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Expanding Horizons for Public Policy Review

Reconsidering the Role of Citizens – The Case of the *underground royal commission*

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Overview. If policies and programs of a democratic government are meant to create a broadly defined public good, it follows that they should be evaluated for how well they achieve their intended purpose. We debate long and hard the details of this core concept, and contend over different models of governance, consider alternate institutions, invoke contending ideologies, even argue rival interpretations of what ‘the public good’ itself means.¹ Yet the basic proposition itself still stands: government in a democratic state is to serve the public interest and requires evaluation about how well it does that. Accumulating evidence suggests Canada’s institutions of parliamentary government, and in particular the practices of representative government and doctrines of responsible government, are not holding up well in this department. Of rare relevance to this situation is the *underground royal commission*, an independent inquiry into the governing institutions of Canada and the relationships citizens have with these institutions.

The purpose of this paper on the *underground royal commission* is to inform Canadian political scientists about a decade-long project that, to date, has involved hundreds of people, several millions of dollars, the creation of a unique national archive of interview footage, generated 14 hours of television documentaries, published 16 books, and formed the basis of a multi-media university course.

¹ See, for a current exposition of many lines in this debate about the best models and methods for organized operation and institutional arrangements in this self-governing democratic state, *Reinventing Canada: Politics of the 21st Century*, Janine Brodie and Linda Trimble (eds.) (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2003).

³ Law Commission of Canada, Ottawa: “Renewing Democracy: Debating Electoral Reform in Canada” *Discussion Paper* (2002), p. 33.

This opportunity in Halifax in spring 2003 to provide a background briefing for fellow Canadian political scientists is therefore perfectly timed as we contemplate “new developments” and “new trends” in governance. When I mentioned the *underground royal commission* to one of my former professors, Michael Stein of McMaster University, he was slightly taken aback that, as a Canadian political scientist, he had been unaware of all this activity. I reassured him that it was not his fault. The *underground royal commission* had burrowed deep into the workings of Canadian government without much notice. Moreover, as professors can especially appreciate, studies of government policy and practice in this country, whether official or ‘underground’, frequently fail to make much impression on the public radar screen.

Since last fall when Professor Stein and I discussed this, much more has of course become publicly known: the books have been published, the television documentaries were launched into a cycle of broadcasts, and a cross-Canada program of education has begun to spread the word. The Stein household, like many more, are now aware of the *underground royal commission*: Professor Janice Stein from University of Toronto is currently writing a review for publication, as I read in the *Literary Review of Canada*. Professor William Christian of University of Guelph has already done so in his *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* column. Such developments and a growing crop of newspaper articles and media interviews on CBC and other broadcasters foretell the much wider program of information about to unfold.

Summary of the *underground royal commission* report and its presentation.

The report now surfacing provides an overview and an integrated synopsis of findings by the *underground royal commission*. Breakout Educational Network, created in the mid-90s as a non-profit educational organization to address the vast gap between the theory of Canadian government and its actual practice, has been responsible for publishing the *underground royal commission* report in conjunction with The Dundurn Group, an independently-owned, mid-size Canadian publishing house whose books have ‘been defining for 30 years’.

The 16 books in the series range over topics from the counterproductive operation of Canada’s social assistance programs to the absence of focus in major decisions affecting Canada’s armed forces. Some dig broadly beneath the surface of subsidies, others explore specifically why the Canada Infrastructure Works Program for bridges and sewers ended up funding tennis courts and bicycle paths. Still others shed new light on why Canadian government is dysfunctional and our MPs deeply frustrated.

It does not stop there. We find out directly from young Canadians – the best and brightest – why they decamp for the USA, and from MPs and citizens alike why voting does not count as much as it should. Lobbyists and special interest groups are closely scrutinized.

A lot is revealed about accountability, and why we have not had much of it for 30 years or so. In a book I authored under the title “*Just Trust Us*”: *The Erosion of Accountability in Canada*, for instance, research by the young Canadians in the

underground royal commission is blended with my experience during a decade as a member of Parliament, concepts embodied in the political science courses I now teach at universities on the subjects of governance, ethics and accountability, and lessons from participating actively in our country's party and public policy organizations over many years.

More than books alone, however, the reports from the *underground royal commission* constitute a multi-media presentation of significance. Because the *underground royal commission* sought to "connect with Canadians," not only are its books written to be accessible to a wide audience, but the broadcasting and electronic media increasingly utilized by Canadians as their primary sources of information have also been employed. Websites are used in several applications, and so, especially, is television. The report of the *underground royal commission* is the first 'royal commission' report in Canada ever to be presented in televised format. Videotapes of the documentaries are also being distributed and sold with the books. Both the predominant role of young Canadians in the work of the *underground royal commission*, and knowledge about the learning habits of the intended audience for these findings, have made use of filming and television an intrinsic component of this decidedly different initiative in public policy review.

