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Canada's first minority government in twenty-five years may go a long way in restoring the influence of the House of Commons - especially the backbench members of Parliament - in executive policy-making. Indeed, in an unprecedented departure, to avert a possible defeat, Paul Martin's minority government accepted significant amendments from the Bloc Québécois to the Speech from the Throne on October 7, 2004 in Parliament's initial debate. Martin had largely concentrated his well-publicized concern with "the democratic deficit" on how to reform the House: a minority government is certainly a shortcut to greater backbench influence!

Parliament, of course, is *the* essential representative institution so Martin's attention was justified, but Canada's democratic deficit goes much beyond the role of Parliament. Literally every institution in our system of democratic governance – the electoral system, parties, Parliament, federalism, and the public service – as they operate presently, contribute to the democratic deficit. A common thread is that in all these institutions accountability is frayed and confused. We will not cure the "structural" democratic deficit until we eradicate the accountability deficit. The minority government, however, may increase the accountability dilemmas of the public service because of the political pressure that will be exerted to deliver immediate and popular responses to complex problems.

Accountability answers the question, "who reports to whom for what?" It means politically, that those who have been delegated the power to make decisions by the electorate, the prime minister, the ministers, the deputy minister, director-general, etc, must answer for how they have discharged the duties that they have been delegated. Accountability is about responsibility, the responsibility to answer for your actions. In our traditional Westminster system, the electorate confers the formal power to act or be authoritative to members of parliament from whose ranks the governor-general calls on one of the leaders to be prime minister, who in turn is accountable to parliament, and the accountability chain continues with ministers and deputy ministers being accountable to the prime minister, senior officials being accountable to the minister of the department, director-generals being accountable to the deputy minister, and so it goes down the line.

A clearly defined accountability system is crucial to our system of representative democracy because citizens through their vote legitimize or give authority to leaders to act. If citizens do not understand or cannot readily get information on how their representatives have used the power that they have been given, then the legitimacy of the government is deeply affected. Transparent and timely information on who is responsible to whom for what is fundamental to democratic governance. As Adam Przeworski emphasizes in *Sustainable Democracy*:

The conditions under which democratic institutions generate incentives for government to be accountable are quite stringent; they are not met by all institutional frameworks. Governments are accountable only when voters can clearly assign the responsibility for performance to competing terms of politicians, when the incumbents can be effectively punished for inadequate performance in office, and when voters are sufficiently well informed to accurately assess this performance."1

Yet, if accountability is the central spine of democracy, it does not receive much priority from modern Canadian decision-makers. David Good in his study of the great 2000 debate over the audit of grants and contributions of Human Resources Development Canada, writes, "ironically the 'Canadian model' of new public management, operating under the paradigm of the professional public service has not made accountability and performance a primary element." Donald Savoie concurs in *Breaking the Bargain*:

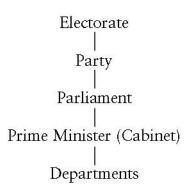
The broad outline of Canada's accountability regime has remained pretty well intact over the years. But everything else has changed. Precious few issues now fit neatly into departmental moulds. As a result, the machinery of government no longer provides clear space to policy actions and to individual public servants to assure policy and program responsibilities. And responsibility is the crux of the problem that needs to be addressed.³

This lack of attention to accountability as an overriding goal of our political system has resulted in many citizens choosing to opt out of the political process. Voter turnout in Canada has declined from 75 percent, the average of elections 1945-1988, to 64.1 percent in the 2000 election, the lowest recorded turnout in a federal election since Confederation.⁴ Preliminary reports suggest that in 2004, turnout fell again to 60.9 percent, despite the closeness of the election. Turnout has declined from 75 percent in 1988 to 70 percent

in 1993 to 67 percent in 1997 to 64 percent in 2000 to 61 percent in 2004. Reasons for nonvoting are complex but there are clear correlations between knowledge, personal efficacy and voting. That is why accountability is at the heart of democratic government. For citizens to be engaged they must have sufficient information to assess performance, they must be able to assign responsibility for performance or non-performance, and then the system must reflect voters' intentions in rewarding or punishing performance. Canada's accountability framework fails these three clear tests: there is not adequate information about performance; there is confusion about who is responsible for what; and the electoral system does not adequately translate votes into seats. One response to this confusion has been that citizens are voting with their feet by exiting the political system. To encourage citizen engagement we must fix the accountability framework.

