalist and more conservative, was led by Honoré Mercier, premier of the province from 1887 to 1891; the other camp, weaker but still significant in Montreal, was led by Honoré Beaugrand, the mayor of Montreal from 1885 to 1887 and the owner and editor of the daily *La Patrie*, which was radical in its demands for more state involvement.¹³ Both sides were seduced by Laurier and united to support him.

Laurier's silver tongue was, with great success, put to work to nurture his caucus; it is not surprising that he led it for thirty-two years. Everyone appreciated his ability to make friends fast and to stay loyal (or at least on speaking terms) with people who bitterly disagreed with him. Laurier's intimate circle of friends included notable writers and poets. His spiritual values and practices, in contrast to Macdonald's, seemed to have led to what might have appeared to outsiders as a stress-free life. He had intuitive qualities and an agreeableness that made him popular; many came to see him as a trusted friend. In public affairs, Laurier did not make any decisions in haste but, instead, took time to think about the pros and cons. If he was willing to give ministers more latitude, he still kept them on a short leash. Laurier loved the feeling of having power over others and of having others dependent upon him. He was re-elected three times, earning more than 50 percent of the vote at each turn, until he was roundly defeated in the epic contest that was the election of 1911.¹⁴ Canada was now dealing with car traffic and being introduced to what, to most people, seemed magical: airplanes.

Robert Borden was fifty-seven years old when he became prime minister that October, older than his two predecessors. He came to the job with far more administrative experience than Laurier, though far fewer accomplishments than Macdonald. He was organized, conscientious, and disciplined; his early life had shown inner courage, control, motivation, and confidence. Until he came to politics, his career had been a splendid success. He was an outsider-insider in that, in so many ways, his self-worth had been earned on the periphery, in the easternmost province. At one time he lived far from Ottawa, but once in the capital he felt very comfortable there. Borden had earned financial success – far more than his predecessors – long before he was elected leader of the Conservative Party or prime minister of Canada. This mattered to him. He was intelligent and handled

problems with cool detachment. He was not an original thinker, but he brought a resolve that enabled him to see through almost any decision or crisis. He could be tenacious, sometimes shrewd, but surprisingly intuitive in his approach to people and politics. At ease with the central Canadian elite, he nevertheless felt and acted like an outsider. He was tested, as his predecessors never were, by Canada's involvement in the First World War. During his mandate, government expanded exponentially, and the Canada he saw in 1920 had been transformed yet again. It was an urban country, industrial, angry, and divided on so many fronts, its heart finding no solace for its almost sixty thousand war dead and countless war wounded.

Borden was cultured, had a fine mind, and enjoyed people, though he was a great deal more reserved than his predecessors. He could be compassionate and sensitive in some instances, and egotistical, domineering, and even controlling in others. Nobody remembered Borden as a convivial person, and he did not require the conviviality of others. He could also be timid in the face of rejection. He was an introvert, in stark contrast to his legendary predecessors. In politics, he was overly sensitive and easily hurt. On occasion, Borden seemed grumpy or moody; I strongly suspect that he suffered bouts of clinical depression. He had to work hard to cover his disappointments and letdowns. Often, he threatened to resign, open to the idea that others should take the reins if it would help the party or the country. His many offers to quit, however, were never accepted. People recognized in him qualities that few had: he was realistic, resilient, and showed empathy. Borden could even be creative at times; more than others, he could at least be trusted.

Inevitably, "style" reflects itself in structures and in substance. The challenge is to define it and to show its impact. In Part 3, I examine how the personalities of the first ministers shaped administration in two ways. The first is through the use of orders-in-council (OICs), the mechanism by which governments make decrees on a very wide range of issues. OICs are important because the government has full discretion in issuing what amount to laws and regulations. Of course, it eventually faces the sanctions of the legislative assembly, but that punishment is, by definition, put off to another time – one chosen by the prime minister. I end *Prime Ministerial Power in Canada* with a look at how prime ministers managed the ordinary. If Macdonald had nerve, Laurier had commitment and

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Borden had resolve. They each, on a daily basis, expressed these qualities differently. Power may attract attention when it is expressed in decision thunderbolts, but mostly it is a matter of routine, and Macdonald, Laurier, and Borden worked to a certain managerial rhythm that inevitably shaped not only the administrations they headed but also those that followed.

