

**Abstract:** An enduring issue of public administration is the ability of our political leadership to implement an agenda and to master events. This question has acquired new urgency in Canada and the United States with the publicity given to personnel problems in the offices of the prime minister and leader of the opposition, and with the role of the White House staff in the Iran-Contra affair. Using examples drawn from the author's past position as principal secretary to Prime Minister Trudeau, the article argues that: (a) it is possible to prevent the urgent from overwhelming the important but only if a strategic plan is adopted; (b) to implement such a strategic plan it is necessary to have a highly competent, partisan personal staff; but (c) we are in danger in Canada of blurring the lines between a partisan Prime Minister's Office and our tradition of a neutral public service. Such a blurring will impede the attempt to develop a strategic prime ministership.

**Sommaire :** Nos chefs politiques peuvent-ils mettre en oeuvre un programme politique et exercer un contrôle sur les événements? Cette question, qui revient constamment en administration publique, a pris une acuité particulière au Canada et aux États-Unis depuis la publicité qui a été donnée aux problèmes de personnel dans le cabinet du premier ministre et dans les bureaux du chef de l'opposition, et au rôle qu'a joué le personnel de la Maison Blanche dans le scandale de l'Irangate. Utilisant des exemples tirés de son expérience alors qu'il était secrétaire principal auprès du premier ministre Trudeau, l'auteur soutient : (a) qu'on peut éviter de faire passer les questions urgentes avant les questions importantes si on adopte un plan stratégique; (b) qu'il est nécessaire pour mettre en oeuvre ce plan stratégique de s'entourer d'un personnel compétent et partisan, mais (c) qu'au Canada, nous courons le risque que la ligne de démarcation entre un cabinet du Premier ministre nécessairement partisan et une Fonction publique neutre, comme le veut la tradition, soit floue. La confusion qui en découlerait nuirait au développement de fonctions stratégiques au bureau du premier ministre.

“The greatest trust between man and man,” Francis Bacon advised, “is the trust of giving counsel.” If Bacon is right, the current crop of political princes

Thomas S. Axworthy is vice-president of a Canadian Foundation, and an associate of the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University. He is a member of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, and was principal secretary to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, 1981-84.

is entitled to feel abused: seldom before have so many advisers to so many leaders received so much publicity for getting their masters into such disrepute.

As his former officials testified before Congress about a White House in shambles, Ronald Reagan was forced to admit that on the Iran-Contra affair, "I wasn't told. Like you, I'm waiting to find out." Novelist Jeffrey Archer resigned from the Conservative party hierarchy after a series of his indiscretions had embarrassed Margaret Thatcher. The campaign manager of Democrat Michael Dukakis, a leading contender for his party's 1988 presidential nomination, was also compelled to resign after releasing controversial tapes without informing his boss. In Canada this past year, neither an *affaire d'état* nor an *affaire du coeur* has shaken the body politic, but both major parties were reeling from personnel problems. In March 1987 Prime Minister Mulroney was compelled to overhaul radically his personal office as part of an attempt to regain public favour. Opposition leader John Turner endured the equal discomfort of seeing the August 1987 resignation of his principal secretary given front page treatment as evidence of a party mutiny. As Juvenal asked in *The Satires*, "But who is to keep guard over the guards themselves?"

The recent spate of stories on backroom advisers and their supposed shadowy intrigues raises once again questions about leadership and democratic accountability. Do those in power – whether kings, presidents or prime ministers – always require a loyal retinue? If so, what is the proper role of a leader's personal office? And what sort of qualities should he or she seek in a personal staff? Perhaps the most critical question of all is whether even a superbly advised leader can impose a pattern upon events. Have our problems become too large, our systems too complex, our society too lacking in consensus for our politicians? They can preside but can any one lead?

To help answer these questions, I will argue a three-part thesis:

- It is indeed possible to keep to a political agenda, and to prevent the urgent from overwhelming the important. But to do so, it is necessary to adopt a strategic approach to government. *Strategy necessitates choice.*
- To run a strategic prime ministership it is critical to recruit a highly competent personal staff. Nostalgia for the simpler days of Laurier or King is an inadequate response to the modern demands of government. A prime minister must make decisions on a host of matters about which he or she is not expert. *Choice necessitates advice.*
- In recruiting a personal staff a leader must distinguish between the demands of partisanship and the virtues of a professional civil service. Partisans bring creativity; public servants provide perspective. The political arm makes things move; bureaucratic routines prevent errors. Both kinds of counsel are necessary but in Canada we are now in danger of doing permanent damage to the concept of a neutral civil service. Paradoxically, a strongly partisan personal office is the best way to defend an apolitical public service. *Good advice necessitates different kinds of expertise.*

In making these arguments I will naturally refer to episodes drawn from my decade (1974-1984) of government experience. Alert readers, therefore, should be ever wary of the danger of ex post facto self-justification. Dean Acheson, no mean chronicler himself, wisely cautioned that he had never read a report of a conversation in which the author came out second best.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this article is also a partial one. I am not writing about cabinet government, the role of parties, or the overall policy-making process. My attention is directed instead towards the Prime Minister's Office. It is an important piece of the puzzle but not the critical piece. A prime minister's primary sources of political advice and intelligence are his colleagues in the cabinet and caucus. The most vital professional policy advice comes from the great departments of state such as Finance and External Affairs. The people who really win elections are the thousands of campaign volunteers, not the handful of men and women around the leader. In short, the personal office of a prime minister is important because it is at the *centre*; but it has predominant sway on very few matters, perhaps only on the leader's schedule and appointments. Whatever the pretensions or even the ambitions of its inhabitants, the Prime Minister's Office in Canada is not the White House North. My object is to demystify the operations of this part of the government.

