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REVIEW ESSAY / SYNTHÈSE DE LECTURE

## Auditing the auditors: The Canadian Democratic Audit

*"If legislatures are becoming irrelevant it is because governments want them to be. Cabinets benefit when legislatures meet less often."*

– David C. Docherty, p. 177.

The volumes in the Canadian Democratic Audit were all published by the University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, in the year indicated. Each book contains bibliographical references and an index.

**Advocacy Groups.** By LISA YOUNG and JOANNA EVERITT. 2004. Pp. xii, 174.

**Cabinets and First Ministers.** By GRAHAM WHITE. 2005. Pp. xiii, 208.

**Citizens.** By ELISABETH GIDENGIL, ANDRE BLAIS, NEIL NEVITTE and RICHARD NADEAU. 2004. Pp. x, 214.

**Communication Technology.** By DARIN BARNEY 2005. Pp. xiii, 210.

**The Courts.** By IAN GREENE. 2006. Pp. xvii, 182.

**Elections.** By JOHN C. COURTNEY. 2004. Pp. xv, 201.

**Federalism.** By JENNIFER SMITH. 2004. Pp. xi, 192.

**Legislatures.** By DAVID C. DOCHERTY. 2005. Pp. xi, 224.

**Political Parties.** By WILLIAM CROSS. 2004. Pp. x, 206.

The Canadian Democratic Audit is an ambitious and important undertaking for Canadian social science. The Audit's director, William Cross, captures its impressive scope: "The objective of this series is to consider how well Canadian democracy is performing at the outset of the twenty-first century" (p. viii). Nine substantial books on major institutions and political processes address this significant objective. The volumes vary considerably in their deeper presumptions about democratic life, in the evidence employed and in the conclusions reached. Each centres around three criteria deemed par-

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ticularly relevant to the democratic condition – public participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness.

The Audit demands careful consideration by scholars, concerned citizens and policy-makers, for several reasons. First, read together, the nine volumes urge readers to think deeply about the quality of Canadian democracy and to contemplate its strengths and weaknesses. Is there a “democratic deficit”? If so, how serious is it? What are the essential attributes of a viable modern democracy? How well does Canada manifest such attributes? Second, the Audit compels readers to distinguish meaningful democratic problems from fleeting ones. Third, the Audit raises complex questions about democratic reform. Is the reform of political institutions and processes sufficient, or are deeper societal changes required to achieve democratic ideals? Finally, the Audit raises important questions about scholarly research priorities and about the need to break new research ground if Canadian government is to be better understood.

This essay has three main sections. The first examines each volume individually in an effort to highlight its particular insights and perspectives. It also examines significant themes and notes some of the interesting reforms advocated. Major Audit themes include striking doubts about the capacity of communications technologies to improve significantly Canadian democracy and enduring concerns about the negative democratic consequences of executive federalism. Auditors are also very concerned about the lack of representativeness of élites and about the impersonality of modern democratic politics. The essay's second section evaluates the Audit's overall quality. A noteworthy achievement is the series' explicit effort to deal systematically with the national, provincial and aboriginal aspects of Canadian democratic life. Other substantial strengths are remarkable clarity of presentation and broad coverage. Remarkable weaknesses include the absence of serious discussions of either Canadian public administration or the growing impact of international institutions and political processes on Canadian politics. The Audit is also weakened by its failure to justify its major premises. For one thing, it simply presumes that indirect democracy, as we now broadly know it, will remain the foundation of Canadian democracy. The third section uses the Audit as a backdrop against which to discuss research priorities. Canadian political scientists are urged to consider new approaches to the study of political leadership, to pay more sustained attention to the study of provincial governments, and, finally, to examine much more systematically the political role of Canadian business.

### **The Audit: themes, reforms, insights**

Darin Barney's *Communication Technology* is the Audit's most wide-ranging and critical analysis. It advances controversial arguments about the substance of communications policy and about the Internet as a vehicle for

political communications and public consultation. Barney's first major concern is Canadian communications policy in the twentieth century. He laments the demise of a policy-making culture that once engaged citizens and asked hard questions about the relationship between communications policy, especially media ownership and content, and Canadian identity. In the 1980s and 1990s, this approach was replaced by business-dominated policy-making that envisioned communications policy as a subset of economic policy. His second theme is the broader relationship between "ICTs" (information and communications technologies) and Canadian democracy. Barney points out that easier access to communications technology will erode neither "digital divides" nor enduring societal inequalities. Effective use of the Internet requires, for example, time, knowledge and money, resources that are already unequally distributed. He bleakly concludes that the Internet and other modern technologies have not animated previously excluded or disengaged citizens: "[V]ery little evidence suggests that ICTs have served to mobilize the mass of politically inert citizens currently inhabiting Western liberal democracies" (p. 128). Canadian political parties and governments have not creatively used information technologies to generate political interest or to engage citizens. Worse still, many advanced communications technologies have destabilized workplaces, made employment more tenuous and thereby reinforced or worsened income and power inequalities. Information and communications technologies thus provide little solace for democratic reformers.

