

Rocky Beginnings:

Transitions to power and its effects on relationships with the Ontario Public Service

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"Large bureacratic organizations are inherantly resistant to change, no matter how necessary or how inevitable. So it is with the OPS" (White 340)

ABSTRACT

The Ontario Public Service (OPS) and the elected government in Ontario have a long and intertwined history. Their partnership is built on clearly defined and strictly divided roles. Elected government officials develop legislation and policy as representatives of the will of the electorate, while the civil service is tasked with advising governments in creating that legislation and implementing policy programs and laws. However, it has been well-documented that there are often tensions between elected officials and the civil servants in the OPS (Lindquist 2000, White 2000, Constantinou 2013). Though the OPS-government dichotomy has existed for decades, it is still not a perfect system. The reasons for the tensions in this relationship are numerous and complex. I argue that the relationship between the Ontario Public Service and government is more adversarial when a new government party comes to power. I specifically look at the Bob Rae, Mike Harris, and the current Doug Ford Government to prove this.

Research Questions

1. What does the relationship between government and the OPS look like immediately following an election and new political party in power?
2. Are tensions necessary following an election?
3. Are there lessons to be learned from those who have gone through this transition from both sides, and it is possible to make better this transition in order to create policies and service implementation most beneficial to Ontarians?

Methodology

When it comes to the current Ford Government and their relationship with the OPS, in addition to references from pre-existing literature on this topic, I interviewed three deputy ministers (DMs) for this paper. This is a non-random sample of the 26 deputy ministers working for the OPS. I interviewed a deputy minister from large-, medium-, and small-sized ministries.

Why is the relationship more adversarial in a transition?

1. The entire OPS has to learn a new language and develop an understanding of how to work together.
2. They must unlearn the priorities of the previous government and adopt familiarity with new priorities of the government
3. They must let go of past personal and departmental work, projects and goals. There are issues of pride, progress, inertia, resistance, and change.

"It takes a while to build rapport"

(Deputy Minister 2019)

References

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