

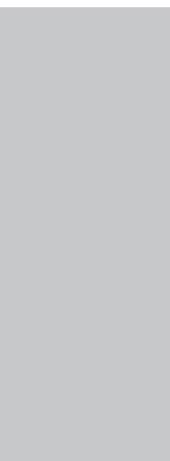
Michael Wernick

GOVERNING

A GUIDE TO THE

CANADA

TRADECRAFT OF POLITICS



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A VIEW FROM THE DESK IN THE CORNER

If you visit the East Block on Parliament Hill, you will pass through a room that used to host Cabinet meetings before they were moved to the Centre Block and then to the West Block, where they now take place. In the corner you will see a small wooden desk, reserved for the Clerk of the Privy Council, who is the Secretary to Cabinet, a role that goes back eight centuries to English kings. In Canada, there are still desks or tables off to one side for the clerk and for senior staff in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and in the Privy Council Office (PCO), even when Cabinet meets outside of Ottawa.

I had jobs that placed me at one of those desks for part of the mandates of four very different prime ministers. I served as the deputy secretary to Cabinet from 2003 to 2006, a period that encompasses the later days of

Jean Chrétien's final mandate, all of Paul Martin's government, and the start-up months of Stephen Harper's tenure. I returned to the PCO eight years later as deputy clerk of the Privy Council for the last year of Stephen Harper's government and the early months of Justin Trudeau's tenure. In January 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau asked me to serve as the twenty-third Clerk of the Privy Council – the real “desk in the corner” – a job that I held until the spring of 2019. In other roles in earlier times, I was often in the room at a Cabinet meeting or a Cabinet committee meeting as a PCO staffer, when I worked at Canadian Heritage, or as the deputy minister at the department that was then called Indian and Northern Affairs, accompanying one of my ministers who was presenting an agenda item. By my rough estimate, I was in that room 250 times.

There are now 38 million Canadians, and only a small number are chosen to sit at that Cabinet table, even fewer to sit in the prime minister's chair. I vividly remember the buzz the first time that I strode up the path to the Centre Block and had to show my freshly issued ID card a few times in order to walk up the stairs and into the Cabinet suite. It was 1987. I never lost that sense of anticipation, responsibility, and privilege over the next thirty-two years. I hope that this book reflects some of those feelings.

This book is not a prescription for reform or for how things ought to be. Nor should it be read as a defence of the status quo. Others can take up those causes and battles.

This is a book about governing – more specifically, about the tradecraft of governing. My view is that regardless of ideology or personality, there are some elements to governing that, approached mindfully, can be learnable skills. This book attempts to distill and to make accessible to a wider audience ideas that I have often been asked to convey behind closed doors or in private conversations. It is focused on “how it works,” or at least on how it has worked in my experience.

THREE DECADES

This experience stretched over three decades and several governments. Currents of fortune, timing, and a mentor or two put me close to ministers, made me a frequent attender of meetings of Cabinet and its committees, and placed me right at the centre of two transitions of power from one government to another.

Eventually, this cumulative experience was sought out. I have spoken at professional development sessions for political staffers and for public servants, as well as to university classrooms. My tenure as the secretary to Cabinet started memorably during a Cabinet retreat in

Saint Andrews, New Brunswick, when the new prime minister swivelled around and asked whether I had any advice for his new ministers on how to work effectively with the public service.

As a deputy minister, I had already learned that the most important conversation to have with a new minister, fresh from the swearing-in ceremony, was not one about files or events but one about the craft of being an effective minister.

I had a key role at the Privy Council Office in three transitions of power. When power shifted from Jean Chrétien to Paul Martin, it shifted to an experienced minister from the same political clan, which meant that the transition was relatively straightforward compared to the later hand-offs from Martin to Stephen Harper and then from Harper to Justin Trudeau. Both Harper and Trudeau, attending their first Cabinet meeting as the chair, looked across a table dominated by colleagues who were new to being a minister and, in many cases, new to being a Member of Parliament.