Stornoway Productions has turned the remarkable footage from the *underground royal commission* into high calibre television documentaries. Stornoway, it should be clarified, was not named for the Official Residence of the Opposition Leader but an island off the coast of Scotland. The company has won many Canadian and international awards for achievement in documentary production since the 1970s.

One series of *underground royal commission* documentaries, *A Question of Honour*, is a 5-part program that chronicles the deterioration of the Canadian military through the eyes of the soldiers who served and examines the decline of Canada's influence on the world stage through knowledgeable participants. Another series of programs, *Days of Reckoning*, chronicles the cross-country journey of seven young researchers who set out to discover why their generation had been saddled with a crippling \$570 billion debt by those responsible for managing a previously prosperous country. They discovered in the process how the national debt is actually a symptom of much deeper problems. *Secrets in High Places* further investigates government spending by attempting to track a tax dollar through the maze of government operations, using the relatively straightforward Canada Infrastructure Works Program to do so. The loaded question, *Does Your Vote Count?* is the theme of yet another series of programs giving viewers a close-up, critical and integrated look at how government and the electoral system serve Canadian citizens today.

Canadian Political Science and the *underground royal commission*. To better consider the contribution, role and importance of the *underground royal commission*, it helps if we place this investigative enterprise in context -- both as a response to the prevailing Canadian patterns of governance evaluation, and as an evolved form of Canadian public policy review.

Examining the phenomenon of an *underground royal commission* also provides Canadian political scientists with a variation on the ways we take stock of our country's institutional practices and evaluate their functional viability. Citizen-based and non-governmental, the *underground royal commission* invented an approach, a methodology and a style that does not compete with anyone else's simply because it is unique.

The *underground royal commission* even serves as a useful talisman for this "Hindsight and Horizons" conference of CPSA when we gather in this 75th year of our existence to consider the current state of our discipline. Since the formation of the Canadian Political Science Association, its members have been observing and analyzing the scene and documenting much that has changed. Those changes even help explain why I am today presenting a paper on something so quixotically Canadian as an *underground royal commission*.

To better understand why a number of citizens decided, back in the early 1990s, to conduct their own exploration of issues facing Canada, a brief retrospective glance at three ways Canadian political science itself has evolved as a discipline over 75 years is instructive.

First, the observers and analysts themselves changed – and I do not mean just because they died or moved to the suburbs. Political scientists since the 1920s have grown greater in number and more specific in focus. Just like other branches of academic study, professions such as medicine or law, and government itself, Canadian political science too evolved into specialized sub-disciplines. This tended to fragment inquiries, and hence the perspectives, of those studying Canadian government and politics.

A second is that the subject matter before us has not stood still, either. Federalism has been transformed. The Constitution has been revamped with the introduction of what is now called Charter politics. Traditional political institutions such as legislatures and political parties have been hollowed out. All the while geopolitical transformations through wars -- ideologic and hegemonic, economic and military, social and cultural -- have repeatedly changed the canvas before our very eyes.

Third, the ways we see and understand has also evolved. Canadian political science, being an integral part of our larger community, developed and absorbed new technologies, new perceptions and insights, and new questions. We also came to analyze things differently as the result of new instruments for research and new methodologies of scholarship. Back when the Canadian Political Science Association was formed, academics studied political events by examining election results, speeches and meetings reported in newspapers, debates in Parliament, letters and records of those in public office, the formation of organizations or movements around particular causes, and correspondence with the then relatively small number of officials. That has all largely been swept away, or at least supplanted. Even a cursory examination of the diverse program for this 2003 annual conference reveals something of the methods and styles of scholarship that have followed in its wake.

The results of this specialization now so intrinsic to Canadian political science eventually became a factor leading to the new methodology invented by the *underground royal commission*, as I shall shortly describe more fully. First, however, the reason for a citizen-centred inquiry invites further comment.

Reconsidering the Role of Citizens as Basis for the *underground royal commission*. Focus on the citizen is overdue. As the Law Commission of Canada observed in its October 2002 discussion paper about Canada's dysfunctional electoral system and why citizens now increasingly boycott our elections, "Citizens are persons in a particular kind of relationship, and they have a context."³

A large amount of the work by the *underground royal commission* was intended to gain a clear and dispassionate view of our present circumstances and make more knowable that context in which citizens find themselves. Once this context is clarified, the particular kind of relationships citizens have make more sense. For example, one of our national political commentators noted the declining voter turnout in Canadian elections and suggested compulsory voting as a tough-love solution. The more I studied what was pouring forth from the *underground royal commission*, however, I came to the contrary view that citizens are not wrong but right to stay away from the polls. Until the present dysfunctional system is seriously addressed, the growing tendency to have as little to do with the state -- even in such fundamental matters as voting and paying taxes -- is justifiable. Continuing to patronize a bad restaurant does little to encourage the management to revise its menu, upgrade the cuisine and improve the service.

