

**Robert Borden and the Rise of the Managerial Prime Minister in Canada**

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Canadians have long accepted the pre-eminent position of the Prime Minister as party leader, head of government and national leader. While there are constitutional and institutional limits on these varied roles, it is understood that the Prime Minister has extraordinary power within the political party, within Cabinet, within Parliament and within Canada as a whole (Hockin, 1971). Yet when it comes to the implementation of the government's agenda there is less understanding and more unease with the notion of the Prime Minister as "chief administrator." The management and implementation of government policy is often considered to be part of the responsibility of ministers and their officials, which according to the Westminster doctrines of ministerial responsibility, lead to responsible government (Sutherland, 1991). The Prime Minister may set the broad outlines and direction of policy, control the party apparatus, appoint and dismiss ministers and deputy ministers, reorganize government at will and control both the cabinet and parliamentary agenda. Yet when it comes to issues like implementation, administrative reform, human resource management and other aspects of public management the exact role of the Prime Minister becomes more controversial (Gomrey 2004).

It should be noted of course that the Prime Minister has recently become the object of a great deal of both popular and academic criticism about the excessive power that has accumulated in his office (Savoie, 1999; Simpson 2001; Bakvis, 2003). There is a sense that when the Prime Minister exercises political power he is acting in a more or less legitimate role as first among equals, but when he begins to exercise administrative power there is concern about presidentialism (Allen 2001). Yet the distinction between the PM's job as political head and party leader are never entirely freed from his job as

chief administrator, and indeed there has always been more of a continuum between political and administrative matters rather than a dichotomy (Aucoin and Savoie 2009).

The role of Prime Minister has always had a strong managerial component and in some sense they are not only the first minister, but also “administrator-in-chief” of the federal government. The current official job description of Prime Minister is very brief and includes the following from the PCO: “The Prime Minister is the head of the government and chair of Cabinet. The Prime Minister's main areas of responsibility include: providing leadership and direction to the government; organizing the Cabinet, including the composition of portfolios and mandates; and recommending the appointment of individuals to key positions.” (Canada, 2009). Even in this truncated version, the Prime Minister exercises tremendous control over who are in senior leadership positions in both cabinet and the public service and agencies, has control of the organization of departments and administrative offices, control over the creation of crown corporations and appointment to CEO positions and boards are all retained within the prerogative power exercised by the Prime Minister (Smith, 1995; Hinton, 1960). All of these powers of course are clearly administrative and have been exercised aggressively by a succession of Prime Ministers since 1867.

There is really nothing new about the administrative power of the Prime Minister, but what is missing is a discussion of the accumulation of functions associated with the “managerial” aspects of the job and which parts of that role are appropriate and which might be better exercised in other parts of the political system including by parliament, ministers and public servants themselves (Aucoin and Savoie, 2009, 115; Bakvis, 2003). Like many aspects of the organization of government the role of the Prime Minister is

somewhat obscured because of the conventions sounding changing interpretations of the Westminster model of government (Rhodes, et al, 2008). While it is common to talk about the administrative presidency or the managerial presidency in the American context, this is not the case in Canada (Arnold, 1998). There is a feeling on the part of critics that the powerful Prime Minister undermines the balance within cabinet government and notions of collegial decision-making at the heart of the Westminster model of government (Weller, 2003).

It is also important to note that the PM has no department and is not responsible for the actions of departments or the administration of government programs. More specifically, he is not responsible for administrative errors the way the other cabinet ministers are. Yet this obscures as much as it clarifies. This paper will argue that the Prime Minister has always had a predominant role as an administrator and this role has grown over time. While the Clerk of the Privy Council is head of the public service, something only recently acknowledged in statute, he is not the chief administrative officer of government in the way the Prime Minister is. Just as true however, is the fact that this role is increasingly recognized as being extraordinarily powerful and many of the changes introduced recently in the name of greater accountability designed to “reign in” government are in effect limits to the discretionary power of the Prime Minister over administrative matters.

This paper will examine the development of the Prime Minister’s role as a manager by focusing on the premiership of Robert Borden who will be described as Canada’s first “managerial Prime Minister”. The argument will focus on Borden’s attitudes toward the management of government, administrative reform, support for his

own decision making, relations with cabinet and cabinet decision making, and civil service reform. Since Confederation each successive Prime Minister has added to the roles, responsibilities, and apparatus at their disposal and these changes come to bind his successors. A Canadian Prime Minister is not as lonely institutionally as an American President, and likewise he does not need to be as persuasive as the President to get the agenda approved by the legislature. However, implementation is another matter and while Prime Ministers always have a concern about controlling decisions, beginning with Robert Borden they became increasingly focused on successful implementation of these decisions.