Equally wide-ranging although much less pessimistic is the insightful analysis of Canadian citizens provided by Elisabeth Gidengil and her colleagues. Relying primarily on data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study, *Citizens* paints a portrait of Canadians' political involvement in the millennium. It studies the relationships between age, education, income and gender, on the one hand, and political awareness and participation, on the other. On the positive side, Canadians are quite actively involved in voluntary associations, participation in which can build admirable democratic qualities. And some Canadians are knowledgeable and active citizens. But there is much to worry about. First, many citizens are disinterested in politics, know little about it and see no obvious reason to become more involved. Canada cannot easily be considered a politically active or informed society. Second, and not surprisingly, poor Canadians and less well-educated Canadians are particularly politically inert and ill-informed. Young people, especially those lacking post-secondary education, are seldom active citizens. "Young Canadians are less interested in politics, they pay less attention to news about politics in the media, and they know less about what is going on, even on matters like globalization. They are less likely than older Canadians to vote or to have belonged to a political party" (pp. 172-73). Contrary to much speculation, little evidence sustains the view that younger Canadi-

ans pursue civic engagement through information technologies, social movements or interest groups. Substantial gender gaps continue to plague Canadian political participation.

Five Audit volumes examine core democratic institutions and processes – elections, federalism, the executive, legislatures and the courts. John Courtney's admirable study, *Elections*, analyses "five pillars" of democratic elections – the franchise, "districting," election management, voter registration and the electoral system. He views the conduct of elections as a significant strength of Canadian democracy that is too often taken for granted. Particularly impressive achievements are the steady extension of the franchise to include almost all citizens and the commonplace of effective, well-managed elections. He notes the entrenchment of non-partisan ideals into much of the electoral machinery that is now beyond the direct control of politicians. While broadly optimistic, Courtney notes the continuing isolation of many aboriginal people and serious inequities in the interprovincial distribution of seats in the House of Commons. He is convincingly critical of the National Register of Electors that has replaced door-to-door enumeration for federal campaigns. The Register was promoted as a democratic innovation that would save money and allow shorter campaigns. In practice, it probably works against democratic inclusiveness by making registration difficult for identifiable groups of voters: "Those who were most likely either to have been omitted from the Register or to experience difficulties getting on the list tended overwhelmingly to be the young, poor, mobile, tenants, and those with limited language skills" (p. 95). Courtney thinks the current fascination with electoral system reform misses the point. He argues that reformers exaggerate the benign effects of change, that the results of change cannot be predicted, and that reformers often misunderstand the interdependence of electoral system, party system and responsible government.

In *Federalism*, Jennifer Smith investigates the complex relationship between federalism and democracy. She notes longstanding tensions between "realists" who see federalism as instrumental to the achievement of particular political and economic ends and "idealists" for whom federalism is integrally linked to the achievement of democratic government and values. She concludes that few general principles govern the relationship between democracy and federalism. For example, federalism provides multiple access points for citizens and might therefore be seen as more responsive than unitary government. Yet, its considerable complexity in modern Canada makes it unapproachable and élitist. Canadian federalism and democracy thus coexist in complex, often controversial ways. Smith illustrates the ways in which federalism "privileges" territorially based interests in policy-making. She urges careful consideration of ways to better incorporate aboriginal governments into the federal fabric, including their direct involvement in executive federalism (pp. 143–47).

Graham White's volume, *Cabinets and First Ministers*, reviews the major debates about political leadership in Westminster systems. He notes the diversity of cabinet government as practised across the provinces, territories and federal government. White is particularly insightful when discussing the role of cabinets in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, whose populations include large numbers of aboriginal peoples. He observes how the debate about the dominance of first ministers rests almost exclusively on evidence derived from the federal government's experience. Yet, many premiers wield extraordinary power. They often serve for very long periods, face small, docile legislatures, and, even in the larger provinces, can still exert decisive control over the government's agenda. White examines debates about whether first ministers wield an unhealthy degree of power and influence over Canadian democracy. He dismisses the view of first ministers as "autocrat" but acknowledges major forces in modern democracies that strengthen executive power. Like other Audit contributors, he wonders about the impact of the direct election of party leaders by rank-and-file party members. White worries about the growing Canadian tendency to have cabinet ministers who enter the ministry with little parliamentary experience and who are then shuffled quickly from post to post.

In *Legislatures*, David Docherty probes institutions that face diverse critics and whose alleged underperformance is often asserted to be the heart of the "democratic deficit." He analyses the scholarly literature, observes legislative behaviour and reports the results of a survey of members of Canada's fifteen legislatures, undertaken in 2001 and 2002. Docherty is concerned that Canadian legislatures are too small to perform effectively and to meet public expectations. Opposition parties seldom have enough members to undertake effective committee work, to hold the government accountable and to engage the legislative process. In this vein, he notes the growing number, role and importance of the various offices that report to legislatures. The most visible of such officers, the auditors general, are now flanked by an array of ethics commissioners, privacy and information commissioners, and ombudsmen with general and specialized mandates. They have grown up in an ad hoc manner and have an imprecise status in modern Canadian government. The recent proliferation of such legislative officers complicates the lives of governments and opposition parties: "[T]he increased number of these agencies, and the rather ad hoc approach that successive governments across the country have taken in their creation, suggest that the organizations often reflect governmental and not legislative policy objectives. If this is the case, legislators might increasingly find themselves scrutinizing the agencies that were established for the same purpose" (pp. 135–36).<sup>1</sup>