Or, in the loftier words of the Canada Law Commission, "A growing 'democratic malaise' has begun to characterize the Canadian political landscape. Many citizens are increasingly expressing their concerns...by disengaging from participation in traditional political processes. In addition to the debate about electoral reform, questions have surfaced about whether our system of government itself needs reform to better reflect changes in Canadian society."⁴

Citizenship provides the common status shared by 30 million individuals across this regional country and throughout Canada's highly diversified and pluralistic society. Rights and responsibilities of citizens, even more prominently focused since the advent of our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, tap a primary energy source for a self-governing and self-reliant people. Citizenship is "the means by which the strengths of individual persons are made useful to the political community," in the utilitarian view of the Law Commission.⁵ While power of the state may reside elsewhere than in the individual, the ultimate glue that holds the power structure together in a parliamentary democracy is the consent of the governed.

Increasingly, and collectively, that consent is being withheld -- as measured in surveys that track decline of traditional deference to authority, decline in political party

⁴ Law Commission, "Renewing Democracy", p. 1.

⁵ Ibid. p. 37.

activity and electoral processes, decline of confidence in governing political institutions, and other ways. The proportion of Canadians who feel “government doesn’t care what people think” rose from 45 percent in 1968 to 67 percent in 1993. Confidence in the House of Commons fell from 49 percent in 1974 to 21 percent in 1996. By 1992 only 34 percent of Canadians were satisfied with our system of government, down from 51 percent in 1986. The proportion expressing “a great deal” of confidence in political parties fell from 30 percent in 1979 to 11 percent in 1999. By 2000, the Canadian Elections Survey found that a total of 24.8 percent -- or one in four Canadians -- were not very, or not at all, satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada. A strong signal is being emitted by the consistent direction of these trend lines.

In particular, political scientists are currently studying trends that show a falling away from political party activity by young Canadians. For example, Professor William Cross of Mount Allison University, studying the age complexion of Canada’s political parties, reports that the number of party members under age 30 averages 5 percent of total membership, and that the political parties “are becoming memberless shells.”⁶ Cross and his colleagues note that this is not a cyclical or developmental phenomenon – meaning that as one gets older they move into political activity – but rather a factor now missing in the make-up of a substantial majority of Canadian youth that had been present in far greater proportion in previous generations. “Public discontent with government and politicians has increased over the last two decades,” concludes the Law Commission, following its own extensive review of these trends, noting that it “is greater in Canada than in the U.S., and is greater here than most places worldwide.”⁷

Beliefs, values, attitudes and memories about government do matter. They reside not in books or survey results but in the hearts and minds of citizens. A decline in voting in our infrequent elections is one thing, but daily decisions to drop out of other traditional civic and political activities, avoid paying taxes, leave the country, head into the underground economy or otherwise “vote with one’s feet” is another. It is time to look into the faces of those around us and see fellow citizens. It is time to look into the mirror and ask what it truly means to be a citizen of this country. People’s beliefs and values are shifting. By and large, thought the people in the *underground royal commission*, this transformation of values was not only a remarkable development of historic significance for Canada’s political culture, but it was being better observed than explained.

Over the past 30 years or so, including a decade when I was in Parliament, I encountered many citizens who repeatedly sought to take civic action only to be overpowered by a political-governmental-bureaucratic juggernaut. A sinking feeling set in when they realized that “doing something” meant going head to head against bureaucracies, political parties, old boys’ networks, cultural establishments, journalistic attitudes, special-interest organizations and lobby groups, not to mention the deadweight inertia of the government system itself. After such experiences many Canadians felt they had no place to turn. A number grew cynical and passive. The falling away from politics

⁶ Remarks at Montreal, October 26, 2002, in presentation to the Association for Canadian Studies conference on ‘Constitution and Democracy’.

⁷ Law Commission, *Discussion Paper*, op. cit., p. 17.

and the decline in voter turnout, matched by growth and institutionalization of the underground economy, were not quirks but a direct consequence of the growing feeling of powerlessness of formerly conscientious Canadian citizens.

Ironically, I experienced a similar reaction as a member of the House of Commons. Even though I no doubt appeared to most of my constituents to be more of a political-system insider than they were, in Ottawa I often saw myself like some hapless mountain climber trying to scale the sheer face of an immense plate-glass window using my fingernails. It was fitting, I thought, that an entire constituency of citizens would send to Ottawa as their stand-in and spokesperson someone who would confront the same feelings of powerlessness and ineffectiveness as they did. Perhaps this is what it really means when we say we have *representative* democracy!

The *underground royal commission* in context of ‘Civil Society.’ Renewed recognition of the importance of the citizenry is showing up in political science circles and among our country’s policy élites. The term in vogue when doing so is that of ‘civil society’.