Robert Borden is perhaps best known for his attacks on patronage and championing of the merit system as essential steps along the path to a reformed public service and he eventually achieved these goals in the final year of his time as Prime Minister. In championing of the need for good administration, Borden was a classic progressive era reformer. In the words of historian Michael Bliss he was “a non-politician with high ideals about public service and the need to clean up government, (he) was temperamentally far more in tune than Laurier with the reform voices” (Bliss, 1991, 67). Yet what Bliss points out is a central tension within the role of Prime Minister. That is, Laurier should not be criticized for simply being short-sighted in his desire to politicise the public service and ignore the opportunities presented by an expert public service. Putting short-term political gain as a priority is not an entirely irrational choice for a politician and it is a strategy that most PMs must embrace if they hope to succeed. The argument pursued in this paper is that, beginning with Robert Borden, there was a new attempt to ensure that the administrative apparatus was not only responsive to political

direction as was the practise under the Macdonald/Laurier system, but was also capable of providing advice and support in and making decisions in the national interest. Borden was one of the first prominent politicians of any party to advocate the view that what politicians needed to help them fulfill their political mandate were arm's length agencies, including the public service, which would recruit and deploy neutral expertise. Borden and those that represent this line of thought up to the current day believed that if we attract more talented Canadians, recruit the "best and the brightest" and give them official independence and autonomy, we can have a real pursuit of the national interest (Dawson, 1922; Sossin 2004). The current paper is not about the rise of the overreaching PM, although Borden did increase the power of the PM considerably, but rather it is about the rise of the PM as someone who must take management issues seriously and who must accept responsibility for implementation and not only decision-making.

The current debates about the power of the PM in relation to ministers, the public service to parliament however are not new and have been in existence since Confederation (Bakvis, 2001). Borden is arguable the first Prime Minister in Canada who actively engaged in this managerial role and championed the reform of the public service. He tried to understand and promote the values of competent management, and increased the number of organizations with autonomous decision making authority freed from partisan influence. Borden did not see his role as manager exclusively in terms of making the executive branch amenable to political control or "responsiveness" to various clamouring constituencies. The in a real sense Borden was the beginning of a long struggle to find an acceptable balance between the values of political responsiveness on

the part of the public service and the undeniable value of independent, neutral expertise that would help government achieve its goals.

### **Robert Borden: The Move to a Managerial Executive**

Robert Borden recognized the tremendous challenges that a Prime Minister faced in the Canadian system of government and often complained of the excessive burden of decision that rested with him. This was not merely an idle complaint either. His health suffered at various stages in his career requiring extended periods of rest from exhaustion (Cook and Belanger, 2007, 202). In his memoirs, he noted that the “duties and responsibilities of a political leader in the Federal areas of Canada are exceeding onerous whether the party be in power or in opposition” (Borden, 1938, 75.). Adding to this burden was the fact that he had few formal organizational supports as do modern PM in the form of a powerful PCO and PMO.

Critics of the recent increases in the power of the PM do acknowledge that the PM has a legitimate role to play in the organization and management of the executive branch. In this desire to improve the management of government, Robert Borden was no different than any of his successors. He wanted to improve the quality of government decision-making and administration and in particular he wanted to find an effective balance in the administrative system in Canada. More than anything else, Robert Borden was unequivocal in wanting to ensure that the administrative system was not only politically responsive to the government of the day as his successors had been, but was also administratively competent. What he sought was some balance between expert advice and competent administration on the one hand and while trying to preserve the

notion that the administrative apparatus will be responsive to the PM's political preferences on the other hand.

It is safe to say that Robert Borden was Canada's first PM, and perhaps only PM, with a serious interest in public administration. He also had a philosophy of administration which would guide him through much of his political career. Borden was a reformer but he was a reformer in the progressive era mould who believed that administrative reorganization and neutral competence were keys to moving the nation away from the stagnant and corrupt Macdonald/Laurier model and towards a new more modern form of government and administration. He was a pragmatic reformer, who came to government convinced that Canada needed a more coherent administrative structure and a more competent and able cadre of administrators. Borden understood that Canada's challenges had grown quicker than the government's ability to effectively respond. Whether it was a national railway commission, a reformed public service, improved working conditions for workers, non-partisan procurement, or an arm's length utilities commission the administrative answer was always to bring competent and able people into government and give them enough independent authority to carry out their duties in the pursuit of the national interest. He wanted to create new organizations that were focused on goals, favouring a decentralization of decision making to independent units. But Borden was also aware of the pressure of different clientele groups for better administration and wanted to do something about this pressure for some very practical political reasons as well.

Borden's interest in improved management and better administrative structures was based on a belief that the government of Canada was too weak to deal with its

growing social, political and economic changes. While private institutions were gaining in strength in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and increasing in both size and power, government was being overwhelmed and needed to be able to effectively respond. This meant that government itself needed to be stronger, and required some new governmental organizations, it needed more economy and efficiency in services and the PM needed to make more decisions armed with better advice and in a more timely manner. Borden inaugurated what can be called the “structural era” of administrative reform in Canada based on a diagnosis of government’s internal problems which usually required an organizational response to these new problems.