### **The law of acceleration**

Even the greatest of political leaders have often wearily agreed with Emerson that "things are in the saddle, and ride mankind." Lincoln confessed that "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."<sup>2</sup> Bismarck, no shrinking violet when it came to self-confidence, believed that "man cannot create the current of events. He can only float with it and steer."<sup>3</sup>

The pessimism of such great statesmen about their ability to master the forces transforming the nineteenth century is all the more striking because today the pace of change is accelerating at an exponential rate. Technology strides ahead. The number of actors on the global scene shoots upwards. Interactions increase. Interdependence expands. No state, not even the most powerful, is any longer in complete control of its own destiny. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for example, has calculated that the last two lifetimes have seen more change than the planet's first 798 put together.<sup>4</sup>

The cumulative impact of such revolutions leaves man breathless. One part of us rejoices at the affluence and leisure that new technology brings. Another side of our soul hungers for stability. Politicians are caught in the middle, not knowing whether to welcome the new world or to defend the old ways. But

1 Quoted in Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), p. xxii.

2 Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986), p. 168.

3 A.J.P. Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 70.

4 Schlesinger, *Cycles*, p. xi.

as Henry Adams warned, "a law of acceleration, definite and constant as any law of mechanics, cannot be supposed to relax its energy to suit the convenience of man."<sup>5</sup>

Canada has not been immune from Adams's law of acceleration. Statistics tell the story. In 1867, in the era when Lincoln and Bismarck found it so difficult to cope with society's complexities, the new government of Canada spent less than \$14 million. In 1987 Finance Minister Wilson plans to spend more than \$116 billion. In 1867 Canada's public service could comfortably be fitted within the East Block; even in 1909 the newly created Department of External Affairs was housed entirely above a barber shop on Ottawa's Bank Street, and the total federal public service only numbered about twenty thousand souls. In 1987, the federal Main Estimates authorize over 236,000 person-years, exclusive of the military, while External Affairs now resides in solitary splendour on Sussex Drive in a brown, squat imitation of an Egyptian pyramid.

The demands placed on the time, energy and physical resources of our leaders by this complex machinery are enormous. In 1983 Ian Clark, the deputy secretary to the cabinet, completed a study for the OECD on Canada's central decision-making system.<sup>6</sup> Pressures on ministers were intense: in 1982-83 for example, there were three hundred meetings held of full cabinet or cabinet committees, nine hundred cabinet memoranda circulated (how many read?), seven hundred and fifty policy decisions taken, seventy-five bills drafted, four thousand order-in-council appointments made, and six thousand Treasury Board spending decisions taken. As an additional example, a case study showed that the Department of Regional and Industrial Economic Expansion alone made a further forty-seven hundred spending decisions, all of them theoretically under the purview of the minister. No human being could long keep up even with the press of this government business, let alone the equally heavy demands of constituents, party militants, media and interest groups. To survive, one must choose. And to choose well one needs a strategic conception of the job.

### **A strategic prime ministership**

In a healthy democracy politics should mean more than a single-minded pursuit of office. Tyrants need seek only power. But leaders in a self-governing democracy must build a reciprocal relationship of trust and support with their fellow citizens. Democratic politics, therefore, is fundamentally a debate about conviction, while democratic leadership is the ability to educate, arouse and energize citizens to work for goals that represent mutual values.

Put simply, a strategic approach to politics is the intelligent application of priorities to the complicated world of clashing values and interests. There

5 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: The Modern Library, 1918), p. 493.

6 Ian Clark, "A New Look into the Privy Council Office," December 30, 1983. Clark made his findings known through a series of public speeches to groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Ontario Federal Council.

is no magic to it: one decides on objectives, assesses the difficulties in achieving them, and calculates the resources available to throw into the contest. Yet, while easy to outline, strategic politics is excruciatingly difficult to implement. A leader must choose from among a vast array of problems of which three or four issues will receive his or her individual attention. Once the choice is made, events, or the competing priorities of colleagues, can too easily edge aside the top items of the agenda. With a plethora of ministries and a multiplicity of decision makers, even politicians with the best of intentions may not be able to coordinate action or concentrate sufficient resources to make headway.

In this endless battle to rescue an element of choice from the pressure of events, you may fail even with a strategic approach. But you are certain to fail without it. Recommending such a course, I once wrote Prime Minister Trudeau that the purpose of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was "to join policy and politics, structure and process in a coherent plan that can change with events (but not too often) and that takes into account constraints and available resources."<sup>7</sup> To achieve this, four different components should interconnect:

- Policy:     where do you want to go?
- Politics:    how do you get there?
- Structure:   how do you distribute authority?
- Process:    how do you run the system?

## Policy

Politicians are expected to have a five-point platform on every problem facing government. Yet, while it is easy to design such a program, if a leader has not made a real intellectual and emotional commitment to the ideas, they remain only fodder for campaign speeches. If a leader has not identified those few policy themes most fundamental to his or her conception of the job before arriving in office, he or she will have difficulty putting an imprint on affairs while in office.