Docherty notes how Canadian legislatures are becoming more representative of the Canadian population. Women, aboriginal Canadians and "visible minorities" are now more prominent in legislatures but remain

substantially underrepresented compared to their proportion of the total population. Educators, not lawyers, now comprise the single largest occupational group in the Canadian legislatures. Docherty argues that Canadian legislators, generally aided by increased resources, do excellent constituency work. However, Canadians expect their members to be much more active in the policy process, to hold governments to account and to be their delegates. Finally, Docherty notes the growth of executive power and governments' general indifference towards legislatures: "If legislatures are becoming irrelevant it is because governments want them to be. Cabinets benefit when legislatures meet less often" (p. 177). He recommends a considerable increase in the size of Canadian legislatures: "Most provincial assemblies could easily withstand a 50 percent increase in size. The House of Commons would not suffer from a one-third growth in members" (p. 181). Docherty also urges cabinet ministers to make major announcements in the legislature, to participate actively in the legislature, and to respond thoughtfully to major committee reports.

In *The Courts*, Ian Greene contributes a tight analysis of the changing role of courts in Canadian democracy. He situates courts as key actors in Canadian democracy, examines the modern meaning of judicial independence and pays careful attention to the controversial policy roles of superior courts in the Charter era. Refreshingly, he moves beyond the "high politics" of Canadian courts and probes the routine operations of the provincial courts, where most Canadians deal with the judicial system. Greene examines not only the roles and backgrounds of judges but also those of lawyers, court administrators and support staff. He probes such seldom-explored topics as public input into court administration, the treatment of juries and the use of social scientific evidence in trials. Greene argues that reformed judicial selection processes with greater public input have certainly led to a more representative bench: "The new appointment procedures have dramatically increased the number of women in the judiciary, as well as of visible minority judges, particularly in Ontario, and of Aboriginal judges, particularly in western Canada" (p. 59). But he also observes that governments will continue to be deeply involved in judicial selection and that overtly political considerations will continue to play a role. He notes, for example, that governments remain fully in control of the promotion of judges to higher courts. Greene advocates more citizen input into judicial selection but urges a cautious approach to reform that recognizes the complexity of the issue.

William Cross, in *Political Parties*, and Lisa Young and Joanna Everitt, in *Advocacy Groups*, examine the "input" side of Canadian politics. Both volumes also share a concern with the impact of money on politics. They ask whether political parties and interest groups are themselves democratic in their internal decision-making. Cross notes the chronic inability of Canadian political parties to engage large numbers of Canadians in meaningful politi-

cal activities. Equally, party activists are not representative of their fellow citizens. He argues that Canadians will not become active in political parties until parties embrace rank-and-file members in policy-making. Cross believes that candidate nomination and leadership selection processes require reform if they are to achieve their democratic potential. He brings attention, as does Graham White, to the major changes that Canadian political parties have undertaken in leadership selection, especially the move to selection by rank-and-file party members. White engages the debate about the implications of direct leadership election on governments.<sup>2</sup> Do first ministers, when selected by direct election by party members, wield even greater control over their governments and parties than heretofore? Cross, on the other hand, probes the broader democratic potential of leadership selection by party members. As noted, his ideal is a leadership selection process that allows all citizens a chance to vote. Cross also raises the thorny issue of how leaders, if selected by their party members or citizens at large, can be removed from office. He provides a compelling critique of national election campaigns that he sees as dominated by small, leader-centred entourages comprising party insiders and persons skilled in polling and media manipulation. Any sense of "national dialogue" is lost by the increasingly regionalized nature of national campaigns.

Young and Everitt provide a stimulating overview of advocacy groups whose activities remain controversial in modern democracies. They define advocacy groups as "any organization that seeks to influence government policy, but not to govern" (p. 5). The authors are particularly interested in "compensatory groups," a broad category that includes gays and lesbians, disabled persons and various minorities who are underrepresented in democratic institutions and who turn to advocacy groups for influence and public recognition. Young and Everitt note major disparities in the capacity of different groups to shape public policy. They also lament the growing number of advocacy groups whose members are passive contributors of funds to unaccountable professional staff. Such concerns aside, Young and Everitt applaud the contributions of advocacy groups to Canadian democracy. They argue that participation in groups can teach democratic values, that groups give "voice" to chronically underrepresented citizens, and that groups enliven policy-making by providing options and feedback to government: "[A]dvocacy groups remain one of the healthier elements of Canadian democracy. They are better adapted to Canadians' changing political values than are more traditional, hierarchical organizations like political parties" (p. 152). Young and Everitt applaud the contribution of the controversial Courts Challenges Program, whose funding was suspended in 2006 by the federal Conservative government, to the capacity of groups, including gays, lesbians and disabled persons, to represent their claims through the courts (p. 115). Equally clear are Young and Everitt's ideas about the role of advo-

cacy groups in the public policy process. They see advocacy groups as public bodies that, subject to some constraints, should be free to participate in election campaigns and, where warranted by their roles, mandates and memberships, should receive substantial public funding if a "level playing field" is to be attained. Interestingly, they propose an independent public body to deliver public funding to advocacy groups. Such an agency would deliver predictable funding and, ideally, remove decisions about advocacy group funding from partisan politics (p. 148).