Borden was fortunate in one sense in that he was living in a time of increased public support for government activism and he promoted this notion of a more active government in a variety of contexts to various constituencies. But with high levels of support for an active government, there was a sense that, given the scandals in the past and the obviously lack of competence in much administrative decision-making, that a new more neutral and competent organizational apparatus was a pressing need. Of course as noted above, there was an expectation that this new more competent and effective apparatus would bring political benefits to the existing government from a variety of grateful constituencies, but the primary motivation for Borden was a form of nation building and public spiritless associated with his generation of public leaders.

At its core, Borden’s administrative philosophy was rooted in the idea that the public interest could be better served by creating administrative agencies with independence from the political system. His support of the merit system would make competence rather than political allegiance, the criteria for administrative office, and a

decentralized administrative structure in which key functions would operate in isolation from the political storms of parliament. Borden chose a structural response. As new problems arose, he created new structures to deal with them. Whether it was railways, public utilities, a tariff commission and so on, institution building at the national level began under Borden and was considerably accelerated by his successors.

Of course, Borden was never someone who wanted to see experts impose some form of artificial rationality on the political world. He was always a strong believer in democratic institutions at the head of this apparatus while acknowledging the inevitability of a large administrative apparatus in the service of national goals. He never went as far as many progressive reformers who wanted to find technical solutions to political problems (Weibe, 1966). Borden always wanted democracy, in his case representative and responsibility democracy, but always an efficient democracy capable of implementing his reform agenda. This is why he was such a powerful voice against the destructive role that patronage played in the public service.

It would be wrong to describe the problems faced by Borden as problems of the bureaucratic state – those awaited his successors who would have to engage in reforms that grew out of his strengthening of the institutions of public management. Rather, the problems he faced were related to the way officials were appointed and the need to create non-corrupt and effective organizations. Later PMs would come to see this as a problem that needed to be corrected (Savoie, 1995). The rise of the bureaucratic state which had substantial discretionary power was something for his successors to worry about. Borden saw his job as creating an efficient and dynamic public sector capable of responding to mounting challenges.

## **Robert Borden as Administrative Reformer**

Robert Borden was both a product of the progressive era and a leading advocate for progressive era reform in Canada. Initially, he used his dominant position as leader of the Liberal/Conservative Party to advocate for reform and he did this beginning with his renowned Halifax platform prior to the 1908 general election. Borden was clearly interested in reform and civic uplift and was committed to the idea of independent and neutral public service. In his very first speech to the House of Commons upon being elected in 1896, he brought up the themes of reform noting that “I deplored and attacked the evils of the spoils system and defended the right of public officials to make their voices known and their influence felt with the same freedom as other voters but subject to the necessary considerations of official duty and discipline.” (Borden, 1938, 47). An early champion of the rights of public servants, Borden would spend his career trying to bring about a stronger voice for public servants. In the end, he would succeed.

This party platform for the 1908 election was put together largely based on his own progressive inclinations and those of his trusted advisors which would include a number of successful province premiers. This platform would be a manifesto for his managerial thinking throughout his career. It is not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that this platform would serve as a guidebook, his “Red Book” if you will, until he left office in 1920. Yet it needs to be noted that this 1908 election platform was never that popular with Canadians, or for that matter even among large swaths of his own party, but he insisted on it and used it to guide two elections, one he lost in 1908 and won the next in 1911. However, his victory in 1911 was less a result of the popularity of this platform

than was from voter weariness with the Laurier Liberals and the divisive nature of the reciprocity debate.

Robert Borden's 1908 platform is perhaps the most crystallized version of his vision of reform and in particular administrative reform. This platform made clear that he was a champion of the principle of strong executive leadership and it would consist of the following elements.

1. Honest appropriation and expenditure of public moneys in the public interest.
2. Appointment by Merit: Appointment of public officials upon consideration of capacity and personal character and not party service alone.
3. Honest Elections: More effective provision to punish bribery and fraud at elections, to ensure thorough publication as to expenditures by political organizations, to prevent the accumulation of campaign funds for corrupt purposes and to prohibit contributions thereto by corporation, contractors and promoters....
4. Civil Service Reform: A thorough and complete reformation of the laws relating to the Civil Service so that future appointment shall be made by an independent commission after competition.
5. Reform of the Senate: Such reform in the mode of selecting members of the Senate as will make that Chamber a more useful and representative legislative body.
6. Immigration: A more careful selection of the sources from which immigration shall be sought, a more rigid inspection of immigrants...
7. Public Land and the Franchises of the People: The management and development of the public domain (in where are to be included great national franchises) for the public benefit and under such conditions that a reasonable proportion of the increment of the value arising there from shall inure to the people?
8. Non-Partisan Management of Government Railways: The operation and management of our government railways by an independent commission free from partisan control or influence.
9. National Ports, Transportation and Cold Storage: The development and improvement of our national waterways, the equipment of national ports, the