The Three A's

Authority is the formal power to act, delegated in the Canadian system from the crown to the prime minister but with the crown guided by the results of democratic elections. The crown is the source of authority in Canada but the exercise of the crown's executive prerogatives flows through the prime minister to the Cabinet to the public service thus is indirectly dependent upon the votes of citizens. The preferences of citizens as revealed by an election is the bedrock of democratic legitimacy in our system of government. Therefore the accountability framework must work so that citizens have real choices, and their choices must count for something. The accountability chain in Canada therefore descends from:



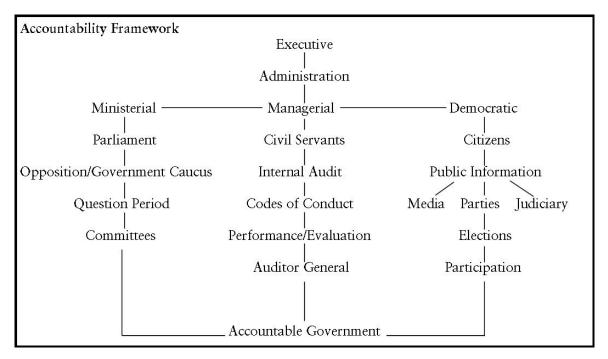
Accountability is the requirement to account for the authority delegated by the legitimate source of authority. In the accountability chain above, citizens have the responsibility to participate, especially by voting; parties have the responsibility to recruit candidates, develop policies and offer a clear direction; the crown has the responsibility to interpret the will of the electorate as reflected through votes for members of parliament in asking a prime minister to form a government, parliament has the responsibility to support or defeat governments; the prime minister and cabinet have the responsibility to use their executive power in administering and creating policies; and the public service has the responsibility to implement efficiently, effectively, and impartially the policies of the elected government. The key to accountability is the exercise of powers delegated from above: public servants, for example, should treat their clients or the public fairly and efficiently but they are not directly accountable to the public. They are accountable to the deputy minister, who is accountable to the minister, who is accountable to parliament, who is ultimately accountable to the people. Who is responsible to who for what is the central question in any accountability framework.

Answerability requires that an account is tendered to those to whom an account is due. Reporting to other people, either voluntarily or by the threat of sanction is an essential component of democracy. But answerability is not the same as responsibility, a critical convention in our ministerial/parliamentary system. Ministers report to parliament and they answer for the actions of their department, but they are responsible only for the policies they promote or the occasional personal administrative foray, not the actions of the thousands of civil servants who serve in their departments. Ministers have the responsibility to inform, to explain and to correct, but they do not have personal liability for every action undertaken by their department. Matthew Flinders, in his study of the British Home Office, outlines this distinction nicely:

Accountability is a process where a person or group of people are required to present an account of their activities and the way in which they have or have not discharged their duties...the difference between accountability and responsibility is culpability.⁵

While accountability involves the obligation to give a reckoning or account, responsibility involves the "liability to be blamed for loss or failure."

There are three distinct kinds of accountability in our political system and confusion is common about the distinctions between them. First, there is democratic accountability, the main emphasis of this article, and this priority involves the ability of citizens to hold decision-makers to account for the power that has been delegated to them. Second, there is ministerial accountability, the convention which forms the cornerstone of our parliamentary system. Parliament holds ministers to account for the policies they promote and for the administrative actions of their departments. Ministers are responsible for some things and answerable for all things. Third, managerial accountability is the province of the senior public service. Officials have the responsibility to ensure that public resources are being used in accordance with the policy goals of the government and deployed in the most efficient and effective manner. Public servants also have the responsibility in carrying out their duties to ensure that laws, policies and guidelines are respected. Democratic accountability enhances the legitimacy of the government, ministerial accountability to parliament polices abuse, corruption and hubris, and managerial accountability identifies where responsibility lies for success or failure leading to improved performance and better outcomes. Mechanisms to ensure these three kinds of accountability are as follows:



Adapted to Canada from Flinders, The Politics of Accountability in the Modern State