In a four-year term, a prime minister has the time to concentrate extensively on four of five issues at most. This is not to suggest that a prime minister can or should ignore the routine of government. Mistakes avoided are just as important as bills passed. It simply means that a leader can expend a significant amount of personal energy only on relatively few subjects. Since the most valuable resource in Ottawa is the time of the prime minister, to work intensively on four or five problems requires saying no to hundreds of other requests.

In a strategic prime ministership it is the task of the PMO to deal with the disgruntled. In the 1980-84 government, for example, the four priorities of

<sup>7</sup> My 1981 memo drew heavily upon a study of the Carter presidency by two former Carter assistants. See Benjamin W. Heineman Jr. and Curtis A. Hessler, *Memorandum for the President: A Strategic Approach to Domestic Affairs in the 1980's* (New York: Random House, 1980).

constitutional reform, the national energy program, anti-inflation policy and the peace initiative took up much of the time of the prime minister. To allow Mr. Trudeau to concentrate on them, our office systematically reduced the paper flow, spun out functions like order-in-council appointments to other ministers and took care that his luncheon guests included outsiders knowledgeable in the priority areas. Together with the reforms in the cabinet process initiated by the secretary to the cabinet, Michael Pitfield (discussed below), these measures reduced the prime minister's involvement in administration and gave him time to manage personally his key concerns.

If prime ministers can at best immerse themselves in four of five policy areas, the cabinet can devote substantial effort to only a further twenty-five or thirty problems. While Mr. Trudeau was working on the Charter of Rights or the peace initiative, for example, Mr. Pepin was engaged in the negotiations over the Crow's Nest Pass freight rates, Mr. Lalonde was approving projects in the special recovery program, and Mr. LeBlanc was restructuring the Atlantic fishery. It is a sobering thought that the reputation and impact of a government rests on only the twenty-five issues that receive the top priority out of the one thousand plus cabinet memoranda that will be produced by the bureaucracy in a four-year term. Thousands of issues must be managed but only twenty-five problems can receive full political attention. This basket of twenty-five priorities must meet the needs of the country, respond to the ideology of the party and pass muster with the citizens of the polity. The success of a strategic prime ministership rests on which twenty-five issues are chosen.

## Politics

Timing, organization and communication are the very stuff of politics. Knowing when to proceed and when to delay, sensing when to be bold and when to be prudent, calculating the forces pro and con – these are the intuitive arts possessed by all great politicians. Timing makes or breaks a government. In 1974, for example, the re-elected government of Mr. Trudeau spent its first year debating issues in a model planning exercise, but by the time it was ready to move, economic events had overtaken it, wage and price controls had to be introduced and the government never really recovered its balance. In 1980, in contrast, Mr. Trudeau moved quickly to use the results of the climactic Quebec referendum to spur the country to accept radical constitutional change.

Organizational politics is coalition building, pure and simple. Who can you bring onside and with what degree of intensity? Every government needs allies, especially those with media credibility. Over time, for example, the Trudeau government lost the support of business. No reform government can reasonably expect to have substantial support from this sector, but it was a serious weakness not to have a working, or even a civil, relationship with such a powerful interest. In his last government, Mr. Trudeau spent time trying to develop

new allies – with the cooperative movement, for example – but the new friends gained never equalled the weight of the old friends lost.

The traditional cry of losing governments is that “our policies weren’t wrong, they were simply not understood.” More often than not, citizens understand their governments very well and that is exactly why the party in power loses, but the centrality of good communications can hardly be in doubt. Every great leader is a master of the communication medium of the age: Lincoln the outdoor rally, Roosevelt the radio, and Trudeau the television set. It is no good decrying the age of the thirty-second clip: one must simply master it, or disappear.

Policies that ignore politics quickly come to grief. Ukases that come down from on high with neither public support, nor a plan to garner any, are more commonly a failure of government than an administration with few ideas. Politicians who become so convinced of the righteousness of their cause that they expect the public meekly to follow reflexively their banner forget that leadership in a democracy is reciprocal: the leader must first identify with the needs, aspirations and values of the public before he can begin to educate. Moral leadership emerges from and always returns to the fundamental values of society. And party politics is the main venue for this debate over values.

A prime minister must lead a party before he leads a government. Parties represent a particular constellation of values, interests, blocs and localities. Politics is a never-ending process of satisfying your supporters, disengaging the supporters of your opponents and attracting the uninterested. The ideas which drive policy must somehow connect with the public. Thus, communicating the values inherent in a policy directive is just as important as writing a bill. Building a coalition to organize around an idea is just as important as passing a law. Ministering to a party, knowing the needs of the militants and maintaining the sinews of organizational strength are crucial to a successful prime ministership. The party base should never be forgotten.

Policy and politics should intersect most dramatically at election time, but in Canada the conduct of modern campaigns is invariably a record of opportunities lost. The duty of the party is to define problems and find answers. In Great Britain political parties issue detailed manifestos outlining their vision of the future. In Canada personal image rather than policy substance drives the race. Policy announcements are too often viewed as tactical devices to be dropped whenever media attention is flagging. The press, which must be fed, is daily doled out a policy Gainsburger.