Civil society is made up of self-organized voluntary associations of citizens who respond to needs and interests as they see them, to do things collectively which they feel are not otherwise or satisfactorily being addressed by government. Civil society is comprised of activist citizens and organizations which are non-governmental, and which, in the words of Philippe Schmitter, “do not seek to replace...state agents...or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole”.⁸

‘Civil society’ may not be new so much as it is a newer term to describe what has long been the core reality of a self-governing democratic society. In 1832 Alexis de Tocqueville maintained in *Democracy in America* that “the most powerful and perhaps the only means that we still possess in interesting men in the welfare of their country is to make them partakers in government...civic zeal seems to me to be inseparable from the exercise of political right.”⁹ More recently Robert Putnam’s focus on ‘social capital’ in countries such as Italy and the USA drew insights about the twilight stage of such civic zeal in its contemporary context and why people may end up ‘bowling alone.’¹⁰ Last year CBC Radio’s program ‘Ideas’ informatively explored the meanings of civil society by drawing upon information and insights from a number of Canadian academics.¹¹

Discussion of civil society in our own country does require this “Canadian content” because of the context: the role of government here is so much more welcomed and expected by citizens than is the case in the USA where many of their scholars

⁸ Philippe Schmitter, “Civil Society East and West”, in *Consolidating Third World Democracies*, Diamond et al (eds.) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 240.

⁹ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. By H. Reeve (Boston: John Allyn Publisher, 1882), vol. II, p. 395.

¹⁰ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

¹¹ CBC Radio, “Ideas” program, *Civil Society* (transcript edition), March 2002. See also, Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Civil Society Creates Citizens: It Does Not Solve Problems”, in *Brookings Review* (fall 1997 Vol. 15 No. 4), pp. 13-15 (The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.)

ascribe different meanings, or implications, to the same ‘civil society’ term. American descriptions and analysis of civil society loses salience when moved, without translation, across the US-Canada border. For our present purposes in the setting of our distinct political culture, the *underground royal commission* can be appreciated as an expression of both the vitality and importance of the Canadian variant of this civil society.

Citizen Engagement More Problematic as ‘Citizens’ Disappear. Citizen engagement is a subject of long-standing interest and attention to Canada’s political science community.¹² However, academic literature has described Canadian decision-making as being far more dominated by an interest in intergovernmental élite bargaining than with public input or popular sovereignty. For many Canadians, whether political scientist or not, public participation is principally seen in terms of voting in elections. To deconstruct and better understand the nature of ‘citizen engagement’ requires reconsideration of what it means to be ‘the sovereign people’ in a democratic state. It also requires understanding the emerging possibilities in light of new technologies, changed expectations, and cumbersome institutions that have endured into the present day from earlier times to which they were more suited.

The word ‘citizen’ refers to individuals in relation to government and the state. A noteworthy trend in public discourse in recent years has been the dropping of references to ‘citizens,’ so that now the term has a vaguely old-fashioned ring to it – like referring to Canada as the ‘Dominion.’ Today government officials and their advisors busy themselves in lofty ways with concepts and processes that tend to leave out real, live, breathing, smelling, feeling, energetic and emotional people. Those who formulate public policy are more likely now to be heard describing citizens as ‘clients’ and ‘customers’ and ‘stakeholders.’ People are spoken of as ‘demographics’ and even ‘targets.’

This detaching trend is not confined to government operations, but now occurs broadly from corporate strategizing to academic positioning. As political scientists Tom Pocklington and Allan Tupper observed last year, Canadian universities are “now linked through their managers” to corporations and government bureaucracies, a factor that “partially explains the widely noted adoption by universities of the style and rhetoric of

¹² Canadian political scientists will be acquainted with the substantial and evolving body of scholarly literature on citizen engagement. Among more recent diverse entries could be included: Jocelyne Bourgon, “A Voice for All: Engaging Canadians for Change” (Notes for an Address by Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to Cabinet. Institute on Governance Conference. (Aylmer, Quebec: October 1998); Simone Chambers, “Contract or Conversation? Theoretical Lessons from the Canadian Constitutional and Susan Phillips (eds.), *Citizen Crisis*”, *Politics & Society* 26 [1998], pp. 143-72; Robert Dahl, “A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness versus Citizen Participation”, *Political Science Quarterly* 109 (1) [1994], pp.23-34; Katherine Graham *Engagement: Lessons in Participation from Local Government* (Toronto, 1998: Institute of Public Administration of Canada); Matthew Mendelsohn, “Getting Engaged”, in *Building the Social Union*, Tom McIntosh (ed.) (2002, Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy).

corporate managements, including reference to students as ‘clients’ or even ‘customers.’”¹³

Over on the government side of this trend, those who hold high office and employ such vocabulary betray a mind-set that is increasingly manipulative of the citizenry and, necessarily, their elected representatives, instead of responsible to them. Political scientists interfacing with government in terms of polling research projects are able to attest to how pernicious this seemingly innocuous way of referring to people can, over time, become.

This trend in Canada has resulted in a state of affairs where now most actions and programs are evaluated in terms of their consequences for government rather than their true impact upon people.