In each case, I was one of the leaders of the public service team that met with a team of advisers to the new prime minister – the “transition team.” An intense period of decision making accompanied the start-up of the new government. Not many people have taken part in this process three times, and these

experiences impressed on me how similar the conversations are with any group new to governing. A friend of mine used to distinguish between the “what” and the “how” of a government – what policies it pursues versus how it conducts itself. This is an attempt to capture a lot of those briefings and conversations about the “how.”

New politicians or politicians in new roles get help. The House of Commons runs excellent programs for new members of Parliament and their families. Ministers are welcomed in two ways. Their core department usually prepares a suite of material on their role and authorities, upcoming issues and events, personal safety and cybersecurity, and a sense of the policy landscape that they’re about to enter. The caricature of public service briefings is a stack of binders; but these days, the material comes on secure laptops and tablets.

In addition, the “Centre” – the prime minister’s political team, or the PMO, and the prime minister’s department, or the PCO – prepares orientation sessions and issues ministers a handbook on governance titled *Open and Accountable Government*. This handbook has been updated after each election to better reflect the incoming government and is available on the Internet to all Canadians. The Privy Council Office also focuses on what the new prime minister needs. I fondly remember

showing Justin Trudeau around the old Cabinet room in the Centre Block.

All of this material can be a valuable resource, but in my experience, it is a bit too safe, doesn't quite capture why things are the way they are, and doesn't delve into the real tradecraft that determines success. This book is intended as a supplement to those other sources, but I also hope to convey, to anyone who is interested, what ministers and prime ministers are expected to learn on the job, sometimes painfully.

There is a special feeling and swirl of emotions around the start-up of a government. I was at Rideau Hall for the swearing-in ceremony for the Martin, Harper, and Trudeau Cabinets and remember the buzz of anticipation, the pride beaming from family members, and the sense of history. I was at their first Cabinet meetings and recall the palpable sense of optimism and determination to make a difference by finally putting aspirations into action. I recall on another occasion escorting a visibly trembling new minister to the assigned place at the table.

But I was also in the room for the very last Cabinet meetings of the Chrétien, Martin, and Harper governments. The mood was more sombre and reflective – marked by a sense of finality in one respect but also by a feeling of leaving unfinished business behind. There was a streak of joviality and end-of-term camaraderie

that had been forged in common experiences. But I remember a senior minister, defeated in the recent campaign, turning back to look one last time at the room with a pained expression. I have sat across from an exhausted minister who was suddenly forced into resignation by events that spiralled beyond recovery.

The chance to sit at that table rarely comes a second time, and once it is over, it is over.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

It is possible that this volume will be picked up and annotated by some future minister or prime minister. Most politicians I have met are life-long, avid students of history, including accounts of political campaigns as well as political biographies and memoirs, and they can piece together from these works indirect insights into governing. My goal is to be more direct and to make it a bit easier.

My ambition is broader. I want to take anyone who is interested in Canadian politics – those who study it, those who work close to the decision makers, and those who observe them through the lens of media coverage – into the rooms where the discussions take place and where decisions are forged. More than that, by looking beyond the very narrow spotlight on Question Period and beyond the hallway media scrums that show up on the news, I hope to

convey the broader scope of what prime ministers and ministers actually do most of the time. These are hard jobs, especially if you want to do them well.

POLITICS VERSUS GOVERNING

The difference between politics and governing is a matter of scope. There are many dimensions to Canadian politics that I will not touch on or that I will touch on only to the extent that they affect the central topic of governing: the exercise of the power to make decisions on our behalf.

My entire career was effectively on the government side of our democracy. My contact with backbench members of Parliament and with the other side of the aisle was limited to appearing at interrogations conducted by parliamentary committees of the House and Senate and at occasional briefings offered to members of Parliament and critics. Someone else will have to write a handbook for being an effective member of the Opposition or an effective backbencher.