When politicians treat the party policy process so cavalierly, they fail the people. Trust, involvement and ultimately faith in our system of self-government fade away if parties continually denigrate the intelligence of the citizenry. But such politicians also fool themselves: by starving their campaigns of a policy content, they are throwing away one of the most powerful instruments of reform. Elections bestow moral legitimacy; policy mandates give leaders the opportunity to overcome vested interests, to impart urgency to

a sluggish public service, to demand sacrifices from a people and to instill resolve within a cabinet and caucus. In 1962-63 the Pearson Liberals, for example, made a major expansion of the welfare state a crucial part of their electoral appeal. Despite being a minority administration, the first Pearson government used this mandate to transform Canada's system of social security.

A strategic prime ministership, therefore, should begin to put down its roots in the campaign headquarters. The kind of campaign waged has a direct bearing on the nature of the government to follow. In the heat of an election it is difficult to have such discipline: one more promise to one more group may win one more seat. But by a curious process, the seeds of the next defeat are often sown in the moment of a seeming triumph.

### Structure

The structure of decision-making can determine whether a strategic prime ministership will work or not. While the pattern of authority must give the chief executive enough time to work on the central agenda, it must also allow the government as a whole to get on with its business. A prime minister may define a set of priorities, but his or her cabinet colleagues will have their own concerns and the routine of government involves hundreds of daily decisions. A prime minister who has a well-developed policy sense but who continually finds his government blown off course by a series of minor crisis is perilously neglecting structure.

In Mr. Trudeau's final term, Michael Pitfield, the clerk of the Privy Council, created a balanced structure which gave the prime minister overview responsibility while decentralizing major areas of decision-making. Full cabinet and the Priorities and Planning Committee, both chaired by the prime minister, concerned themselves largely with the central political objectives of the government. The strategic prime ministership was implemented through these two forums. Spending envelope decisions and sectoral strategies were delegated to cabinet committees on Economic Development and Social Policy. Removing spending fights and program auctions from the cabinet agenda freed important time for discussion of central themes while the committee structure attended to specific needs.

### Process

Pierre Trudeau ran a collegial government and no apologies need be made for that style. He seldom reserved decisions for himself and loved instead to have his cabinet and caucus debate issues at length. The Trudeau style was undoubtedly time-consuming and even frustrating to the ministers involved but, as Bismarck once remarked, people with weak stomachs should not observe the manufacture either of sausages or new laws. A collegial style of government gave ministers the right not only to run their departments but to question and to participate in the responsibilities of their colleagues. Critics point to the vast proliferation of paper and several former ministers in the



Trudeau cabinet have voiced their dissatisfaction with the consensual system.<sup>8</sup> Such a system is ponderous. But it is also fair. Ministers have to defend the policies of their colleagues, they should have some say in determining them.

One of the wisest maxims of public administration is, "where you stand depends on where you sit." Occasionally ministers define their role as implementing the government's priorities within their respective departments. Marc Lalonde was such a minister. But more commonly, ministers see themselves as being the spokesperson of their departmental interest to the prime minister and cabinet. Thirty ministers in a room usually leads to thirty definitions of the public interest. A prime minister must bring order out of this babel and find the common thread that unites.

Discussion invites participation. Participation increases involvement. Involvement may lead to commitment. Such a progression is central to the concept of a strategic prime ministership. Ordering ministers or caucus members to toe a line is far less effective than winning their support through engagement. To persuade the thirty members of cabinet or the one hundred and forty members of caucus to put aside their parochial concerns to take up a central quest is the essence of parliamentary leadership. An engaged cabinet, caucus, or party can do wonders; a sullen group of colleagues simply sits on their hands.<sup>9</sup> Prime ministers *must* seek to widen the circle of the committed.

8 See, for example, Donald Johnston, *Up the Hill* (Montreal: Optimum Publishing International, 1986), pp. 53-73; Jean Chretien, *Straight from the Heart* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1985) pp. 75-76; John Roberts, *Agenda for Canada: Towards a New Liberalism* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys Ltd., 1985), pp. 47-50; and Eugene Whelan, *Whelan: The Man in the Green Hat* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1986), pp. 213-14. With so much fire power directed against the Trudeau planning system a casual observer would naturally conclude that it must have been conceptually flawed. Mistakes were undoubtedly made. The frustrations expressed by the former ministers are evidently deeply felt. Yet many of the criticisms are remarkably similar to the broadsides Richard Crossman directed at the office of Harold Wilson in *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975, 1976 and 1977). Frustration in a strong minister with central authority seems to be endemic. In that sense one begins to understand Charles C. Dawe's famous remark that "the Members of the Cabinet are a President's natural enemies" (Quoted in Roger B. Porter, *Presidential Decision-Making: The Economic Policy Board* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980] p. 18.) Good ministers have strong views about policy; they fight one another mercilessly to gain program resources; they believe that if only the prime minister would accept their point of view all would be sweetness and light. The problem is that in a cabinet of thirty or forty individuals these views are often diametrically opposed. A prime minister must balance the opposing views while keeping the proponents within the nest. Ministers in a cabinet are always slightly disgruntled because no one ever gets their way completely.