10. A Public Utilities Commission: The reorganization of the present Railway Commission as a Public Utilities Commission with wider powers and more extended jurisdiction so as to establish through and effective control over all corporations owning or operating public utilities.
11. Public Telephone and Telegraph: The establishment after due investigation of a system of national telegraphs and telephones under conditions which has to be just to capital already invested in those enterprises.
12. Improved Postal Facilities: The improvement of existing postal facilities, especially in newly developed portions of the country and the inauguration after proper inquiry as to cost, of a system of free rural mail delivery.
13. Provincial Rights: The unimpaired maintenance of all power of self-government which has been conferred upon the provinces of Canada under the Constitution.

This is a remarkable list and has a tremendous amount of contemporary relevance.

While he was not successful in the 1908 election which saw the Liberals under Laurier survive on the basis of their promises around the railways. It did begin the process of articulating a serious administrative reform agenda in Canada. Borden, in the run up to the 1908 election, engaged in a campaign called “purity in politics” in which he attacked the corrupt Liberal government and damned the abuse of patronage and influence it had within the public service for partisan purposes.

Borden was part of a new movement, which at least since the first few years of the new century was beginning to be increasingly frustrated with the poor quality of public administration in Canada. He was interested in expanding the national government's control over areas that needed national leadership. He championed numerous commissions, boards and public corporations. He also introduced federal

income tax and initiated the use of progressive income tax, shifting the government's reliance on the tariff to income tax. Reformers like Borden who were serious about civil service reform would have concurred with John Willison, Wilfrid Laurier's first biographer, who observed at the time that "there is surely a crying need for reform of the Civil Service in Canada and the protection of honest and efficient public officers from the spoils element which corrupts and bedevils the administration of public affairs." (Willison, 1907-08). Borden felt that the public service was being harassed by selfish, ignorant, and short-sighted politicians. What he called for was the complete reform of the personnel system, which would strengthen the hand of the public service through an emphasis on utility and meritocracy, thereby protecting the guardians of the public interest. Borden, along with other reformers, now sought a new *Civil Service Act* that would "take every place from top to bottom out of the hands of the politicians who, both at Ottawa and Toronto, have shown themselves so unworthy of being trusted with the power." (Marshall, 1906, 159). The goal was to free the bureaucracy from the grasp of rapacious (Liberal) politicians which made it necessary to strengthen the public service. Such reform would have to take place even if it meant weakening a fundamental pillar of responsible government: ministerial responsibility to Parliament. Indeed, the creation of the Civil Service Commission, as envisioned by Borden at least, implied, and indeed required, that Cabinet relinquish some executive control and that Parliament accept less than complete accountability. Such were the feelings surrounding the need for strong action that when the time came to debate the proposed legislation neither Cabinet nor Parliament balked at the idea of losing some of their authority. (Julliet and Rasmussen, 2008). However, Borden went further than anyone in this and noted in the debates about

the legislation for a new *Civil Service Act*, that “it would have been much wiser to have framed the measure so as to give the members of the Civil Service Commission an absolutely independent status similar to that enjoyed by the Auditor General.” (Canada, 1908). Yet it was clear that the commissioners would be granted a great deal of autonomy and independence which, while not always used by some of the early commissioners, turned out to be an essential feature for the creation of the professional public service (Julliet and Rasmussen, 2008).

Borden was willing to accept independence for the CSC because he recognized the need for growth in government activity and he was himself a forceful advocate for increased government ownership. There was recognition that development of an industrial infrastructure demanded “expert knowledge and technical efficiency of the highest order, with a force trained and organized to handle such intricate questions.” (Magrath, 1913, 248). The acceptance of a growing state made efficient by the widespread use of experts may be taken as perhaps the first modern example of the Canadian willingness to use the state to provide direction and assistance to the limited industrial economy that existed at the time. Whatever the reasons, there was a growing consensus that the public service needed to be increasingly independent from the government of the day. The "accumulation of public business" was a natural and progressive state of affairs; the reforms were simply intended to handle public business more effectively. Thus Borden’s motivation for championing public service reform was motivated not only by a sense of moral outrage, but also by economic interests, by the business community, which wanted the public service to be better able to manage the economy in the interests of business(Whitaker, 1987). There was a general belief that

Canadian governments, at all levels, were incompetent and inefficient, that the public was by-and-large ignorant, and that there was thus a need for a new force that could deal effectively with the various problems facing the state (Owram, 1986, 41).