Some topics that political scientists like to explore, but that I will not, are relevant to governing because they determine which small set of people will have the opportunity to govern. Take, for example, how political parties choose their leaders and party constitutions, a process

that affects internal dynamics and the leader's vulnerability to challenge from within. These internal battles have become a regular feature of governing in Australia but remain rarities in Canada. However, it matters in Canada how parties set the rules to determine which candidates will become members of Parliament and then how safe incumbents will be.

Elections matter. The only people who get to govern, and exercise power, are the ones who win elections. But I have no experience in the business of winning elections and no advice to offer. Clearly, the Canadian electoral system matters a lot. The "first past the post" election system of choosing our members of Parliament has more than one effect on who gets to sit in the Cabinet room. As has been well studied, it tends to distort the geographical mix on the government team, providing the prime minister with a surfeit of choice in some provinces and a dearth in others. It exacerbates tension among regions. But it has also spared Canada, so far, the complications of forming and running multiparty coalition governments, which are commonplace in many other democracies, including the United Kingdom.

That is not to say that governing and politics are separate realms. Politics is always present in the deliberations of the elected, as it should be in a democracy. Governments are supposed to be responsive to electorates. The core agenda

of any government, the default setting to which it seeks to return if driven off course by events, is to deliver the things that it promised voters in the last election and to signal the things that it will do more of if re-elected.

So my view is that it is useful to understand how politicians and their political staff think about issues and what factors they are likely to weigh in order to sustain and extend their mandate to govern. I was always annoyed to hear some version of the phrase “they’re being so political” spouted as a complaint. Of course, they are. Sometimes, it is important for public servants to weigh in with other considerations of broader public interest, such as sustainability or a longer time horizon, but in the end, it is the elected who are accountable.

The most important trait among ministers seems to be geography; every minister is from somewhere. Much of what happens in the Cabinet room is affected more by regional considerations than by divergence in ideology or by who supported whom in the last leadership contest. I vividly recall sitting in on a meeting of the Trudeau Cabinet as clerk in 2017 and feeling a wave of *déjà vu*, as the same topic had come up for Brian Mulroney’s Cabinet in the 1980s when I was a junior officer at PCO and the same regional tensions were surfacing. If I had closed my eyes, it would have been difficult to tell one meeting from the other.

The art of governing a democracy often lies in finding the right mix of politics and policy. It takes political skill to craft policy initiatives and legislation that will overcome resistance or inertia and gain enough public support that they become immune to reversal. And it takes a record of competent, responsive government to sustain political support.

PEOPLE

Much of the “political science” that is taught is about institutions and processes. Not that there is anything wrong with that. My goal is to convey the importance of the human dimension. I have come to the view that the best preparation for government is not the study of law or economics but the study of psychology.

In the end, a Cabinet or a caucus of members of Parliament is a collection of humans, and they will be strongly affected by human cognitive biases, responses to incentives and disincentives, and the dynamics of group behaviour. I don't think that there is a right set of character traits to be effective in governing. Rather, it helps for leaders to be self-aware and for the people who support them to make adjustments to systems and processes that accommodate or compensate for very different leadership styles and temperaments, different learning styles, and different ways of getting to decisions.

I set out to capture the direct advice that I would give to a new prime minister, a new minister, and a new deputy minister, who will be asked to support a minister. But they form a connected package; understanding what the other is going through may make someone more empathetic and effective in their own role.

I have observed and talked to several prime ministers and dozens of ministers over the past three decades and have worked closely with political staff from both teams who have earned the right to exercise power on our behalf. It is difficult to convey the breadth and variety of the people who make our democracy work. Some start strong and fade. Others grow into the role. Some are better at the job than others. But overwhelmingly, they approach their role with dedication, perseverance, and a sense of greater purpose. Canada will need them if we are going to keep moving forward toward our aspirations and our potential.

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