9 The primary role of a central agency in such situations is to play fair. All sides should get a hearing. Cabinet agendas, time set aside for discussions, private meetings with the prime minister, must all be allocated impartially. One critic who disagrees that the Trudeau PMO-PCO played fair is Donald Johnston. Mr. Johnston takes two incidents: the purchase of Petrofina by Petro Canada and the announcement of the Macdonald Commission as evidence that ministers were excluded from key decisions. Petrofina was obviously a special case because it was a commer-

## The guardians

Access to power, Plato advised, should be confined to men who are not in love with it. Yet, as with many of Plato's ideals, human nature keeps getting in the way. Every king has a court. Men are attracted to power as moths are to a flame. With the example of Oliver North fresh before our eyes, however, we should at least revisit Plato's critical question: what virtues should the city demand of its guardians?

Since every leader must constantly make decisions about matters in which he is not expert, the beginning of wisdom is to know what one does not know. Advisers should be recruited to fill the gaps in a leader's experience. The first rule of the office, therefore, is to recruit complementary skills. If the leader has spent a lifetime in the party but lacks policy depth, the staff should have a strong intellectual base. If a leader is relatively remote from party activists, assistants with extensive personal networks are needed. Balance should be sought not only between the leader and the staff but also within the office staff. Enthusiasm must be tempered with experience. The PMO is not the best place for on-the-job training. Ignorance causes trouble. Robert Lovett, one of the wisest of President Truman's counsellors, believed that "good judgement is invariably the result of experience. And experience is frequently the result of bad judgement."<sup>10</sup> A sagacious leader will insist on a staff that has already learned from mistakes made elsewhere.

Loyalty is perhaps the virtue most praised and least practised among politicians. Leaders hunger for loyalty because it is so rare. "Power is poison," wrote Henry Adams. He meant by that not only the corrosive effect authority has on the character of a leader, but also the predatory environment in which he or she must live. Everyone wants something. Supplicants want to use a leader's power for their ends, the leader wants to persuade them that his objectives should be their objectives. In this heated atmosphere, having the support of people who genuinely want to promote your interest, as opposed to their own, is a valued commodity. Franklin D. Roosevelt explained his support of a controversial adviser in just such a way. To Wendell Wilkie, his

---

cial transaction and the circle of insiders was kept very small, (for what it is worth I was also excluded from those in the know), while the public announcement of the Macdonald Commission was a quick response to a press leak. Two incidents out of the 300 issues annually brought to cabinet is not overwhelming evidence. Mr. Chretien, for example, has the opposite complaint. He writes that Mr. Trudeau arranged too much discussion: "he was extraordinarily patient, he let everyone have a say, and he listened attentively, sometimes he was too patient, too generous . . . more often than not you wished that Trudeau would bring down the gavel" (p. 75). When the cabinet minutes are opened thirty years hence they will show that on issues like the Constitution, energy, cruise missile testing, and the peace initiative, Mr. Trudeau returned again and again to his colleagues for advice and reflection. The Trudeau system of planning may have had many defects but lack of ministerial involvement was not one of them.

10 Quoted in Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Making* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 11.

Republican opponent in the 1940 presidential election, he said: "Practically everybody who walks through that door wants something out of you. You'll learn what a lonely job this is and you'll discover the need for somebody like Harry Hopkins who wants nothing except to serve you."<sup>11</sup> Leaders need emotional succour; staffs provide it.

But loyalty is not the same as sycophancy. As Cardinal Richelieu warned, "there is no plague more capable of ruining a state than the host of flatterers." The best single test of loyalty is to tell the truth. Often the greatest service rendered to a leader is to force him to face unpalatable realities. To be able to do so requires a relationship of trust and respect.

Such a relationship usually rests on three building blocks. First, a leader has a right to demand high levels of performance. Mr. Trudeau's general standard was perfection, to be surpassed on special occasions! Second, a leader has the right to demand staff anonymity: it is the elected politicians who need publicity, not those who never have to face the voters. "The best way to stay out of trouble," President Kennedy told Theodore Sorenson, "is to stay out of sight."<sup>12</sup> Third, if a leader has the right to demand competence and anonymity, a staff should insist upon a civilized norm of behaviour. Some leaders, like Lyndon Johnson, are prone to tantrums, abusive language and lapses in decorum. In contrast, in Mr. Trudeau's office civility was the rule. Advisers who allow themselves to be abused eventually lose the respect of their masters. In the words of Walter Bagehot, "no man can argue on his knees."

### **A partisan office**

In 1873 the new Liberal prime minister, Alexander Mackenzie, with not even a secretary to handle his mail, answered all letters himself, complaining "as letters come in bushels I have to answer them as fast as I can drive the pen."<sup>13</sup> In 1983 Mr. Trudeau received nine thousand pieces of mail a week, a volume that not even the industrious Mr. Mackenzie could have kept up with. Unsurprisingly, as the scope of government has expanded in Canada, so too has the size of the prime minister's personal office.

In 1968 Mr. Trudeau initiated one of the most significant structural changes in the history of Canadian government. Before Mr. Trudeau, prime ministers' personal staffs were almost all seconded from the civil service. Sometimes the adviser was personally recruited by the prime minister to enter his service, as was Arnold Heeney in 1938 or Tom Kent in 1963. On occasions an official who had entered the public service by the normal route of civil service examinations might show an aptitude for politics, and by close associa-

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Michael Medved, *The Shadow Presidents: The Secret History of the Chief Executives and Their Top Aides* (New York: Times Books, 1979), p. 198.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in R.M. Punnett, *The Prime Minister in Canadian Government and Politics* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977), p. 75.

tion with the prime minister, grow into a partisan. Such was the case with J.W. Pickersgill. Mr. Trudeau changed all that, by making it clear that his personal staff would be openly partisan. Thus a new category of official was created – the political adviser. The role of such individuals differed from that of the public service; they would advise on the interaction of policy and politics and not be subject to the formal rules of the public service. They could enter government without examination and they would leave government without the protection of the Public Service Act. Mr. Trudeau made the system honest by acknowledging what always had been the case – politics was part of the Prime Minister's Office. It had been duplicitous to paper over this function with the screen of civil service impartiality.