Administrative reform would eventually come to Canada at the end of a two-year parliamentary session between 1906 and 1908 in which the Liberal government came under constant attack from Borden who hoped to expose the corruption in the ongoing administration of the government at the time and its inefficacy to move forward. There were new demands for new social and economic policies, but both parties were hesitant to act, partly due to the inadequacy of the machinery of administration at the time. But Borden had decided to put the full weight of his party into a new tactic aimed at discrediting the Laurier government (Brown, 1975, 120). The Conservatives ran a “purity in politics” campaign and continued it throughout the remaining session of Parliament until the general election at the end of October 1908. Of this time one contemporary observer noted that “it was a stormy Session and filled with angry debate and prolonged discussion and personal charges; it was a scandal Session teeming with Opposition allegations of corruption and maladministration.” (Canadian Annual Review, 1908, 28).

This session summed up what had become clear to Borden and to a growing number of Canadians as well: the public service was corrupt and ineffective due to patronage appointment. The Liberal Party, like the Conservatives before them, had lots of supporters continually clamouring for jobs, and private firms expecting rewards for their donations. One of Laurier’s early biographers noted that the governing party would not only fill all the postmaster, excise officer and other jobs, but participate in activities well

beyond: “Supplies must be bought from firms on the patronage list, subsidy hunters, contracts seekers found the way smoother if they subscribed to campaign funds.”

(Skelton, 1921, 270). Indeed the distribution of patronage, broadly defined, had arguably become the most important function of government. It was noted at the time that:

Sir Wilfrid frequently repeated the story of Lincoln, asked during a crisis in the Civil War whether it was a change in the army command or complications with foreign powers that wrinkled his forehead, and replying, No it is that confounded postmastership at Brownsville, Ohio. No other subject bulked so large in correspondence; no other purpose brought so many visitors to Ottawa. It meant endless bombardment of ministers, ceaseless efforts to secure a work from the friend of a friend of the premier, bitter disappointment for the ninety and nine who were turned away (Skelton 1921 270-71).

The move to end this system began in 1907 under relentless pressure from Borden because of the scandals. The Laurier government eliminated all patronage lists for suppliers. An Order-in-Council was passed requiring that timber licences be granted only at public auction and new Elections Act forbid companies from contributing campaign funds and set heavy fines for ballot tampering.

Borden continued to worry that the accumulation of problems related to industrialization, immigration, urbanization and ongoing scandals were making Canada increasingly ungovernable. In response to the relentless pressure the Laurier government created a royal commission headed by John Courtney, the Deputy Minister of Finance. (Canada, 1908). The Courtney Commission was to be the most thorough inquiry to date of the public service and it strongly dissented from the Laurier government’s view that the civil service was satisfactory; it instead recommended the complete repeal of the

existing Act. It stated what nearly everybody knew: that patronage was alive and well in the civil service.

The Courtney Commission noted the litany of abuses that the previous inquiries had observed and made many of the same recommendations. The most far-reaching were that "the service should be entirely free from political favouritism or patronage; that appointments should only be made by merit after competitive examination; and that for that purpose, a permanent Commission of three officials should be created to deal with the question of the service; that this Commission should be entrusted with all examinations in connection with the service; that they should cause different examinations to be made in the different subjects required by the several classes employed in the Civil Service." (Canada, 1908, 45). It emphasized that "the principle should never be lost sight of that promotion and pay should in every case depend on individual merit, and that, therefore, every individual in the service should, as it were, be under continual appraisal and be eligible for promotion to any position in any division of the service." (Canada, 1908, 16). It wanted to make the civil service a career open to talent and representative of the best in Canada. "When a young man of great efficiency, who gives indication of force of character, appears it is surely to the advantage of the country that it should get the full benefit of his capacity as soon as possible. To secure this he should have swift promotion instead of having obstacles thrown in his course by narrow official regulations and limitations." (Canada, 1908, 45). Like other voices for reform at the time, the Courtney Commission was most interested in creating an accountable administration, not more parliamentary oversight. It believed that strengthening the civil service would result in responsible administration.

The passage of civil service reform legislation took place in the lead-up to a federal election that was held on October 28, 1908, which the Liberal Party won again, albeit with a reduced majority. Even though the election was fought on the Liberal Party's substantial record of scandal and Borden campaigned aggressively on clean government and a commitment to greater public ownership, the Liberals still prevailed. Once the election was concluded, not surprisingly the government went on to other matters and lost interest in reform of the public service. But the first pillar of administrative reform was created and it did begin its work to improve the quality and professionalism of the public service of Canada, albeit with limited jurisdiction for the Inside Service, that is, the Ottawa-based public service. The reform created had a strong legislative basis for a civil service with the autonomy needed to be attractive to experts but also the autonomy to work in the national interest.

While Borden took pleasure in the creation of the new Civil Service Act it would be another four years before he could begin to implement his much more ambitious reform agenda. But with the election of 1911 which ended the rule of the by then tired, and demoralized Liberal party, Borden became Prime Minister and he began to plan for his reform agenda. In order to bring some coherence to government he wanted to engage in a comprehensive review of the organization of the government of Canada including the way in which cabinet operated and the way in which services were delivered. While Borden was the first Canadian Prime Minister to do this at the beginning of his term, it is now something of a tradition in the US as well as in Canada with a host of inquiries and reform suggestions coming on the heels of new elected governments.