Reviewing Government With a Citizen’s Eyes. The key idea for the *underground royal commission* was to look at contemporary functioning of the Canadian political state from the view of a citizen, rather than the vantage point of those in public office or in the public service. Why the citizen? Political scientists themselves had the answer to that. Professor Donald Smiley had shrewdly observed from his studies of Canadian politics that most analysis of Canadian government and public policy is conducted from the point of view of government itself. As such, even in its most objective and critical expression, government-sponsored reviews necessarily embody a self-justifying approach. When extended through nominally independent inquiries, including judicial inquiries and royal commissions, this implicit government-centric perspective remains essentially the same: individuals thinking within the frames of reference and patterns of institutional order and political performance associated with the established system. That may even be why meaningful reform of Canadian political institutions is seldom achieved -- it is so rarely contemplated in the first place.

A related reason is that most members of the political class of our country -- including those who receive policy research contracts or appointments to program review committees because they are well versed in the *status quo* and well connected with the established political order -- are quite naturally and even instinctively entrenched within this established framework and inherited patterns of thought. For most policy reviews, fundamental questions about the institutional order itself are seldom formulated. The Lortie Commission, for example, conducted what appeared to be a sweeping review of policy and practice governing Canadian elections, but never touched the foundation of Canada’s dysfunctional voting system. This is because terms of reference are generally drawn up by the “powers that be.” Any close observer of Canadian public policy review or analysis of government operations could see that, especially once Donald Smiley had pointed it out.

¹³ Tom Pocklington and Allan Tupper, *No Place to Learn: Why Universities Aren’t Working* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), p. 33.

Even government-sponsored policy reviews launched with a sincere quest for doing the right thing, employing fine critical analysis by some of our best scholars in creating the recommendations, eventually end up back on the highly polished desks of those ensconced atop the established governing order. Little mystery, especially for those of us who study the use of power, should surround the dismal “success rate” of royal commission reports and other government-sponsored research. The bills are paid, but the real account is never rendered. This is not a sinister conspiracy, just the result of operating within a power structure and a particular frame of reference with government-oriented thought patterns, the defining hallmark of Canadian political culture.

That reality was the genesis of a *non-governmental* “royal commission.” Since the people of Canada are as much a source of sovereign power under our Constitution as the Crown, initiating a policy review is equally open to citizens. That this has in fact just happened is an acknowledgment of the vitality of our Canadian variant of a ‘civil society’, where we are much less likely to be bowling alone than playing hockey together. Strictly speaking this whole enterprise should properly have been called an “underground *citizens’* commission,” (but it was up and running long before anybody asked my opinion.) Besides, the concept of an “underground royal commission” has a paradoxical quality that perhaps appeals to Canadians’ sharp sense of irony and our distinct style of humour.

By whatever name, a different picture emerges when we begin to understand governance from a citizen perspective. Niccolò Machiavelli conveyed this idea in 1513 in his letter to The Magnificent Lorenzo de’ Medici when he said “To comprehend fully the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to comprehend fully the nature of princes one must be an ordinary citizen.”¹⁴

Trying to See the Big Picture Through the Eyes of Specialists. So far I have been sketching the context that spawned an *underground royal commission*, yet the picture is still incomplete. The cumulative result of these changes which sharpened the focus of political science in Canada were a mixed blessing. As Professor Des Morton warned our first-year class entering University of Toronto law school 30 years ago, “Legal training sharpens the mind by narrowing it.” In time, narrowing of focus and specialization of interest brings about a new order of problems.

Even in the 1920s, the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead described a dilemma he foresaw for political societies as learning and the application of knowledge increasingly came to be divided into narrow and narrower fields. “Who,” he asked, in posing what came to be called ‘Whitehead’s Dilemma’, “is left to understand and integrate all the particular and specialized learning?” His bleak answer was that the specialists themselves could not, because they had developed specific vocabularies and coined words unique to their field of research that precluded sharing information with others. He reasoned that integration would fall to the lowest common denominator of communication and connection in society. This meant regular folk who make the world

¹⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (transl. George Bull) (London: Penguin Books, 1961; new edition 1999), p. 2.

tick from day to day -- bus drivers, novelists, electronics technicians, farmers. It is not irrelevant that the latter part of the bewildered 20th Century witnessed a revival in movements centred on holistic living and integrative thinking. To a population seeking explanations, even something like horoscopes would enjoy such a revival as to make them respectable on the pages of mainstream newspapers, right up there with such other realities as obituaries and stock market reports.

As part and parcel of this broad trend toward knowledge specialization, the various fields of academic scholarship became vastly more rarefied since those days when the CPSA was first formed. Political scientists Allan Tupper and Tom Pocklington neatly portrayed the evolution over this period in Canadian universities last year. "Specialization and a highly developed division of labour characterize and mould universities," they observed. "The professor is now best described as a knowledge worker who pursues narrow research in a highly structured university and who relates primarily to comparable specialists."¹⁵ The two authors observe that a modern professor, far from being "an intimidating figure full of wisdom about the human condition," is generally an expert on a specific subject.