In his last year as prime minister, in 1983-84, Mr. Trudeau's personal office employed eighty-seven people and had an estimated budget of \$4.2 million. The prime minister's civil service secretariat – the Privy Council Office and Federal Provincial Relations division – had two hundred and seventy-five positions. These numbers pale in comparison to the United States. In the mid-1980s there were approximately four hundred political staff in the White House and four thousand presidential appointees across in the executive branch. The PMO has grown, further, under Prime Minister Mulroney: in 1985/86 it expanded to one hundred and seventeen with a budget of \$6.6 million.

As is often pointed out in the literature, the Trudeau PMO was double the size of Mr. Pearson's. But these numbers can be deceiving, since three-quarters of the staff slots were taken up by secretarial or correspondence positions. Most people in the PMO simply answered the mail or the telephones. Only twenty or so persons were senior advisers. While twenty is not a large number for such an office, my preference would be for an even smaller number. In 1979 after the election defeat, as leader of the opposition, Mr. Trudeau's staff was reduced by 60 per cent to only thirty with twelve senior people. Even though there are obvious differences, that small staff functioned more cohesively with as much impact as the larger PMOs which preceded and followed it. A prime minister requires a few assistants, not another layer of bureaucracy. The purpose of the staff is to leave the leader more time, rather than less, to concentrate on major policy decisions. A large staff usually generates more work by taking up everyone's time in endless staff meetings. For the purposes of manning a prime minister's office the operative principle should be that less is more.

The personal office of the leader should make contributions to the four dimensions of the strategic prime ministership outlined above:

- Policy: knowing the trends.
- Politics: promoting the party perspective.
- Structure: knitting things together.
- Process: keeping a grip during a crisis.

## Policy intelligence

Information is power. This may be a cliché but it is still a powerful insight. The PMO must connect daily with other assistants on the Hill, with the caucus, the party and the media to keep abreast of events. My foremost objective – not often reached – was to avoid surprises. Part of the intelligence-gathering function should be to assess what the opposition is likely to do: on most issues my office spent considerable time on competitor analysis. While personal networks are crucial for managing the information flow, polls provide the most reliable assessment of public opinion. Quarterly, the PMO in 1980-84 prepared an assessment of public opinion and presented it to cabinet. Every cabinet meeting, of course, gave ministers the opportunity to raise political issues under the regular agenda item of “Communications,” but the quarterly “political” cabinet was the essential clearing house for the partisan agenda.

Party activists help create the climate of values to which decision makers respond. Individual members of cabinet and caucus bring regional perspectives to bear. The great departments of state have their own interests and are a vast reservoir of expertise. The Prime Minister’s Office must balance the competing priorities by assessing them against a standard of public acceptability. The PMO is more often a policy synthesizer than a policy initiator.

## Partisanship

The PMO, along with party headquarters, is a central partisan agency. Just as Finance brings economic expertise to a discussion, and External Affairs advances foreign policy considerations, the role of the PMO is to promote a partisan perspective. While the partisan perspective does not always carry the day, it is essential that ministers understand the political implications of policy discussions. To that end, PMO advisers in Mr. Trudeau’s office spent their time on major theme documents like the speech from the throne or the annual planning agenda meetings of the cabinet. Operational responsibilities were few, coordinating and goal-setting responsibilities were uppermost. Prior to the speech from the throne, for example, the PMO would research relevant Liberal party policy resolutions, work closely with the Liberal party policy committee, and interview all ministers individually to get as complete a picture as possible of the political priorities. This role, however, was generally resented by the party militants rather than applauded. The feeling grew that the PMO was not transmitting party views so much as manipulating them. Such tensions, while perhaps inevitable, are ultimately self-defeating. Since the partisan perspective must compete with real power-holders like Finance, a divided political wing simply means that bureaucratic priorities rather than political necessities will prevail.

## Coordination

James Coutts, my predecessor as principal secretary, described the PMO as

“a switchboard” and that metaphor is apt. As a central political agency it connects the party with the bureaucracy. More time of the PMO is spent on coordination than any other activity. The romantic image (cultivated most assiduously by members of the PMO itself) portrays the staffer having long heart-to-heart talks with the prime minister, but in reality most members of the office spend their days with ministers, members of Parliament and other assistants. Weeks may go by without a member of the PMO even seeing the prime minister.

With thirty government departments, twelve provincial party associations, and nearly three hundred ridings, the job of meshing the various components of this huge machine is enormous. Even a simple task like organizing the speaking engagements of ministers, so that Canada's outlying regions receive some attention, takes hundreds of phone calls. A strategic prime ministership must choose relatively few central themes, not only because of the time demands on the prime minister, but also because it takes a herculean effort to coordinate the government machine.