In order to bring the coherence needed Borden followed his own advice and hired an experienced British public servant on what needed to be accomplished in Canada. This report was commissioned quickly after coming to office was released in 1912 (Murray, 1912). This report was written by an expert and an outsider in this case an established British civil servant, Sir George Murray, who was familiar with the ideas of liberal reform and who was soon to serve on the justly renowned Haldane Commission in Britain which established the working relationship between public servants and politicians to help government meet the more complicated requirements of more active governments. The idea was to create a mutually interdependent relationship between public servants and ministers.

This report made five major recommendations about how the executive should be organized, but in the end went much further than Borden had anticipated, perhaps giving him his first glimpse at the dangers associated with bringing outside expertise in the service of government. First, beginning at the top of the hierarchy, Murray noted that there was a bottle neck at the level of Cabinet. “Almost every decision of a Minister, even of the most trivial importance, is thus, at least in theory, brought before his colleagues for the purpose of obtaining their collective approval, which is necessary for its validity.” (Murray, 1912, 8). The requirements of collective responsibility, as they had developed at that time in Canada, required this type of approval in order to safeguard individual ministers and party rule. However, Canada had grown so much since Confederation and particularly during the Laurier Boom” that a system of this sort would cause serious difficulties for efficient government. Given this, Murray argued, “many of the powers now vested in the Governor in Council should, by some process of

devolution, be transferred to individual Ministers.” (Murray, 1908, 8). What Murray apparently wanted was a more decentralized form of Cabinet decision-making which emphasized strong ministers in the classic model associated with cabinet government.

Even more important was Murray's second point which suggests that devolution should also occur within the department itself. That is to say, the routine matters should be left to the administrative staff of each department. "The business of a Minister is not to administer, but to direct policy. When a Minister has laid down a line of policy to be adopted in his Department, the carrying out of this policy, or in other words, the administration of the Department should be left to his subordinates.” (Murray, 1908, 9). For Murray, this was the first and soundest principle of management in the public sector. While it placed greater responsibility in the hands of the deputy minister and other senior bureaucrats it meant only that greater care would have to be exercised in recruiting senior civil servants. This point is extremely important in that it formally recognized the separation of administration from politics which is crucial for development and acceptance of the CSC.

Murray's third major concern focused on the administrative methods of the various departments, particularly the chief spending departments. First, he expressed a concern with how the appointments were made. He vigorously argued for the continued expansion of the two-tier system, which at this time prevailed only in Ottawa. Under it, those with a university education would be recruited for the higher posts and those with a high school education would be recruited for a lower division. He believed there was a strong need to have a stricter standard for the higher division to attract men with good qualifications and ability. Likewise, it was essential to offer sufficient career

inducements, such as attractive salaries and quick promotions, to keep talented individuals in the civil service.

With regards to promotion, Murray believed that it should be entirely in the hands of the deputy and the minister. The Civil Service Commission should be permitted to maintain their role in making initial appointments, but should have no role in making promotions. Selecting candidates for initial appointment is one thing; "The duty of adjudicating on the merits of officers whom it is proposed to promote from one grade to another is an entirely different one." (Murray, 1908, 37). The Commissioners should confine their activities to selecting candidates and allow the job performance of the individual to attest for their suitability for promotion. Murray simply felt merit was better judged by those closest to the individual, as opposed to a remote examination. He also felt that the deputy should be the administrative head of the department which would require the control of most personnel functions, including promotions. This was to be an endlessly repeated point, and something that would be core to the ongoing critiques of the Civil Service Commission in the decades to come.

Murray's fourth point pertains to a problem that has endured for years, superannuation. He urged that some "system of securing retirement is absolutely essential if the public service is to be maintained in a satisfactory condition." (Murray, 1912, 18). For all the obvious reasons Murray proposed the introduction of a pension plan that would require all individuals in the civil service to retire at the age of 65. By ridding the civil service of the aged, you make room for younger and more energetic candidates.

Murray's final point extols a dominant feature of the reformed civil service. The requirement of executive control over expenditures coupled with parliamentary scrutiny of the executive. Murray acknowledged the existence of both forms of expenditure control: "the control exercised by the Government over its own Departments; and the control exercised by Parliament over the proposals of the Government." (Murray, 1912, 10). But he recognized that due to party discipline the Government will generally get its estimates or money bills passed. Therefore, "the control of public expenditures must depend almost entirely on the Government of the day." (Murray, 1912, 10). Given that the Minister of Finance is responsible for raising revenue, the task of controlling expenditure should naturally devolve to this department which needs to press for economy.