### **The Canadian Democratic Audit: themes and ideas**

Several themes permeate the Audit, few of which will surprise observers of Canadian government. First, Canada's highly developed system of "executive federalism" – direct negotiations between elected and appointed officials of governments – is an enduring challenge for democracy. As Jennifer Smith notes, executive federalism involves a tiny number of élite actors, excludes citizens, advocacy group and even legislatures from direct participation and produces "done deals" not debatable policy proposals (pp. 98–107).<sup>3</sup> These problems are exacerbated by serious deficiencies in accountability, by the conduct of negotiations through esoteric, insider vocabulary and, especially when first ministers are involved, by inflammatory rhetoric, political posturing and media coverage that exaggerate conflict and ignore meaningful intergovernmental cooperation. Such observations are not surprising in a study of the quality of Canadian democracy. The late Donald Smiley, a distinguished student of Canadian federalism, wrote extensively about the democratic challenges of executive federalism as early as the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> What is noteworthy is the paucity of creative proposals to ease perennial democratic problems of executive federalism. Contemporary democratic reformers have stressed electoral system reform, the alleged excess of prime ministerial power and unreasonable party discipline. Executive federalism is still not a major candidate for democratic reform, notwithstanding its democratic drawbacks.

A second major Audit theme is the unrepresentative character of Canadian political élites. The volumes on courts, legislatures, cabinets and political parties note some progress towards leadership that better reflects Canada's socio-economic, ethno-racial, gender and religious composition. Several authors also mention the significant efforts of first ministers to construct more representative cabinets. But to most Auditors, progress is distressingly slow for women, aboriginal Canadians and visible minorities, especially when measured against the broader society and, in some cases, the professions. A related point is the uneven character of Canadian political participation and major differentials in citizens' capacity, willingness and ability to shape public policy. Democracy's formal equality of "one person,



one vote" is challenged by the continuing importance of money, time, advanced education, social status and "networks" as determinants of political participation and political power. Finally, two major points emerge about younger Canadians, whose apparent decline of political interest and participation has evoked much recent concern. First, Canadians under the age of thirty indeed show disinterest, but seldom cynicism, towards democratic politics. Second, better-educated young Canadians are much more likely to be involved and to see politics as a meaningful activity. More precisely, Canadian politics reveal a particular decline of interest and participation by less well-educated younger Canadians.

As a group, the Auditors see little democratic salvation in the Internet or other communications technologies. John Courtney, for example, accepts that Internet voting might, subject to the resolution of complex security issues, be a useful device for making voting easier for disabled persons and the geographically isolated. Beyond that potential, he doubts that Internet voting will increase voter turnout especially among younger voters. The democratic implications of the Internet are well described in *Citizens*, whose authors advance two broad views. The first view, the "mobilization" hypothesis, asserts that the Internet will increase democratic participation, open new avenues and engage disinterested voters. The second view, the "reinforcement" hypothesis, sees the Internet as another avenue of political influence for affluent, well-educated citizens and groups whose voices are already well heard. Gidengil and her colleagues conclude that the preponderance of evidence supports the reinforcement view: "The Internet remains very much a verbal, as opposed to a visual, medium, and users require basic literacy, technology, and language skills in addition to the abilities necessary to sort through the sheer mass of information available" (p. 32). Docherty and Young and Everitt see the Internet as a tool that, if properly used, might somewhat improve democracy. But they are not euphoric about its potential. Moreover, no Auditor proposes a major democratic reform that centres on Internet technology. The Auditors' lukewarm response towards communications technology hints at a noteworthy disciplinary bias of modern political science. Major problems and solutions are thought to be primarily located in the structure of political institutions and established political processes, not in the larger society.

The Audit highlights the impersonality of modern democratic politics. It shows politics for what they have become – complex processes that, broadly speaking, are the preserve of experts and professionals, that are technologically mediated, and that are devoid of direct contact between citizens and government élites. For example, Courtney interprets the National Register of Electors as a dubious reform motivated by naïve faith in technology and one whose broad implications for citizens' relationships with government were not seriously considered:

What is striking about institutional changes that rest on advances in technology is that they often gloss over the socially valid features of the arrangements that are about to be replaced. Such was the fate of door-to-door enumeration. The role that the state played in reminding citizens of an approaching election and of their inclusion among those entitled to vote had a value that is now lost (except in the areas where a targeted revision takes place during the first two weeks of a campaign) in the facelessness of data banks and information transfers among government agencies and departments (p. 99).

Similarly, in *Citizens*, Gidengil and her colleagues note a simple fact – voters who are directly contacted by a political party are likely to vote. William Cross's analysis of modern general elections reinforces the theme. For Cross, elections and many other important aspects of modern party politics are quintessentially the domain of political technocrats, the experts in crafting messages, pronouncing on public opinion polls and shaping public opinion. Communications technologies are increasingly employed, not as vehicles to engage citizens, but as techniques that allow even more precise messages to particular "demographics." The broad implications are not lost on the Auditors, who note the need to better engage citizens and to lessen the distance between citizens and élites. A perennial question remains – can modern, indirect democracy be reformed? Or must it somehow be transcended?