CHAPTER 1

HOW THE PRIME MINISTERSHIP WAS “MADE”

Readings, Theories, Models

A book inevitably betrays the reading habits of its author, and this one is certainly no exception. It is the product of a hybrid career: I was trained in history, formed by almost twenty years of work in government and the non-profit sector, and now guided by a decade of teaching public administration and politics. In walking through three fields of research, my compass becomes a little tricky to interpret, but the highlights of my interpretations presented in this chapter point the reader to the starting points and the orientations of my exploration of the prime ministerships of John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier, and Robert Borden. My objective here is not to impress a doctoral dissertation committee with an exhaustive discussion of all that I’ve read. Still, this work stands on the shoulders of works that have inspired me. The discussion that follows is far from a complete summary of my hours in the library, but the books and articles I discuss provided both admirable models and foils that shaped my outlook. In fairness to those who thought hard and wrote, I’m happy to give them their due.

When it comes to reading the literature on the office of the prime minister in Westminster systems, one quickly becomes convinced that the position has grown overly dominant in the political landscape. The prime minister looms so large that his shadow darkens the bureaucracy, the cabinet, and even Parliament. For many, it has become “presidential” – a powerful, separate, and independent locus of power. So gloomy is democracy’s garden, it is argued, that nothing can grow. This point of view seems

to win the day in Canada. Indeed, for more than twenty years, much of the writing on the office of the Canadian prime minister has focused on the dominance of that institution over all others. But Canada is not alone in this view of the Westminster system.

Such observations about the prime ministership became commonplace in Great Britain in the early 1960s. R.H.S. Crossman described the coming of “prime ministerial government” and the “decline of the cabinet” in 1964.¹ G.W. Jones, writing in *Parliamentary Affairs* the following year, reflects on “the conventional wisdom” that government had been “altered significantly.” The prime minister, he writes, “had been transformed into something quite new, perhaps a quasi-president, or an elected monarch or even an autocrat.”² More than a half-century later, British letters so routinely describe how the prime ministership has become presidential that there has now been a reaction,³ mostly in that such a contention has not been supported by empirical evidence. The prime ministership, the new argument goes, is not presidential in the American sense – it is *more powerful*, but within the limits of its design.⁴ In *First among Equals: Prime Ministers in Westminster Systems*, Patrick Weller emphasizes the centrality of the prime ministership in a wide range of countries, leading to the conclusion (and concern) that the office has grown omnipotent, if not “presidential.”⁵

Weller led a team of scholars examining the development of the Australian prime ministership over a fifty-year period, starting in 1939, and again refrains from attributing presidential traits to the prime ministership.⁶ All the same, Australian scholars make much about the growth of the office of the prime minister.⁷ In their introduction to a collection of essays that aim to measure prime ministerial performance around the globe by using a combination of political, policy, and administrative measures, the Australian-based trio of Paul Strangio, Paul ‘t Hart, and James Walter describe the complexity of the position for those who occupy it: “They are accountable for just about everything that goes on in the name of the governments they lead, regardless of the fact that even the most ambitious among them cannot know about, let alone control, even a modest part of all business that is being transacted.”⁸

Canada followed the fashions. As early as 1969, Denis Smith argues that prime ministers had grown so powerful that “we seem to have created in Canada a presidential system without its congressional advantages.”⁹ He

clearly struck a chord because, since then, the power of the prime minister has been a key concern in the field. It is perhaps telling of the new generation's broader political concerns that the concentration of power in political executives began to excite attention. R.M. Punnett's *The Prime Minister in Canadian Government and Politics* examines the role of the prime minister in terms of four broad “functions and skills”: acquiring the job, forming government, leading cabinet, and “selling” government.¹⁰ Thomas A. Hockin's collection of essays, *Apex of Power: The Prime Minister and Political Leadership in Canada*, was published in the same year.¹¹ These books conspicuously avoid issues of administration, focusing instead on the very political functions of prime ministers. It was twenty years later, and forty years after Crossman, however, that Donald Savoie set the field afire at the close of the twentieth century with his *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics*.¹² Since then, journalists have jumped on the bandwagon and their books have emphasized the quasi-dictatorial powers of Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin, and Stephen Harper.¹³