With this understanding, Murray suggested that a more formal system be instituted which would allow the Department of Finance more time to criticize each proposed expenditure; on the other hand the departments would now have to justify these proposed increases. This, of course, foreshadows the role that the modern Treasury Board would assume in the mid-1960s. In addition, he suggested a system in which the Department of Finance would become a management board of cabinet overseeing the expenditure of other departments and requiring them to justify their proposed increases. In short, he wanted to make the Department of Finance the first central coordinating agency of government, ensuring economy and efficiency on top of its political scrutiny of departmental expenditures.

The thrust of Murray's report was in line with the philosophy of the British government at the time. The greater devolution of authority from cabinet to ministers,

and from ministers to their departmental staffs, greater deputy control over personnel and administration, a strong career service recruited through rigorous examinations, and superannuation are all classic principles of this creed. If the report had been implemented in its entirety, it would have created a new type of civil service requiring a new type of administrative responsibility that emphasized merit over patronage, administration over politics, and autonomy over subservience and an enhanced role for the minister.

This report however was not implemented and was a disappointment to Robert Borden, the champion of administrative reform. This is surprising in that this report revealed a strong utilitarian tendency that should have appealed to Borden: streamline the machinery of government, reaffirm the orthodoxy of ministerial control; centralize financial control; and reform personnel policies along the lines of the Northcote/Trevelyan report (Wilson, 1981, 329). In short, it represented the orthodoxy of early twentieth century liberal reform. Yet Borden did not act after it was table partly because his government was absorbed in the navel controversy, which was then followed by the outbreak of the First World War, which diverted his attention (Borden, 1938, 391). But Borden was scared by the sweeping nature of the report as well as by its practical and impractical recommendations. Borden was taken aback by the fact that Murray had strayed from purely administrative matters and talked about things like devolving authority to cabinet ministers and deputy ministers, the abolition of the Treasury Board, and the control of expenditures and appropriations by the Department of Finance. Borden, ever cautious, simply thought this was too sweeping a set of reforms. When it came to strictly civil service matters, Borden objected to taking any authority away from the Civil Service Commission and giving it to deputies, particularly promotions and

stricter distinctions between the various classes of the civil service. Borden noted in his memoirs that Murray “probably did not fully appreciated the consideration that had induced Sir John A Macdonald in the early days of Confederation to bring many matters of administration and especially of expenditure with the ambit of the Governor-in-Council’s control” (Borden, 1938, 391-2). It appears from his reaction that Borden was no more interested in classical cabinet government than any of his successors have been. Likewise it also appears that he really did see himself as administrator in chief.

Borden did not implement the recommendation of the Murray commission but he did move towards the establishment of many arms length agencies which remained under his control. He created an Archives Act which removed the national archives from the department of Agriculture where it had no particular relationship thus it “was proposed to introduce a Bill known as the Archives Act which would provide for the administration of the archives under the President of the Privy Council: the Bill passed without discussion on January 23<sup>rd</sup>.” (Borden, 1938). Likewise, he passed a Bill creating a Tariff Commission which would create a board that would obtain and collate information to help the government make new tariff laws. But this would not detract from government responsibility for making tariffs and this commission was not to be used to minimize government responsibility. “The proposed Commission was to consist of three members, appointed by the Governor-in-Council for a period of five years from the date of appointment, the duties and responsibilities of these officials were then detailed by the Minister” (Borden, 1938, 39).

There was also a very large increase in the administrative power of the PM when he passed a very important law at the end of his term called the Public Service

Rearrangement and Transfer of Duties Act. This Act allowed cabinet to transfer any powers, duties, functions, or the control or supervision of any part of the public service from one minister of the Crown to another minister of the Crown or from one department or portion of the public service.”. While this would come to be a problem and would eventually see the executive make changes so that it would make these sorts of changes without tabling these documents in the House of Commons. According to Hodgetts this was a crucial development as it appears that Parliament gave, “carte blanche to the executive to initiate major organization changes, subject only to rather ineffectual ex post facto control by way of insisting that any orders issued under the act after tabling can be debated and theoretically reversed” (Hodgetts, 1975, 60).

Unfortunately “events” overcame Borden and undermined his reform agenda. The naval controversy, the start of the First World War, the financial collapse of the railways, all pushed his reforms to the back burner. Indeed, the gross mismanagement of the War effort by the public service only underscored the desperate need for reform in Canada. (Rasmussen, 2000). Borden managed to strengthen the public service with the passage of a new public service act in 1918, and ordered the reorganization of the public service including a new classification structure which for better or worse would last for decades. (Roberts, 1996). His reformist and progressive credentials are further burnished by his decision to extend the electoral franchise to women and ending the practice of conferring honours to Canadians such as peerages and knighthoods. Borden also vastly increased the use of the order in council while some critics saw this as an undemocratic tool it also clearly expanded the power of the executive and the Prime Minister.