While easy to state, the distinctions between the three forms of accountability often get blurred in the heat of politics. Ministers, for example, not surprisingly define their responsibility for actions very narrowly while the opposition calls for resignations at every opportunity, serious or not. In Canada, for example, in the famous al-Mashat Affair in 1991, Joe Clark, Secretary of State for External Affairs, refused to take any responsibility for Iraq's Ambassador to the United States entering Canada in suspicious circumstances, even though his personal office and his Chief of Staff had been kept fully informed by officials. David Good describes how the Department of Human Resources Development undertook a normal internal review of grants to community groups and NGO's for job creation. The department released the information that several of the projects did not have proper documentation only to find to its horror that the media added up all the projects and ran headlines about "a billion dollar" abuse. Managerial accountability quickly became subsumed in a battle over ministerial accountability and the democratic legitimacy of the government.

This relatively minor scandal of 37 dubious cases out of 459 files (which itself raises questions about the responsibility as applied to the answerability of public servants, for the performance of third party providers) took centre stage in the House of Commons for five months in the winter and spring of 2000, and led to 8000 questions being directed to the Minister Jane Stewart. The Department had failed in its paperwork, but it had discovered the problem itself, and as good government demands it had been transparent and released the information itself. But the result was devastating both for the reputation of the minister who had played by the book and the morale and effectiveness of the department.⁸ Politics and parliament ensure that accountability frameworks are not the quiet preserve of logicians trying to measure outputs by technocratic science. They can become playthings in the brutal cockpit of parliamentary debate.

In assessing accountability frameworks, Matthew Flinders posits several tests: they should be based on clear and agreed upon criteria, self-audited, transparent, consistently applied, engender a culture of encouragement, identify where responsibility lies, engage participants in the process and lead to improved outcomes.⁹ But while affirming these norms and the old belief that "public servants need to speak administrable truths to political power,"¹⁰ Good's case example points out how difficult it is to achieve true accountability in modern times because "as public management is increasingly performed in a fish bowl, the media amplify and magnify its dichotomies and contradictions."¹¹

The Sponsorship Scandal

The impact of the al-Mashat Affair in 1991 and the Human Resources debacle of 2000 pale in comparison to the political fall-out resulting from the sponsorship scandal of 2004, but many of the issues are the same. Like the al-Mashat Affair, the minister in charge of Public Works, Alfonso Gagliano, denied liability because he claimed he lacked knowledge. His deputy minister did the same. Like the Human Resources issue of 2000, Public Works did commission an internal audit but the rules were clearly stretched and the department did nothing to fix the problems the audits had revealed until the Public Accounts Committee and finally the Auditor-General brought maximum publicity to bear. But if the minister and senior civil servants were not running the department who was? Chuck Guité?

The Gomery Commission of Inquiry into the questions raised by the November 2003 report of the Auditor-General on sponsorship and advertising has built on the work of the Public Accounts Committee. Testimony to Gomery has revealed that senior public officials ignored several internal complaints about irregularities in awarding ad contracts, and that senior politicians and the Prime Minister's Office had an unusually strong interest in the sponsorship program. Public accountability theory in the Canadian system usually posits that ministers give policy direction and public officials administer but testimony to Gomery raises questions about the involvement of political advisors in policy implementation.

Max Weber, the inventor of modern public administration theory would be aghast because his whole notion of accountability depends upon an ethic of responsibility. C.E.S. Franks has put his finger exactly on the main point: the investigations into the sponsorship affair "identified the crucial factor that allows such problems to happen. Not one of the many witnesses who came before the committee, neither ex-ministers nor public servants, stated, "yes, managing this program was my responsibility, and I am responsible and accountable for what went wrong with it."¹²

Codes of conduct, interlocking structures, and integrity officers are important, but what is even more critical is that people in positions of power take responsibility for their actions. Organizations or collectives don't have moral responsibilities, only individuals do. Understanding the primacy of responsibility is the starting point of accountability. To highlight personal responsibility and to clarify the confusions that the sponsorship scandal so clearly demonstrated, a blue ribbon task force, not a royal commission, made up of notables

such as ex-ministers like Monique Bégin or Barbara MacDougall, distinguished public servants like Gordon Robertson or Arthur Kroeger, and opposition stalwarts like Preston Manning or Deborah Grey, should be given the task of developing accountability guidelines that can be supported by the public service and still receive a buy-in from Parliamentarians. The Treasury Board has already created an internal task force on ministerial responsibility and accountability with the distinguished academic Donald Savoie as a consultant. This work should be reviewed, changed and improved by a delegation of notables whose expertise and reputations would command wide support. These guidelines should be presented to Parliament, debated, and hopefully passed, not as laws but as a sense of Parliament. A clear set of benchmarks will be very useful the next time a sponsorship scandal or al-Mashat Affair comes along.