Savoie was particularly eloquent in his assessment, using the administrations of Pierre E. Trudeau as a starting point (1968–79; 1980–84). The prime minister, ably assisted by a strengthened political apparatus in the ever-expanding Prime Minister's Office and guided by politically adroit public servants in the Privy Council Office, is depicted as having grown into a position to singularly affect policy. The prime minister's control of the machinery of government *allows* him to sideline cabinet, treating it as an inconvenient body that could be easily manipulated. Prime ministers have such a free hand that they could govern by “thunderbolts” – unilateral decisions affecting government policy, budgets, and administration, often made without consulting the relevant minister. Savoie's study is original, drawing on the words of senior and retired public servants in describing how the state apparatus had moved from serving cabinet to serving the prime minister. The model has proven very popular and has been applied at the provincial level by an assortment of scholars.¹⁴

Savoie re-emphasized his diagnosis almost a decade later in *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability* by drawing comparisons between the Canadian and British systems.¹⁵ Pointing to the growing importance of the Prime Minister's Office as it dominated the bureaucracy, he and others argue that the prime minister plays an authoritarian

role that allows for little discussion in cabinet (or in the bureaucracy) of policy priorities, program implementation, and public communication. By dispensing key incentives and sanctions, he or she occupies the central nervous system of the government. Savoie, of course, adds new twists and understandings. He highlights the central importance of communication in state concerns, argues that there is a new intensification of centralization, and focuses on those “central” agencies that seem to set and execute the critical parts of the government agenda. He also re-emphasizes the notion that cabinet had become less important on both sides of the Atlantic – the Prime Minister’s Office and the Privy Council Office are now the principal decision makers. The implication of this argument is that the prime minister himself knows more and is more involved in the management and administration of the government than ever before.

The reaction from scholars took time in coming, but it did appear. Herman Bakvis, in “Prime Minister and Cabinet in Canada: An Autocracy in Need of Reform?”¹⁶ and Graham White, in *Cabinets and First Ministers*,¹⁷ consider the claims of concentration of power to be unevenly proven, and both emphasize that there persist many structural and political countervailing forces that limit the concentration of power. Eddie Goldenberg, the long-time aide to Prime Minister Chrétien, protests in his *The Way It Works* that the suspicions of too much concentration of political power in the hands of the prime minister are overblown.¹⁸ Goldenberg could point to the political fortunes of his political mentor to demonstrate the real limits to prime ministerial power (Chrétien had to negotiate an exit as he realized that opposition to him in the Liberal Party had grown to barely controllable limits). The historical record on Pierre Trudeau’s relations with his cabinet is also slowly changing. In his memoirs, Jean Chrétien recalls the wide berth the prime minister gave him.¹⁹ A close study of the October Crisis shows that Trudeau consulted his cabinet regularly.²⁰ The same realization came to British prime ministers (one thinks of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair) and to the Australians, who, over the past decade, seem to have made a happy sport of tearing down prime ministers. The experience of the past forty or fifty years has shown that governing from the centre is real, but that it has its limits.

As noted above, many argue that the prime ministership in the Westminster system has become “presidentialized.” The idea is that prime

ministers are personalizing power while simultaneously undermining the political strength of their parties, much in the manner of presidents. This applies to the way they campaign and to the way they govern. In campaigns, prime ministers make themselves the key spokespeople for their electoral program. In power, prime ministers simply ignore their caucus, listening instead to their personal, non-political staff and the key public servants who report to them directly. The notion here is that the dominance of the prime minister in the policy process simply shuts out the members of the cabinet, reducing them, as Donald Savoie argued, to nothing more than a “focus group.”²¹

In the United Kingdom, the most prominent voice is Michael Foley, who wrote two books on the subject, *The Rise of the British Presidency* and its updated edition, *The British Presidency*, to capture the governing habits of the Tony Blair administration.²² Graham Allen, a member of Parliament (MP), also contributes a vibrant polemic in *The Last Prime Minister: Being Honest about the UK Presidency*.²³ In *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*,²⁴ editors Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb promote the concept even further and assemble scholarly treatments from around the world. The argument, however, hits something of a roadblock when it comes to Canada. The Canadian chapter, by Herman Bakvis and Steven B. Wolinetz, provides a classic overview of the roles of the Canadian prime minister and concludes that “the Canadian prime minister is more powerful than counterparts in other Westminster systems.” If any “presidentialism” could be found, however, it would be “in the political rather than the electoral face of the phenomenon,” starting in either the Diefenbaker or Trudeau eras.²⁵ John Hart also proves sceptical of the argument that there is a presidential phenomenon in Australia.²⁶ R.A.W. Rhodes, John Wanna, and Patrick Weller, three Australia-based leading lights on Westminster governance, dismiss the idea because they consider it structurally incoherent. Their argument is that prime ministers may have centralized power over the years but they cannot presidentialize it because doing so is constitutionally impossible.²⁷ More recently, Keith Dowding returns to first questions in evaluating to what degree “presidentialism” has infected the prime ministership. He concludes that the whole notion of presidentialization is nothing more than a media obsession that deserves to be “expunged from political science vocabulary,” because the