One final note about Borden's own sense of his legacy as an administrative reformer can be found in his defence of his legacy as an agent of reform. Political Scientist R. McGregor Dawson tended to be quite dismissive of Borden's role and this irritated and outraged (Dawson, 1929). In a presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association Borden noted that: "I may be pardoned for observing that Professor Dawson has almost wholly ignored any share that I had in promoting the cause of reform, except to paint an unpleasing and quite inaccurate picture of my attitude and outlook" (Borden 1931, 6). Borden would go on to note that the "academic critics usually lack the knowledge or imagination to realise the difficulties, complexities and limitations that enter into the environment of the political leader... Untried virtue is always impeccable" (Borden 1931, 6). Borden would take the time to correct the record on his role as an administrative reformer and argue before a group of academics that he had been and remained a champion of reform and that he more to further the cause of professional public administration than his predecessors is probably enough by itself to earn him the title of Canada's first Managerial Prime Minister.

### **Conclusion: Borden and the triumph of neutral competence**

Prior to Robert Borden there had been a long tradition in Canada of seeing the reform of the public service as something that would end corruption and the problems of incompetence, and replace them with a more efficient and economical system of professional administration at the service of the nation (Rasmussen, 1994). This was the desire of Borden as well. He hoped to bring more knowledge and skill to the public service and to the newly expanded agencies of government and have these individuals

provide useful knowledge and disinterested advice that would assist elected officials in making national policy. This was an attempt to remove the public service from direct control by politicians and create a space for the rise of neutral competence. Yet Borden also created something of an ongoing paradox. That is, he accepted that the executive branch of government, including the public service, should be responsive to the public through their politicians, but he also realized that the agencies and departments of government must be stable and competent and protect the long-term general welfare by identifying what needs to be done rather than what is popular at the time (Joel D Aberbach and Mark A Peterson, 542.).

Robert Borden inaugurated a period of concentrated action and active government with strong executive leadership from the Prime Minister over the organization and functioning of the administrative apparatus of the state. In bringing about change in this direction, Borden had a tremendous influence on the development of Canadian public administration. He contributed to the growth in both the functions but also the power of government; he increased the number of national administrative agencies and began the first system of conditional grants to provinces for road construction which would greatly increase national influence in the provinces. Borden also accumulated a great deal of power of the Prime Minister. His creation of the administrative state with a powerful “chief executive” would eventually usher in an era of concerns about the unaccountable power of bureaucracy (Hewart, 1929). While he was accumulating power over the political and policy making system in Canada, Canadians would subsequently get caught in a paradox of wanting strong executive leadership, while at the same time fearing the abuse of executive power.

The rise of neutral competence in Ottawa was ushered in by Borden and the idea of creating a strong national administrative apparatus would be greatly expanded under his successors. Eventually, the public service would become the key organization for policy development and service delivery and would provide a great deal of the necessary capacity to help politicians grasp increasingly complex policy issues. Yet slowly over time, there would accumulate a fear that the administrative reforms initiated by each successive Prime Minister provided a resource that could overwhelm the elected government. The distrust of the administrative apparatus would become especially acute with governments coming to power after long periods of absence from government. Thus it was during the Diefenbaker, Mulroney and Harper governments in particular where this notion of neutral competence is given its most critical assessment. What new leaders are often looking for then is not neutral competence, but rather a passionate commitment to their agenda. The naturally competent may appear passive and unmotivated as opposed to the activism a new PM hopes to bring to the job. Thus the pressures of politicization become very real.

What the recent fears of politicization of the public service remind us of is that Prime Ministers are now well aware that the power of government asserts itself through the public service and countless agencies resulting in a new government's need to ensure that these administrative organs are responsive to their needs and preferences. Controlling the public service is one of the highest priorities of any new government. As Stephen Harper noted not long after becoming PM,

"Probably the most difficult job, you know, practical difficult thing you have to learn as a prime minister and ministers, our ministers as well, is dealing with the federal bureaucracy. ... It's walking that fine line of, of being a positive leader of the federal public service, but at the same time pushing them

and not becoming captive to them. ... I could write a book on that one."  
(CBC, 2007)

Yet Borden would have a ready answer for his modern successor. A Prime Minister might well be attracted to the idea of having an army of political aids and a powerful, overweening PMO that tries to control the public service, but this might not be the best way to get your agenda implemented. While it is clear that a Prime Minister and his control agencies might like to see a more blind loyalty from the public service to make it more directly in tune with the needs of the PM, Borden would have suggested was that it was just as important to have a public service that exhibits skill and nimbleness in being responsible to citizens. What the government needs more than support of a consensus around the Prime Minister's decisions is instead more vitality and vigour in the deliberations preceding a decision of the PM. It is here that the true value of a neutrally competent public service becomes clear to the government and the Prime Minister. Borden was well aware that while he could provide the political direction, it required a trained and highly skilled public service that would ensure that policy to come to fruition and reach its goals. The assets of career officials that Borden was so adamant about capturing all his career are every bit in demand now as in Borden's time; indeed it is clear that they are probably in even higher demand now than at anytime in the past.

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