### **Crisis management**

Only crises came to the PMO: the easier problems got solved elsewhere. The critical clearing house of the PMO from 1981-84 was a daily 8.30 a.m. meeting chaired by the principal secretary and including all senior staff. Here information was exchanged and tactics discussed. The operations, policy and communications divisions of the office also attempted to have weekly planning meetings to anticipate future crises rather than reacting to daily concerns. Despite this heroic goal, such meetings often dissolved into tactical fire-fighting sessions. The only compensation in all this was knowing that the ability to defuse a crisis, promote calm and instill confidence is among the most important characteristics of a central political staff. The only infallible rule is that crises are a true test of whether an office has the creativity and good humour to master events.

### **Preserving the public service**

I believe in a strong partisan Prime Minister's Office. If politics is a debate about values, there is a need for a contingent of value-driven people to influence the direction of the state. Commitment fosters creativity. It is the political dynamic of our system which brings about reform. But good government needs other virtues besides creativity. Impartiality, experience and caution are equally important components to policy-making. These virtues the public service provides. The Canadian system of government with its amalgam of partisan advisers and neutral public servants combines equal doses of commitment and consistency.

A close partnership between the principal secretary and the clerk of the Privy Council is crucial to the workings of a strategic prime ministership. Since both officers have equal access to the prime minister, it is essential that they

establish between them an atmosphere of trust. I established with the two clerks with whom it was my privilege to work, Michael Pitfield and Gordon Osbaldeston, one overarching rule: no games. When we disagreed about the timing or substance of government policy, such arguments were to be made to the prime minister directly, most often at the daily 9.15 a.m. joint planning meeting. Briefing notes were equally shared. After the demise of the 1981 budget, I also made a special effort to share information with the deputy minister of finance. Prime ministers require both a partisan and a public service perspective. If either is systematically excluded or ignored, trouble will result.

I fear that we are about to damage seriously our system of government by confusing the function of the partisan and the public servant. I favour stronger partisan advisers, not a more partisan public service. The dismissal of career public servants such as Edmund Clark and Robert Rabinovitch by the Mulroney government, for simply implementing the direction desired by their former government masters, is an attack on the very concept of a neutral public service. The placing of Dalton Camp, a former Conservative party president, into the neutral Privy Council Office rather than the partisan Prime Minister's Office was a further blurring of the lines. The installation of Derek Burney, a career public servant, as chief of staff of the Prime Minister's Office is a return to the days of J.W. Pickersgill and Mackenzie King. This is not a criticism of the undoubted talents of Messrs. Camp or Burney: if they switched offices they would be in the right place.

Pierre Trudeau did the right thing in 1968. By creating the modern partisan PMO he made our system honest. It should be kept that way.

### **An evaluation**

Even if a strategic prime ministership is successfully implemented, there is, of course, a price to be paid. Donald Johnston laments, for example, that while Mr. Trudeau in the 1970s scrutinized every item on the cabinet agenda with zest, in his last term many issues were left to others; "after 1980 Trudeau no longer took home three binders of briefings for thorough study."<sup>14</sup> Johnston is right but that was exactly the intent. Rather than the prime minister spending most of his time managing a great number of items, after 1980 Mr. Trudeau wanted to concentrate on a few big ones. Only with maximum prime ministerial involvement could the host of obstacles that stand in the way of reform be overcome. The crucial question in a strategic approach, then, is which big items?

The big items chosen by Mr. Trudeau between 1980 and 1984 provide lessons, both about the concept of a strategic prime ministership and the role of the PMO. The National Energy Program (NEP) was the most purely political priority. It originated from the work of the Liberal Platform Committee in

14 Johnston, *Up the Hill*, p. 54.

1979-80 and all of its major components were explicit points in the Liberal election platform of 1980. By appointing Marc Lalonde to the Energy portfolio and allocating a substantial budget to energy needs, Mr. Trudeau indicated to the Ottawa bureaucracy that he was serious about the NEP. Mr. Lalonde took all major issues to the Priorities and Planning Committee or full cabinet, but on a day-to-day basis the minister of energy conducted the negotiations with Alberta with only a small circle of officials, ministers, and the prime minister in the know.

The PMO was anxious to keep the election commitments of 1980 and the office rigorously supported the minister of energy. Members of the leader's personal staff had played a large role in drafting the 1980 platform, but after the campaign, the PMO became a backstop rather than a leading player. The most important actor by far was Marc Lalonde.

Despite intense opposition, the NEP was enacted, and in a form very close to the objectives outlined in the 1980 campaign. But the attempt to use energy as a building block for a more independent economy and a strengthened federal treasury did not survive the Liberal defeat in 1984. Only Petro-Canada and the national sentiment in favour of a Canadian-owned oil industry remains as a legacy of the Trudeau energy policy. Public support for the NEP, while substantial, was not intensely felt. Bureaucratic support was always tepid. These two factors allowed the Conservatives to make sweeping changes.