Another major idea traverses the Audit. The idea is that representative democracy, sometimes referred to as "indirect" democracy, will or must remain the centrepiece of the constitutional order.<sup>5</sup> The Audit presents this fundamental notion imprecisely and, despite its importance, without clear argument. Is the point that there are no imaginable options to representative government? Or is the Audit's claim that there are no feasible options, bearing in mind the need for careful definition of "feasible"? Or, in another variation, is the claim that representative democracy should be retained because it has admirable qualities and, by certain criteria, delivers good results overall? A commitment to indirect democracy goes to the Audit's very heart. However, its presentation as either an implicit premise or an assertion is inadequate. Many readers will likely see indirect democracy, even a reformed one, as a debatable proposition, not a given.

A final major Audit characteristic is the diversity of its reform proposals. The Audit excels in presenting different approaches to democratic reform. Three volumes, *The Courts*, *Elections* and *Federalism*, advance a position of "cautious reform." Their authors believe that institutional change should be employed sparingly and only after careful reflection. Caution is dictated by two principal reasons. First, reforms can have major unanticipated consequences. Second, democratic institutions are interdependent and share complex histories that must be understood. Reform in one area will have impact in other areas and will seldom achieve its potential unless other changes

occur. Hence, John Courtney is sceptical about electoral system reform, and Ian Greene urges a careful approach to changes in judicial appointment processes. Jennifer Smith's views about reform are captured in the following remark: "Chapter 7 summarizes where Canadian federalism stands in terms of the audit, and suggests that it could do with a little more democratization. But not a lot more" (p. 10).

Another group of Auditors are "aggressive reformers." Within the boundaries of representative government, they want major changes. Aggressive reformers are not particularly worried about unanticipated consequences or whether their proposals will be immediately embraced. They have a longer-term perspective and ultimately want to change attitudes as a catalyst to major reforms. Hence, David Docherty, who wants much more vigorous legislatures and a different balance between executive and legislatures, urges larger legislatures and greater resources for legislators. His ideal is vigorous legislatures that employ a relaxed notion of motions of confidence, that, for example, elect chairs of important committees, and that are active forces in policy development. Young and Everitt see advocacy groups as public bodies that merit government subsidy and support, a view that will strike many readers as very controversial. William Cross, on the other hand, believes that Canadian political parties are now too dependent on the state. He wants major changes – proportional representation (in contrast to Courtney), parties that engage citizens as policy-thinkers, and leadership selections and nominations that are open to all citizens, not just to party members. The Audit thus presents a panorama of reforms. In doing so, it reflects a major characteristic of Canadian democracy in the millennium. Many Canadians want political reform. However, they define problems differently and embrace conflicting visions of a good democracy.

## **The Canadian Democratic Audit: strengths and weaknesses**

### **Audit strengths**

The Audit epitomizes clarity of presentation and readability. Each volume introduces readers to important ideas, proceeds without jargon and presents complex ideas precisely. A further strong point is the Audit's admirable breadth of coverage in each volume and across the series as a whole. Each book examines the literature, the major debates and the array of reform proposals, both current and perennial. Such observations should not be considered condemnation through faint praise. To the contrary, an enduring criticism of modern social science research is its acute specialization, its often esoteric terminology and its frequent inaccessibility to policy-makers, general readers and other non-experts. In this sense, the Canadian Democratic Audit is an admirable model that will build support for social science

research and bridge the often wide gap between public policy-makers, scholars and public affairs specialists. Its clarity of presentation is a major strength.

A second major strength is the Audit's explicit effort to examine the democratic quality of provincial and aboriginal government, as well as that of the Government of Canada. The volumes *Cabinets and First Ministers*, *Citizens*, *Elections*, *Legislatures*, *The Courts* and *Political Parties* deal at some length with non-national Canadian experiences. This methodology contributes to the Audit's overall quality, relevance and potential policy impact. First, the Canadian experience is shown to be remarkably varied. Reflection on such diversity raises many stimulating questions. For example, why does voter turnout vary between provincial and federal elections in the same province? What general lessons about democratic government can be learned from comparative study of provincial legislatures? Second, as Graham White demonstrates in his study of cabinets, Canada's many variations of the Westminster model reveal the flexibility of cabinet government and suggest interesting reforms. He is particularly interested in the dynamics of cabinet government in the Northwest Territories and in modern western Canada, where he sees interesting changes and a reforming spirit. Under Premier Klein, for example, Alberta employed "standing policy committees," chaired by government backbenchers, as an integral part of the government decision-making process. White notes drawbacks in the Alberta system and its British Columbia variant but sees them as important attempts to engage backbenchers in the public policy process. More generally, he sees deeper involvement of backbenchers in cabinet activities as a desirable reform. Third, if there is any truth to several received wisdoms about Canadian government, the non-national experience merits much more attention. For example, Canadian provincial governments are routinely said to be extraordinarily influential compared with regional governments in other advanced federations and very important to the everyday well-being of Canadians. Why not study them simply on the grounds that they are very important? By the criterion of breadth of coverage, the Audit merits praise.

