**Jonathan Malloy. “The ‘Responsible Government Approach’ and its effect on Canadian legislative studies.” *Parliamentary Perspectives*. Vol 5. November 2002.**

**Thesis**

The dominance of the “responsible government approach” (RGA), which is characterized by a belief in the organic unity of Parliament’s components, a focus on the need for a strong government, and a **strongly normative** defense of the existing parliamentary system, has limited legislative studies in Canada.

**Approach**

Literature review / neo-institutionalism

**Key Arguments**

* “Parliament is a surprisingly understudied field in Canadian Political Science” with even further momentum was lost in the years after Atkinson and Thomas
* RGA stresses division between government, who have right to pass laws and administer departments, and opposition, with no right to govern but only to question.
* Leads to a celebration of centralized authority and party discipline which they see as contributing to clarity and accountability.
* Two key problems with RGA: (1) many of its key tenets are hidden out of sight and are difficult to test - It argues legislators are influential, but only behind the scenes in private activities such as caucus, and explains party discipline as largely self-imposed, driven by shared interests and solidarity rather than coercion; and (2) the approach emphasizes accountability so strongly that it appears to undervalue other principles of representation and responsiveness.
* Manifestation of these problems with RGA:
  + Argues that backbenchers have influence, but only in venues closed to the public (e.g. party caucuses), making the claim hard to verify
* Only qualitative, interview based approaches can be used with these assumptions.
* Makes it hard to test arguments that caucus is either impotent or influential
  + It overemphasizes accountability to the expense of responsiveness and representation.
* Accountability is seen to be exercised primarily when citizens vote at election on the government’s entire record of achievement.
* Changes that would blur this record (e.g. free votes) are therefore opposed.
* Focusing on elections relieves the opposition of the need to properly scrutinize the government on a daily basis or to develop meaningful alternative policies.
* However, RGA supporters blame this failure on the parties themselves, not the system
* Focus on accountability with strict roles for the government and opposition accepts a reduced degree of representativeness and responsiveness since interests not represented in the governing party have no avenue for influence.
* Also citizens are seen to have no means for input beyond one vote.
  + Holistic focus restricts comparisons and limits discussions of reform
* View of parliament system (e.g. Crown, Commons, Senate) as an organic whole lead to the view that it can only be compared to other models in its entirety. The Commons therefore should not be compared directly to Congress.
* Also, reform proposals can only be evaluated for their impact on the system as a whole.
* Reforms tend to be classified as those that either maintain the system or destroy it
* RGA proponents especially stress need to preserve the flexibility in the system.
* RGA therefore leads to the argument that the system “is so flexible that we dare not change it.”
* Defenders of RGA assume that most people do not understand the basic principles of the system and how they differ from the congressional model.
* Failure to adopt foreign theories is caused by the difficulty of applying them to the Canadian context
* Progress has come in limited areas – e.g. Docherty developed an original theory of the legislative career using rational choice; feminist scholars studied representation by women MPs
* Hope for the future
  + Malloy notes a few glimmers of hope with Kam (2000) and Schneider[[1]](#footnote-1), both of which are theoretically grounded and actually examine the assumptions made by the RGA
  + Kam used a formal empirical model to highlight the benefits of concentrated ministerial accountability in Canada, Australia, NZ, and the UK.
  + Schneider adapts the idea of the utility maximizing legislative actor from the US, but focusing on parties instead of individuals, showing that a powerful executive is efficient.
  + Both however take party discipline for granted.

The best way to restore momentum in Cdn legislative studies is to move away from the defensive and categorical modes of the responsible govt approach, toward greater engagement with alternative conceptions of representation and democratic accountability.

**Contribution**

Updated Atkinson and Thomas (1993) with an additional decade worth of content (or lack there of). Noticed the more quantitative / theoretical approach demonstrated by Kam (2000) which has since gained speed.

1. Steffen Schneider, “Parliamentary Government in Canada: Institutional Stability and Constitutional Reform in the

   Legislative and Executive Branches” in Rainer-Olaf Schultze and Roland Sturm, eds., The Politics of Constitutional

   Reform in North America: Coping with New Challenges (Leske and Budrich: Opladen, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)