If Mr. Trudeau delighted party activists by making the interventionist NEP central to his agenda, he was equally responsive to his cabinet and caucus colleagues through his management of the inflation issue in 1982. After the failure of tax reform in 1981 (described below) the cabinet and caucus demanded a greater say in budget-making. Following the Versailles economic summit in June 1982, Mr. Trudeau and Allan MacEachen, the minister of finance, proposed a bold strategy both in substance and process. The substance was a stiff reduction in public service wages with a public campaign to persuade the provinces and the private sector to join the guidelines. The innovation in process was to open up the summer 1982 budget to collective decision-making. With the encouragement of the minister of finance, cabinet rewrote substantial portions of the initial documents submitted by the Department of Finance. In the fall of 1982 the prime minister went on television for three successive days to promote the anti-inflation policy. The PMO expended a vast amount of energy coordinating the communication efforts of the ministry, and in attempting to build an organizational base for the Six-and-Five campaign. From its inception in 1968, the Trudeau government grappled with the need to develop a coherent anti-inflation policy. It came closest to achieving such a consensus late in its life, and only after the Department of Finance had temporarily surrendered sovereignty over the budget.

Responding first to the party with the NEP, and then to his cabinet colleagues in the Six-and-Five anti-inflation program, the peace initiative of 1983-84 resulted from the personal drive of Pierre Trudeau. Long bothered



by the escalating arms race and disheartened by the atmosphere created by the Soviet attack on a Korean airliner in the fall of 1983, Mr. Trudeau decided to inject himself into the superpower debate. Structurally he formed an ad hoc group of officials to advise him (largely because of the skepticism of the Department of External Affairs about the enterprise), but he regularly reported to cabinet and caucus on the progress of his mission. Indeed, the long and painful cabinet debate over American testing of cruise missiles in the summer of 1983 may have been one of the contributing factors to his eventual decision to suggest an alternate course. The PMO organized the process of government to give Mr. Trudeau the time needed to decide on his options and to travel abroad.

In the battle to patriate the constitution and entrench the Charter of Rights and Freedoms all four components of the strategic approach were synchronized.<sup>15</sup> The policy was far-reaching. The decision to have a parliamentary committee hold public hearings helped create a vast constituency in favour of the Charter of Rights and by this device policy reform and organizational politics meshed as one. Structurally, the prime minister used cabinet and the Planning and Priorities Committee to discuss fully the general items, while Justice Minister Jean Chrétien employed his considerable skills in the day-to-day negotiations with the provinces. The Liberal party made constitutional reform central to its political appeal. Both caucus and the cabinet believed that they had moved Mr. Trudeau to take even bolder steps than he had originally contemplated. The circle of commitment, therefore, was large and deep. And it had to be for, even with all this in place, provincial opposition to the Charter was so intense that the battle for constitutional reform was, in the words of Wellington at Waterloo, "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life."

By contrast, tax reform in 1981 was a major failure. In this, the outmoded process of budget-making in Canada was the major culprit. In 1979 the platform committee of the Liberal party had recommended that tax loopholes be closed and income tax rates reduced. Finance Minister Allan MacEachen was thus implementing Liberal policy when he attempted such a reform in 1981. This fact was conveniently forgotten by many in the party and caucus when the debate turned sour.

But if the basic policy idea was good, almost every other canon of strategy was ignored. As senior political adviser to the prime minister at the time I deserve my fair share of the blame. Like many I was so caught up in the constitutional and energy battles – which occurred at exactly the same time as Mr. MacEachen's budget planning – that the economic agenda was left solely to the Department of Finance. There were other errors and oversights. The Liberal party favoured tax reform but it had not campaigned on it. No public

15 For an analysis of the constitutional debate, see my article "Colliding Visions: The Debate Over the Charter of Rights and Freedoms 1980-81" in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 24 (November 1986) pp. 239-53.

tion of budget secrecy has not changed since the era of Gladstone; because of this convention Mr. MacEachen did not benefit from the political and expert advice of his cabinet colleagues. Cabinet was surprised by the scope of the 1981 budget and when the attacks began, few defended it because none had had a role in formulating it. Consultation with involved interest groups had also been minimal. In short, what could have been a political and policy achievement of the Trudeau government turned into a debacle.

The sad history of the 1981 budget also suggests that whatever the four or five overall priorities of a government, the economy must always be one of them. Politically the economy may be a no-win issue, but neglect will turn it into a clear loss. Living standards are nearly always the principal object of public concern and no government can afford to ignore this reality. Expectations will always exceed results but the resulting dissatisfaction is simply a fact of twentieth-century political life. Charles de Gaulle described this melancholy dilemma in his memoirs: "At grips day after day with national and human realities in a sphere in which all is asperity, in which nothing is once and for all achieved, in which no one is ever remotely satisfied with what he gets, I was reminded that economic progress, like life itself, is a struggle whose course is never marked by a decisive victory. Even on the day of an Austerlitz the sun does not emerge to light up the battlefield."<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusions

Government can make a difference only if there is true appreciation of how difficult and crucial it is to retain an element of choice from the welter of changing events. The urgent is always crowding out the important. A strategic approach and a strong partisan office, however, can help a leader master events. In summary, my recommendations are as follows:

- to have an agenda before you go in;
- to use the election campaign to seek a policy mandate;
- to concentrate on only a few themes, to know the trade offs, and never to ignore the economy;
- to combine policy and politics, structure and process into a coherent plan;
- to keep the personal staff small and to give them thematic, not operational, responsibilities;
- never to forget that a political party is made up of volunteers; and
- never to blur partisan and public service roles. Each has a different contribution to make.

Finally, despite the current attention focused on advisers and the backroom, we should never forget that it is the elected politicians who make our system of self-government run. As Machiavelli recognized, "it is an infallible rule that a prince who is not wise himself cannot be well advised."

16 Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope: Renewal and Endeavour*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 162.