### Audit weaknesses

The Audit's impact is lessened by serious errors of omission. For one thing, it badly needs a volume that integrates the individual contributions and makes the series a coherent whole. Such a volume would neither summarize individual volumes nor provide an overall evaluation. Rather, it would establish a richer and fuller context. First, a capstone contribution would articulate and justify the Audit's major premises about democracy. As noted, the series' implicit presumption in favour of indirect democracy is unimpressively presented and badly in need of elaboration. Why, for example, is representative democracy presumed superior to deliberative democracy? Why are the

many elements of "direct democracy" not explored more fully? Equally, an overview would establish essential conditions for viable democracy. Second, the overview would reflect on the different approaches employed by contributing authors. For example, John Courtney evaluates Canada's electoral machinery by analysing its development over time, while Darin Barney and Lisa Young and Joanna Everitt outline democratic ideals against which Canadian realities are measured. Which approach is more illuminating? Third, the overview would explain the Audit's emphasis on public participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness as the major democratic values as distinct, for example, from transparency, trust and accountability. Why are these three democratic qualities deemed particularly important in Canada in the early twenty-first century? Fourth, an Audit overview would establish criteria for evaluating the reform proposals nested in the individual volumes. Such criteria would add considerably to the series. They would themselves stimulate interesting debates. How should democratic reforms be evaluated? Arguments about how best to evaluate democratic reforms would also reinforce common themes, show the complexity of democratic reform and, likely, highlight the tradeoffs implicit in democratic life. Finally, an overview volume would raise a matter that, surprisingly, is seldom addressed in the Audit: What are the main obstacles to the reform of democratic institutions and processes in Canada?<sup>6</sup> What combination of circumstances, leadership and institutional characteristics facilitate or impede substantial change? Are there easily achieved reforms that would yield substantial democratic benefits? An overview volume, possibly with the content outlined here, would contribute significantly to the Audit's impact and longevity. It would be the nucleus that is currently lacking.

A full assessment of Canadian democracy in the millennium demands rigorous consideration of Canadian public administration for several reasons. First, the public service is a powerful, autonomous institution that shapes policy outcomes, advises on important initiatives, and delivers vital public services. Its operations contribute significantly, albeit positively or negatively, to the quality of government. Its explicit omission from the Audit leaves unasked an impressive set of fundamental democratic questions. Second, in Canadian government, the public service, legislature and cabinet are interdependent. Governments and the public service also interact extensively through executive federalism. Reforms to the cabinet, legislature and executive federalism thus require careful consideration of the role of the public service. Yet, the Audit grants public administration no status as an autonomous source of power. Third, the Audit is deeply concerned with the representativeness of Canadian élites. However, its omission of the public service limits discussion of an institution with considerable potential, and likely demonstrated accomplishment, in achieving greater inclusiveness. Moreover, debates about "representative bureaucracy" pre-date in several

key ways, contemporary discussions about democratic inclusiveness. Fourth, Canadian public administration has been the object of unrelenting reform for more than two decades.<sup>7</sup> An inescapable consequence of such reform is substantial growth in the complexity of the machinery of government. Many significant public services are now provided to Canadians through semi-autonomous agencies, organizations that blur the boundaries of democratic governments. In most provinces, health care, for example, is delivered through appointed boards of citizens that manage budgets derived wholly from provincial governments. They stand between citizens and governments in uncertain relationships. Governments frequently rely on "public-private partnerships" to build and operate infrastructure. Independent foundations make important public policy decisions and control large budgets yet claim immunity from government direction and political accountability.<sup>8</sup> In a public sector newly populated by such organizations, what does "legislative scrutiny" of governments or accountability mean? Finally, non-partisanship and "government by experts," relevant topics for both public service and democracy, are currently enjoying a renaissance of sorts.<sup>9</sup> How far can either be extended?

The Audit does not examine systematically the growing impact of international organizations, treaties and agreements on Canadian democracy. It envisions Canadian government as primarily shaped by domestic events and circumstances. Yet, international forces now exert major impacts that shape Canadian governments. As Stephen McBride has argued, international organizations and agreements drive a process of "quiet constitutionalism."<sup>10</sup> The powers of legislatures and political executives, the role of government and the balance between federal and provincial governments have been subtly but substantially re-ordered by NAFTA, the World Bank and other bodies. Second, the "democratization" of international organizations, an obvious antidote to growing external influence, raises daunting challenges. As Robert Dahl notes, it embodies all the problems of "domestic" democracy – ensuring wide and open public debate, holding fair elections and establishing proper instruments of accountability – and unique problems of international governance.<sup>11</sup> The latter include ensuring fair representation among countries with very different populations and economic prowess and the embrace of different national political traditions.

### **The Audit and research priorities**

The Canadian Democratic Audit is one of the more ambitious social science research projects to have been undertaken in Canada in recent years. An important, albeit indirect Audit consequence, is the highlighting of strengths and weaknesses of modern Canadian social science, especially political science. The Audit permits reflection on the subjects of scholarly inquiry, the quality of work and the need for new approaches.