In a similar vein, historian Michael Bliss delivered a lecture on the 100th anniversary of the University of Toronto's history department in 1991. He used the occasion to note how the writing of Canadian history during the preceding 25 years had been characterized by an intense degree of specialization which replaced the older Canadian historians' concern for explaining the nature of the country. Bliss saw the declining sense of Canada as a national entity underlying much of the then current political and constitutional malaise. He looked around the academy, moreover, and noted how almost without exception other disciplines "had gone the way of history, collapsing into jargon-laden, lint-picking irrelevance. Narrow specialists, uninformed by broader perspectives, including any sense of evolution through time, were poor vessels for delivering broad visions of Canada to increasingly puzzled and divided Canadians."¹⁶

This all happened in concert with subdivision and specialization in other dimensions of life, too – whether raising families, running corporations, restructuring the communications media, or administering the public service and government. If becoming preoccupied with research 'molehills' is a criticism levelled at contemporary practitioners of Canadian political science, it is hardly a shortcoming exclusive to us.

Moreover, there is reciprocation of cause and effect here. For just as art imitates life and life art, so the very government and power structures of interest to scholars of politics themselves expanded into new areas of jurisdiction and fragmented into further subdivisions of activity year after year. To study government meant one had to follow it, and that required specialization.

¹⁵ Pocklington and Tupper, *No Place to Learn*, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁶ Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada". *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol 26. No. 4 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 5-17, at p. 12.

In this same transition over the decades, members of the news media who report on politics and government found it harder and harder to connect the dots between their specific news stories. As journalism also changed in style -- particularly following the advent of television and its drive for simplicity, imagery and confrontation -- the urgent increasingly overtook the important. The consequence was that comprehensive explanation to Canadians about what was going on with government declined. For their part political leaders, as much as scholars and journalists, seemed increasingly unable or unwilling to paint the 'big picture' in ways that made any sense to citizens.

Creating a New Map of Political Canada. Overall, it was this narrowing of focus that ultimately gave rise, as a response from increasingly frustrated citizens, to the *underground royal commission*. In the early 1990s, a group of young researchers affiliated with Stornoway Productions, the award-winning Canadian documentary film company, began a broad-based inquiry into our country's affairs. What at first was simply a bold idea for a major television documentary soon became much more. As every political scientist can attest, research is a process of discovery. Their background and preparatory investigations for this 'story' led this group of citizens to glimpse a land stranger than they had previously imagined. The existing map was not the same as the terrain itself, so to proceed further they realized they had to create a new 'map', whatever that in fact might be.

They started with the premise that citizens did not understand the issues that had overtaken them because nobody was talking to them in terms they could understand, a rationale highly appropriate for television documentary makers. Better efforts at education and communication could clear up the malaise of misunderstanding. Yet it soon became clear that even inside government many did not really understand what was happening. A simple television documentary was not going to be easy.

Moreover, it increasingly dawned on these individuals that the *official* royal commissions and public inquiries -- which, in this recent era, had generated so many multi-million dollar, multi-volume reports dealing with specific or relatively isolated policies -- did not touch deeply or comprehensively upon the real challenges facing Canadians. From the Malouf Royal Commission on the Canadian Seal Hunt to Donald MacDonald's Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects, or more recently from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Affairs to Justice Horace Kreever's Inquiry into the Tainted Blood Scandal, and ever so many more, Canadians and our government were awash in breathtakingly extensive studies of specific and often quite narrow issues.

The problem for so many of these royal commission reports was that they were too good. Too many experts with too much specific knowledge looked too deeply for too long.

If too often royal commission reports "ended up on the shelf", as is a commonplace Canadian criticism, it was because that was the only place to hold them. The long period needed for such complete and scholarly study of Canadian issues further contributed to the political 'disconnect' that usually has occurred by the time the multi-

volume reports finally do appear -- a fact perhaps not overlooked by the powers-that-be when drafting terms of reference to diffuse an immediate political crisis. Sending the royal commission and its entourage off into the wilder gardens of public hearings and academic research, governments typically have not cared how long they tarried there, lost in thought. The Berger Commission even got lost in terms of geography, holding public hearings in Prince Edward Island for residents' views on pipeline construction in the western Arctic.

Some royal commission reports have been quickly completed, and some have been of timely help, but in recent decades most displayed increasing propensity for large studies of quite specific subjects. It could not be otherwise. The work of government itself is specific. Issues must be narrowed and clarified if they are to be addressed and resolved. The natural and logical reinforcement of this approach comes from departments of government, and from specialists in Canadian public policy including those in policy think tanks and on university campuses, all of whom have deep and impressive knowledge of particular topics and narrow subjects.

That government functions in delineated jurisdictions, and that the best and brightest academics operate in silos of specialized knowledge, only reinforces the primary instinct of public office holders to deal with public problems narrowly rather than broadly. Solve the immediate problem. Do not raise general issues about the system itself. When he met with senior Liberal Party policy advisors such as Chaviva Hosek and Eddy Goldenberg prior to the general election campaign of 1997, Prime Minister Chrétien turned back suggestions for a campaign with bold vision policies for the future. His political instinct told him to run for re-election with a focused and specific campaign dealing with details.