Parliament

Ministerial accountability to parliament came to fruition in the 19th century when ministers were actually both the policy and administrative heads of departments. C.E.S. Franks in his classic *The Parliament of Canada* describes the concept thusly:

The theory of parliamentary government, as it was developed in the 19th century, was based upon the existence of and linkages between two systems: the representative system which created the elected House of Commons; and the executive system of departments headed and controlled by ministers. The cabinet, with its members being both ministers of government and members of parliament, was the link between the two, and parliamentary control consisted of two key phases, first the assigning of responsibility and authority through statutes and appropriation, and second, accountability through scrutiny in the house and its committees.¹³

Since the 19th century, of course, the scope of government has expanded exponentially and with it executive power. Yet the theory of ministerial responsibility remains as it was first defined in 1850. Parliamentary reform, therefore, has been a handy perennial in Canadian politics and, not surprisingly, when Paul Martin raised the democratic deficit as a major theme of his leadership campaign he began with a six-point plan to reform the House of Commons, based squarely on principles of accountability:

Under our system of representative government, there should be a direct line that runs from the people to their representatives – their member of parliament – and through them to the executive. The problem is, over time that line has become obscured. Unfortunately, the authority of the individual member of parliament has been allowed to erode while the power of the executive has grown steadily.¹⁴

The February 2, 2004, Speech from the Throne reiterated this priority by declaring, "The Government of Canada is determined to return Parliament to the centre of national debate and decision making and to restore the public's faith and trust in the integrity and good management of government." The then House leader Jacques Saada implemented this commitment by introducing on February 4, 2004, a "Democratic Action Plan." The proposals - an independent Ethics Commissioner, fewer three-line whips, better measures to review all estimates, and House of Commons review of government appointments --have begun to be implemented by the Martin government. The October 2004 Speech from the Throne noted that the government would introduce initiatives "including commitments from the last Speech from the Throne, and will build on the work of Parliamentary committees, involve Parliamentarians in the review of key appointments and examine the need and options for reform of our democratic institutions, including electoral reform." Yet, more needs to be done.

Parliament needs sources of expertise and research equal to the executive. The Privy Council Office and the Department of Finance, for example, with no program responsibility have between them 1500-2000 policy experts whose only job is to advise ministers. The 300 members of parliament have only 80 researchers in the Library of Parliament. Each of the major committees of parliament should have a research staff that can develop expertise, percentage, and memory over time. The chairpersons of committees should be paid the same as ministers so that a person of ambition could see a parliamentary chairmanship being as prestigious and influential as becoming a minister. The key to restoring parliament's role in accountability is to have long serving members with expertise and resources.¹⁵

If parliament could create independent research entities reporting to the House rather than the government, parliament could also contribute to reducing the accountability deficit of citizens. The Congressional Budget Office in the United States, for example, is a bi-partisan entity whose budget forecasts and economic analyses are much more reliable than the president's. Governments are so addicted to spin that many

citizens no longer believe what their political leaders tell them. The Economic Council, the Science Council, and the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, all provided an alternate source of policy expertise and public information capability before they were cancelled by the Mulroney government. Parliament should create similar bodies but have them report to and be run by parliament rather than the executive. On democratic accountability, for example, Canadians have gotten used to governments fudging budget figures and manipulating economic data. It is now a commonplace that governments campaign on balanced budgets, only to have oppositions discover once they take office that the deficit is two or three times larger than anyone assumed. Such political sanctioned lying only increases cynicism and voter apathy: an independent prestigious economic forecasting body that could review government budgets and offer impartial views about the assumptions and figures would both serve to educate the public and act as a deterrent to the spin masters.