Writing in 1974, Alan C. Cairns noted that the major textbooks in Canadian government, as reflections of deeper disciplinary biases, focused on the Government of Canada to the detriment of provincial politics: "The provinces are noted when they supply an interesting precedent, provide an intriguing comparison, or are necessary to a discussion of federalism, but not otherwise."<sup>12</sup> Since Cairns wrote, scholarly research in Canada has changed considerably. Much more research funding is available, universities have elevated research as a priority, and political scientists have certainly expanded their repertoires in some areas. But the study of provincial governments is still underdeveloped, notwithstanding the efforts of a few scholars, several excellent contributions and the insights of several Audit volumes that have already been praised.<sup>13</sup> Major gaps persist in our understanding of provincial and territorial politics. Careful studies of voting behaviour in provincial general elections are seldom undertaken, few comprehensive studies are available on the provincial political party systems or on such remarkably successful modern parties as the Alberta Progressive Conservatives, which has dominated politics in that important province since 1971. Ironically, scholarly neglect of the Alberta Progressive Conservatives stands in stark contrast to the remarkable attention paid to Alberta's former Social Credit government. In the 1950s, Social Credit in Alberta, probably because it seemed to be such an aberration, was examined in an impressive series of books under the general editorship of S.D.Clark.<sup>14</sup> The robust scholarship on Social Credit, while a major exception, highlights the value of intensive scholarly examination of a provincial political system. Provincial legislatures, cabinets and public services are little understood or studied. Creative comparisons across provincial governments or general interpretations of government in a single province, a group of provinces or all the provinces are seldom undertaken. Serious debates about methodologies, concern with alternative approaches, and energetic discussion of research priorities, common signs of vigorous intellectual activity, are not evident in the study of Canadian provincial and territorial governments. Canadian political science's continuing neglect of provincial governments and politics has serious consequences. It impedes deeper comprehension of federal-provincial relations, the substance of public policy in many areas and, more seriously, the totality of the Canadian political experience.

Canadian political science should consider new approaches to the study of political leadership. Considerable work has been done at the federal level on the changing role and power of the prime minister. Peter Aucoin, Bruce Doern and Donald Savoie, to cite several leading commentators, have made substantial contributions.<sup>15</sup> Broadly speaking, Canadian political scientists have noted Canadian variations in the general forces that have increased executive power in advanced democracies, the role of central agencies as particular sources of power and influence, and the changing relationships

among prime minister, cabinet and the public service. The policy-making philosophies of recent prime ministers have been examined. This scholarship has illuminated and stimulated broader societal debate about the "presidentialization" of Canadian government and, more recently, the alleged excessive powers of prime ministers compared to cabinet, legislatures and the public service. As Graham White notes, however, a certain "sterility" begins to surround the debate about prime ministerial power, especially when it is cast as a debate about such power relative to that of other political institutions.<sup>16</sup> Only so much can be said about the matter before diminishing returns are apparent. Martin J. Smith has noted that the comparable British debate about the prime minister has overemphasized the importance of personality and adopted a static and misleading view of power.<sup>17</sup> At least four areas advance themselves for fruitful research. First, political psychology has long thought creatively about political leadership. Its insights might invigorate Canadian leadership studies. Second, the study of the American presidency is substantial, rich in insights and notably diverse in methods employed and conclusions reached. Could its major approaches be feasibly modified to fit Canadian circumstances? Would rigorous comparisons between leadership in different democracies be illuminating? Third, scholars are now examining the blurring line between the worlds of political leaders and celebrities, the growing interaction between celebrities and politicians and the forces that shape such trends.<sup>18</sup> Such work is easily dismissed as faddish, a judgment that might be premature. Witness, for example, the dialogue between Prime Ministers Martin and Harper and various celebrities about Canadian climate control policy. Both prime ministers dealt with celebrity criticism and praise with remarkable speed and directness, almost as if they felt an obligation to respond. Finally, Graham White's contribution to the Audit makes the clear point that Canada has several variations of Westminster government within its borders. More explicit comparisons might yield insights.

Canadian political science has not systematically examined the political power of Canadian business firms, especially larger ones. With several notable exceptions, the discipline has treated business enterprises and industry associations as components of the environment of Canadian politics, as objects of public policy or as one of several interest groups.<sup>19</sup> Such scant analysis is remarkable. Democratic theory, for example, consistently stresses the political power of large corporations as a major, in some variations pre-eminent, challenge to viable democracy. Certain Canadian characteristics, especially reliance on resource extraction through large corporations and efforts to escape such reliance through public policies of economic diversification, raise impressive questions about government-business relations. How do corporations exert political influence nationally, in different provinces and territories and in the larger cities? How do they navigate intergov-



ernmental relations? What do business leaders think about democratic reform? How should political scientists measure business power? Neither the quality of democracy nor the larger pattern of politics can be captured without a much fuller understanding of Canadian business.

## Conclusion

The Canadian Democratic Audit is a major achievement. It offers a wide-ranging, often hard-hitting, analysis of major governance problems and advances interesting solutions. It is noteworthy as a major effort to examine the federal, provincial and aboriginal dimensions of Canadian public affairs. The Audit compels its readers to think deeply about the Canadian condition, to see a broader picture, to acknowledge the interdependence of institutions, processes and policy problems, and, most importantly, to envision better futures.