arguments and observations are misleading. He insists that prime ministers have far more power than presidents and have to be examined as such. While not denying that prime ministers have built up an impressive machinery to cope with increasingly complex policy problems, he notes that presidents have done the same thing. For him, these are two parallel developments, not a phenomenon involving one institution adopting the functions of another. The journal *Parliamentary Affairs* published many responses, but Dowding's arguments, I think, have withstood them. Dowding further argues that more work has to be done to understand the institutional forces of prime ministerial power.²⁸ I would go further still and argue that any diagnosis of presidentialization has to be based on a sound assessment of how the institution has changed over time. Are there genuinely new practices that can be observed? Details matter in taking these measures, and too often political scientists debating this issue have been satisfied with impressions rather than facts.

In contrast to the notion of a rapidly changing prime ministership, another idea that has taken firm hold over the past half-century is that institutions typically evolve slowly. The work of theorists in the field of historical institutionalism (mostly, if not exclusively, political scientists) emphasizes that change in governing bodies is inevitably incremental, gradual, and expresses itself over time. For these scholars, the point of inception is crucial to an understanding of institutional evolution.²⁹

To better capture the evolution of an organization one has to track its "path" and take note of how rarely it departs from it. This "path dependency" seems obvious in that most organizations rarely move beyond their original mandates and habits because they typically find rewards in what they do – recognition, support, incentives. If they do adapt, they do so in a way that shows a trajectory that prolongs the original direction and that, again, is consistently reinforced by outside validation (a positive, reinforcing feedback). Certainly, successful institutions have learned to adapt, mostly because their leadership is able to read the shifting sands of power and find ways to continually reinforce the legitimacy of the organizations it leads. Leadership matters.

The claim coming from political science – that the "past" matters to today's politics – inevitably makes historians wince. They take the idea for granted, of course; practically by definition. Instinctively, historians

believe in the slow but steady accumulation of instincts, knowledge, and practices. The problem is that historians have abandoned political history and, consequently, have neglected the higher elected offices. They have left the field, leaving others to plough it more deeply and to uncover how politics and administrations evolve.

I have been impressed by the manner in which American political scientists and scholars of public administration, and some British, have been inspired to dig into the past and bring some unity to the study of the political executives and the evolution of their managerial approaches. Certainly, Leonard White played a leadership role in this approach and earned the title of father of administrative history in the United States. White is also very concerned with the presidency. In various books, notably *The Federalists: A Study in Administrative History, 1789–1801* (1948); *The Jeffersonians: A Story In Administrative History, 1801–1829* (1951); *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829–1861* (1954); and *The Republican Era: A Study in Administrative History, 1869–1901* (1958) he shows how administrative structures as applied by various presidents, and both their allies and critics in Congress, were a critically important ingredient in understanding the evolution of the presidency and of the state.³⁰

The willingness of American scholars to reach back in time to document the evolution of administrative habits affects my approach. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., White’s near contemporary, brings a seasoned political historian’s attention to the vast canvas of the American past in his *The Cycles of American History*.³¹ He sees patterns, a dialectic between a politics of pragmatism and a politics of “idealism” that traded with practically every generation and, to a certain degree, affected each presidency. A few years later, a younger political scientist, Stephen Skowronek, applied the idea directly to the American presidency. Skowronek, who had followed Leonard White’s path with his first book on the transformation of the US government’s administrative apparatus from Reconstruction to the 1920s,³² also detected recurring patterns. In his *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*,³³ he emphasizes how the White House used policy and administration to further its political reach. He draws parallels between different kinds of presidential roles as they reaffirmed themselves in different generations or in different “political times.” In his view, presidencies could be categorized by their ability to