Almost as a provocation, then, this group of young citizens decided to turn their television documentary idea into something else: a different kind of investigation about the current condition of Canada, driven from the grassroots rather than from the top. An *underground royal commission* would be a novel Canadian response to the plethora of royal commissions and other policy studies over the preceding decades that tended to perpetuate an established official view of Canada. It would entail citizens providing their own perspective on the conduct of Canadian affairs. Its focus would be the big picture, seen with new eyes, and attention to detail. The *underground royal commission* wanted to see the detail in order to connect the dots in a way that was not happening. If it worked, the result could well be a new map for citizens to help them travel and understand our country's political landscape.

So what began as a television documentary soon evolved into much more. I first became aware of Canada's *underground royal commission* and its team of researchers in late autumn of 1993, and in the years since, I have been drawn deeper and deeper into its investigations. Through increasing involvement I have encountered individuals involved in journalism, theatre, television, government, business and non-governmental organizations, as well as educators, farmers, people in the resource economy and social workers. A majority of the researchers working on the project were young people, mostly

students just out of university. Over the course of the years they travelled the country generating hundreds of hours of on-camera interviews and they listened a lot to people who experienced the impact of Canadian government.

The *underground royal commission at Work*. Since 1994, a total of 23 young researchers have travelled across Canada, often accompanied by a television crew, to conduct what ultimately totalled some 486 interviews, generating in excess of 600 hours of video research, itself now a rare Canadian political archive held by Breakout Educational Network. The people whose experiences and insights are so recorded include men and women in government, business, the military, universities, as well as cattle ranchers in the West, sawmill operators in New Brunswick, wheat farmers on the Prairies, east coast fishermen, Alberta oilmen, nationalists in Quebec, government officials behind the scenes, and sundry others in the coffee shops of life – a pretty candid collection of Canadians who, as befits our nature, were critical (even of their own prior performance when in office). Despite their critique and often damning conclusions, a common denominator in these interviews is a sense of decency and caring about the well being of the country.

Yet it wasn't just who was being interviewed that mattered; it was equally important who was asking the questions. These were wide-eyed and open-minded young Canadians with a big stake in the country's future and a huge curiosity about why they had inherited such a mess, including a \$570 billion IOU in the form of Canada's national debt. They were not cynical journalists. They had not 'seen it all before'. So they asked simple, pointed questions – just as many had in the months and years before as political science students seeking understanding from their professors. Like good students, too, they immersed themselves in background reading – scholarly articles, newspaper clippings, Internet searches, government reports, access to information requests – before arriving to interview individuals whom their research suggested, often with the benefit of historical hindsight, had played a pivotal role or had direct personal experience in a problem of government.

As Plato taught long ago, getting the question right is the most important step toward discovery. What these young Canadians discovered, by posing their direct, well-researched and basic questions, exceeded anything they expected. They got a lot of extremely candid answers – including from many who once occupied some of the highest offices in the land. The more they learned, the greater the implications grew; the more pointed the questions, the more revealing still the responses.

Approach of Study. The *underground royal commission* explored the sources of Canadian public policy and examined the apparatus by which programs to implement such policy are evaluated. It focused on how public policy is formed, implemented and evaluated through Canadian institutions created under our Constitution to achieve political accountability in the conduct of public affairs.

Those institutions include the legislatures, and the departments of government and the political executive that directs them. They extend to the institutional arrangements

created by our laws and procedures for raising taxes, approving public expenditures, monitoring spending, and reporting on the efficiency and impact of government's redirection of money within the country to support its programs and implement its policies. In broad scope, these institutional arrangements for political accountability embrace the two fundamental components of Canadian parliamentary democracy already mentioned – 'representative government' and 'responsible government'.

While the areas of government which might be studied by the *underground royal commission* seemed endless, it was decided to concentrate especially on two key pillars of government – fiscal policy and foreign policy. Each of these address the fundamentals of a nation, and success or failure, strength or weakness in either would have far-reaching implications. For instance, as the investigation progressed into foreign policy it became clear that serious problems involving Canada's military had caused a reversal of roles. Most scholars of international relations would say that a country first sets its foreign policy to reflect and serve its national interests and that the Armed Forces are then used in support of that policy. However, in Canada's case, the tail had begun wagging the dog. The weaknesses in our military and defence capabilities began to dictate what was possible in Canadian foreign policy. These military limitations increasingly in recent years curtailed foreign policy, from peace-keeping operations to military and anti-terrorism deployments in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and Iraq.

Another element in the methodology of the *underground royal commission* was emphasis on historical perspective. 'Time' was seen as a formative factor in the way original purposes of public policy and government programs imperceptibly transformed bit by bit over decades, until the reasons for some program had been lost in the mist of time but the interests which meanwhile had vested and coalesced around it became strong defenders of the status quo. Ontario Hydro and the Canada Wheat Board were two among many case studies by the *underground royal commission* on this front.