## Notes

- 1 For an excellent overview, see Paul Thomas, "The past, present and future of officers of Parliament," *CANADIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 287–314.
- 2 For a precise analysis of the issues, see David K. Stewart and Keith Archer, *Quasi-Democracy: Parties and Leadership Selection in Alberta* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).
- 3 See also Graham White, *Cabinets and First Ministers*, pp. 165–66.
- 4 See, for example, D.V. Smiley, *The Federal Condition in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1987), especially pp. 97–9. Summarizing his long-standing critique of executive federalism, Smiley notes, "A more important consideration is that federal-provincial co-operation contributes to secrecy in the governmental process and to the frustration of public debate about important aspects of our common affairs" (p. 98).
- 5 "Whatever the relative merits of representative and direct democracy, a modern state with the geographic scope and population of Canada has no realistic alternative to the representative form" (Cross, *Political Parties*, p. 3). "Elements of direct democracy . . . are emerging in Canada. Even if such practices become more common, however, representative institutions and processes will remain the principal means by which Canadians practise democracy" (White, *Cabinets and First Ministers*, p. 9). "We could move toward direct democracy, wherein everybody governs themselves. This is mirror representation without the mirror. Of course, in modern society this is just not practical" (Docherty, *Legislatures*, pp. 179–80). "Even in a technocratic era that permits telephone or Internet voting, the citizenry as a whole cannot be involved directly on governing on anything other than an intermittent basis" (Smith, *Federalism*, p. 4). "Representative democracy is not going away. The 31.6 million Canadians are not going to engage in a fury of direct self-government" (Smith, pp. 6–7).
- 6 John Courtney raises this interesting matter in his "five-pillar" approach to Canadian electoral machinery. He ponders why the electoral system is the sole pillar that remains substantially unreformed over time. See Courtney, *Elections*, pp. xv–xvi.
- 7 For an excellent overview, see Peter Aucoin, *The New Public Management: Canada in Comparative Perspective* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1995). See also Donald J. Savoie, *Breaking the Bargain: Public Servants, Ministers and Parliament* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).
- 8 See Peter Aucoin, "Independent foundations, public money and public accountability," *CANADIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 1–26.

- 9 For an interesting analysis, see Grace Skogstad, "Who governs? Who should govern?: Political authority and legitimacy in Canada in the twenty-first century," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 5 (December 2003), pp. 955–73.
- 10 Stephen S. McBride, "Quiet constitutionalism: The international political economy of domestic political change," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 2 (June 2003), pp. 251–73.
- 11 For a precise overview, see Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 114–17. See also Jeffry Freiden, *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), especially pp. 459–76.
- 12 Alan C. Cairns, "Alternative styles in the study of Canadian politics," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (March 1974), p. 103.
- 13 Very helpful overviews include Keith Brownsey and Michael Howlett, eds., *The Provincial State in Canada: Politics in the Provinces and Territories* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001), and, more recently, Christopher Dunn, ed., *Provinces: Canadian Provincial Politics*, 2nd edition (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2006). For particular provinces, see R.K. Carty, ed., *Politics, Policy and Government in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996); Alain G. Gagnon, ed., *Quebec: State and Society*, 3rd edition (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2004); Allan Tupper and Roger Gibbins, eds., *Government and Politics in Alberta* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992); and Graham White, ed., *The Government and Politics of Ontario*, 5th edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). See also Dale Eisler's insightful account of policy and government in post-war Saskatchewan, *False Expectations: Politics and the Pursuit of the Canadian Myth* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2006). The Institute of Public Administration of Canada, through its flagship journal, *CANADIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION*, and its substantial publication program, has paid considerable and continuing attention to provincial and territorial government. See, for example, Luc Bernier, Keith Brownsey and Michael Howlett, eds., *Executive Styles in Government: Cabinet Structures and Leadership Practices in Canadian Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); and Evert Lindquist, ed., *Government Restructuring and Career Public Services* (Toronto: Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 2000). Both volumes deal with an important element of public management in provinces and in the Government of Canada. Another very interesting contribution is Barbara Wake Carroll and David Siegel, *Service in the Field: The World of Front-Line Public Servants* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999). This book examines an important administrative and policy question – the role and position of public servants "in the field," that is, those who work beyond the headquarters in the capital cities. Its methodology draws on the experience of employees of the Government of Canada and of each of the provincial governments. See also Robert A. Young, Phillipe Faucher and André Blais, "The concept of province building: a critique," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 4 (December 1984), pp. 783–818.
- 14 The Social Credit series ultimately comprised ten volumes. Several of the books use the Alberta case to raise important general analyses of modern politics. See, for example, C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta: The Theory and Practice of a Quasi-Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), and John A. Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959).
- 15 Impressive contributions include Peter Aucoin, "Organizational change in the machinery of Canadian government: From rational management to brokerage politics," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 19, no. 1 (March 1986), pp. 3–27, G. Bruce Doern, "Recent changes in the philosophy of policy-making in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 2 (June 1971), pp. 243–64, and Donald J. Savoie, "The rise of court government in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 4 (December 1999), pp. 635–64.
- 16 "In Britain, it has been argued that the debate, which reaches back to the 1960s, over the

extent and merits of prime ministerial government is ultimately sterile and unproductive and that there are more analytically useful ways of looking at power relationships within the core executive. The argument is doubtless also valid in Canada" (White, *Cabinets and First Ministers*, p. 65).

- 17 Martin J. Smith, "Prime Ministers, Ministers and Civil Servants in the Core Executive," in R.A.W. Rhodes, ed., *Transforming British Government: Changing Institutions [Volume 1]* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 308–25.
- 18 See, for example, John Street, "Celebrity politicians: Popular culture and political representation," *British Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 6, no. 4 (November 2004), pp. 435–52.
- 19 Important exceptions include William C. Coleman, *Business and Politics: A Study of Collective Action* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), and, more recently, Geoffrey Hale, *Uncasy Partners: The Politics of Government and Business in Canada* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2006).