Managerial Accountability

In recent times the senior managers of the Canadian public service have made two contradictory decisions about the overall thrust of the public service which have added to accountability confusion. First, like most public services, in the mid-1980's the Canadian public service adopted the precepts of the "new public management." Citizens became customers, flexibility, responsiveness and innovation became the prized values, central controls and parliamentary accountability were downgraded. As David Good writes about this period, "the old values of traditional public administration - accountability, political neutrality, anonymity, and consistency – were rubbing up against new values of the new public management - client (for some customers) service, responsiveness, innovation, performance and results." With citizens as customers or clients, departments engaged in an endless series of discussions to see what the client wanted. Decision-making in Ottawa has become a never ending series of consultations between civil servants, client groups, service providers, and of course, lobbyists mostly held in private with no public accountability.

But at the same time as the public service was encouraging managers to be innovative and entrepreneurial, Canada was "at the extreme end of parliamentary systems – even those based on the British Westminster model – in proffering an absolute and hard doctrine of anonymity of the public servant." Clinging to the 19th century concept of ministerial responsibility while endorsing a late 20th century business model of manager empowerment simply does not scan. Indeed, when the Human Resources Department was

criticized in 2000 for grants to community groups for job creation which did not have proper documentation (or less red tape and rules as prescribed by the new public management), then the department did a 180 degree turn and documentation for grants is now more complete, slow and infuriating than it has ever been. The Human Resources Department was playing by the new rules of public management, but parliament was playing by the old rules of ministerial responsibility and the result was a major brouhaha.

While adopting the language of the new public management, Ottawa was also very reluctant to devolve away administrative responsibilities from departments to special operating agencies. In Britain, the "Next Steps" initiative hived off administrative units, and Australia and New Zealand also innovated with private sector models of management to match the private sector values of the new public management. Permanent secretaries in New Zealand, for example, became chief executive officers with fixed contracts and stipulated performance objectives.

Canada must decide whether it will adhere to the 19th century bargain between ministers and the public service or will it truly implement the new public management framework. Either model makes sense, a hybrid does not. Civil servants are told to be flexible innovators on the one hand but parliament and the auditor general remain fixed on rules and "value for money" audits. Civil servants are caught in between. Canada should adopt the British practice of making the deputy minister the accountability officer of their departments - thereby clearly delineating where administrative responsibility should be - and be much more adventurous in creating special operating agencies like the passport office more independent of departments. Ministers must be responsible for policy and deputy ministers for administration and management. Citizens need clear and agreed upon criteria on how best to evaluate the respective performances and then such criteria must be consistently applied.

Democratic Accountability

Authoritative information and analyses from parliamentary institutions would assist voters in judging performance; a clear delineation between the policy responsibilities of ministers and the management responsibility of senior public servants would bring clarity to the internal workings of government. But democratic accountability, the ability of citizens to assign responsibility for performance and to reward or punish performance, also require major changes in the way we organize our elections. Political education

should be a major function of our parties, but it is one they mostly fail. Some parties like those in Germany or Nordic countries devote substantial resources to party think tanks and education foundations. In these European parties, in addition to the hiring of organizers, communications advisers, etc., who report to the party executive, foundations identified with the parties do serious research and policy work based on the party's ideology. These party policy experts contribute to the election platform and engage the public in between elections. With parties in Canada receiving the vast proportion of their finances from taxpayers, voters have the right both to demand that parties conduct their internal affairs according to democratic norms and that they devote substantial resources to idea creation. Some of this taxpayer's money should be used to force our parties to think. At least 20 percent of the taxpayer subsidy should be channelled into independent party foundations, as in the German *stiftungs*.

Elections should contribute to public education as well as government formation. In addition to the party leaders' debate - which focus attention only on the leader, when in Parliament we have a collegial executive - there should be additional national debates based on themes like the economy, foreign policy, social policy, etc., in which designated party spokespeople will debate substantive issues leading up to a leaders' debate. The public airwaves should be used for public education. We should never repeat the shambles of the leaders' debate in the June 2004 election.

Senate reform is a perennial on the Canadian agenda. Given the constitutional amending formula, it will likely never happen constitutionally. But the legitimacy of the Senate could be improved by changing the appointment process in a way that would help the Senate to do even better the very good policy work it undertakes. The Prime Minister should appoint partisan members of the opposition parties to fill at least a third of the Senate. Mr. Trudeau did this, and the system needs opposition senators to fulfill committee responsibilities, etc. Once the partisan balance of the Senate is improved, a certain proportion of senators – say 20 percent – should be nominated from lists of distinguished Canadians (perhaps in a process similar to the naming of the Order of Canada) who could sit as independents or join the party of their choice. We need to continue the tradition of great senators like Eugene Forsey. The senate must be part of the partisan system but its legitimacy would be enhanced if some of its members came from outside political life. If 50 percent of the Senate's appointments were suggested by the opposition parties or an appointments commission, the Prime Minister, at a stroke, would enhance the bicameral strength of Parliament.¹⁹

Government is a never ending series of compromises between different goals and interests. Efficiency, equity, and regional representation have been traditional goals of Canadian governance with only lip service being allocated to accountability. My argument is that accountability – the necessity to account for the use of power – is essential to our system of self-government, itself a sacred thing. In order to exercise the mandate of self-governing men and women, citizens have to understand clearly the choices made by decision-makers and the consequences of those decisions. But in recent years, whether in parliament, or the public service, or in our party system, we have made it more and more difficult to answer the critical question of "who is responsible to whom for what?" President Harry Truman understood accountability when he said, "the buck stops here." In Canada, as the sponsorship scandal has shown, the buck stops nowhere.

A Six-Point Plan to Enhance Accountability within the Life of the Next Parliament

- 1) Establish a small blue ribbon committee of notables to develop accountability guidelines and benchmarks that can be presented to Parliament.
- 2) Designate deputy ministers as the accountability officer of their departments.
- 3) Allocate at least 20 percent of the election spending subsidy to independent party policy foundations.
- 4) Arrange with the networks a commitment to broadcast a series of policy debates between party spokespersons prior to the final leaders' debate.
- 5) Allocate more policy expertise resources to Parliament, starting with the creation of a Parliamentary Budget Office
- 6) Ensure that at least one-third of the senators are opposition senators and that twenty percent are suggested by an independent Appointments Commission with a mandate to suggest names reflecting Canadian diversity and expertise. In effect, one half of the Senate would be nominated by someone other than the prime minister would do much to enhance the legitimacy of the Senate.

Notes

¹ Adam Przeworski, <u>Sustainable Democracy</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 108.

- ² David Good, <u>The Politics of Public Management</u> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 168.
- ³ Donald Savoie, Breaking the Bargain (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 206.
- ⁴ Thomas S. Axworthy, "The Democratic Deficit," <u>Policy Options</u> (December January, 2004), p. 16. Elections Canada has produced a corrected turnout rate for the 2000 election 64.1 percent. The rate has been adjusted to reflect the removal of duplicates from the voters' lists. The final rate for the 2004 election is 60.9 percent (slightly higher than the initial rate provided by Elections Canada).
- ⁵ Matthew Flinders, <u>The Politics of Accountability in the Modern State</u> (Burlington, United States: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2001).
- ⁶ Flinders 12.
- ⁷ S.L. Sutherland, "The al-Mashat Affair: administrative accountability in parliamentary institutions," <u>Canadian Public Administration</u>, Vol. 34(4) (winter 1991), pp. 573-603.
- 8 Good 26-57.
- ⁹ Flinders 1-12.
- ¹⁰ Good 12.
- ¹¹ Good 11.
- ¹² C.E.S. Franks, "Responsibility, Accountability and the Sponsorship Scandal," Canadian Parliamentary Review, Vol. 27 (3) (autumn 2004).
- ¹³ C.E.S. Franks, The Parliament of Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 227.
- ¹⁴ Paul Martin, Speech to Osgoode Law School (October 21, 2002)
- ¹⁵ See Peter Dobell, "Parliamentary Secretaries: The Consequences of Constant Rotations," <u>Policy Matters</u>, Vol. 1(9) (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2000), and "Parliamentary Secretaries: The Consequences of Constant Rotations," *Policy Matters*, Vol. 2(4) (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2000).
- ¹⁶ See Isabelle Fortier, "Skepticism to Cynicism: Paradoxes of Administrative Reform," <u>Choices</u>, Vol. 9(6) (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2003).
- ¹⁷ Good 49.
- ¹⁸ C.E.S. Franks, "Not anonymous: ministerial responsibility and the British accountability offices," <u>Canadian Public</u> Administration, Vol. 40 (4) (winter 1997), p. 627.
- ¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of the role of the Senate, see David E. Smith, <u>The Canadian Senate in Bicameral Perspective</u> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).