In approaching any study, the mind-set or ideology of the investigator is also of fundamental importance, for as Austrian-British economist Friedrich von Hayek once observed, "Without a theory, the facts are silent." What is the 'ideology' of the *underground royal commission*? The question is as problematic as trying to explain what the philosophy of any of Canada's major political parties might be, simply because the agglomeration of individuals drawn into the organization brought with them such a variety of outlooks and philosophies.

The more one tries to find a common denominator in philosophy or outlook – which is important because of natural Canadian suspicions about some 'hidden agenda' -- the more one is left with the conclusion that the *underground royal commission* is driven by four primary ideas. One is that democracy is a system for governance that requires accountability to the governed. Another is that the freedoms and rights of individuals, carrying as they do a personally empowering mission to be self-knowing and self-reliant, has direct implications for government in a democratic state. A third is that 'pragmatism' is an appropriate ideology to guide evaluation of how effectively the instruments of power and institutions of governance work in Canada. A fourth idea involves the scarcity

of resources and use of the concept of ‘opportunity cost’ as a tool for fashioning debate over public choices and evaluating political decisions -- as part of a quest for fair, frugal government.

Findings of the Investigation. The *underground royal commission* report, as a grass-roots or non-governmental response to contemporary Canadian government, serves to bring this story of the democratic malaise in from the wilderness of Canadian public affairs to readers and viewers at a time that is most propitious.

So what are the issues? Some have been alluded to already, in the summary of the reports earlier in this paper. More extensively, however, the report of the *underground royal commission* clearly shows that regardless of region, level of government, or political party, we are operating under a wasteful system that is shockingly and ubiquitously lacking in accountability. An ever-weakening connection between the electors and the elected means that we are slowly and irrevocably losing our ability to understand our political system, or even gain access to it. The researchers’ experience demonstrate that it is almost impossible for a member of the public, or in some cases, even a member of Parliament, to actually trace how our tax dollars are spent. Most disturbing is the fact that our young people have been stuck with a giant and crippling I.O.U. that has effectively hamstrung their future.

The report of the *underground royal commission*, prepared in large part by and for the youth of Canada, provides the hard evidence of the problems many older Canadians may long have suspected. Some of that evidence makes it clear that, as ordinary Canadians, we are every bit as culpable as our politicians – for our failure to demand accountability, for our easy acceptance of government subsidies and services established without proper funding in place, and for the disservice we have done to our young people through the debt we have so blithely passed on to them. Yet the real purpose of the *underground royal commission*, it seems to me, was to ensure that we all understand better how government processes work and what role we play in them. Public policy issues must be understandable and accessible to the public if they are ever to be truly addressed and resolved.

This drive to look at government, not from the vantage point of government nor the perspective of specialized scholarship but from the straightforward citizen’s slant of asking what is really going on, revealed (1) tremendous confusion in Canada today with accountability relationships; (2) justifiable reasons for citizens becoming apathetic and disaffected from government; (3) deep problems within the systemic operation of Canada’s institutions and practices of government that ought to be truly understood before any further ‘reforms’ take place to address what, in most cases, really are only symptoms of these much deeper problems; and (4) how over time these factors have contributed to a transformation of Canadian character.

In Canada today, we see by observing the actual behaviours of those in office how the form of representative government and the formalities of responsible government are observed stylistically but not substantively. The result of this hollowing out of previously

established institutional practices means that the form of accountability and responsibility endures, but not the substance. The consequence is that we lack the means to evaluate the success of government programs to achieve their intended contribution to the public good. The upshot is that we have lost our ability to be a self-governing people, and that the enduring rhetoric about being a parliamentary democracy no longer matches our reality.

Taken as a whole, these books and television documentaries, like the work of the *underground royal commission* itself, are all about stepping out of the problem as much as possible in order to truly see it.

Multi-Media Reports from the *underground royal commission*. The television documentaries and the books which thematically organize interviews of the *underground royal commission* examine the contemporary workings of government apparatus as seen through the eyes of the very citizenry those institutions are intended to serve. In addition to the perspective of citizens interacting with government, however, is the view and experience of citizens working inside those public institutions as well – members of the House of Commons, the Canadian Senate, the Cabinet and Prime Minister’s Office, the Auditors-General, senior public servants and the Canadian Armed Forces.

Moreover, in the report of the *underground royal commission*, participants in the workings of these democratic institutions speak for themselves. Of necessity there is editing, and thematic organization. Yet to a degree that is astonishing when compared with other studies and investigative analysis, the approach of the *underground royal commission* is to reduce to a minimum the intermediaries who interpret, and the experts who explain what others really meant to say.

This hallmark feature of letting the facts speak for themselves to the greatest extent possible reflects oft-repeated mantras of those in the *underground royal commission*, of which two especially stand out. One, “We are seeking a clear and dispassionate view of our present circumstances.” Another, “This problem we are seeing is actually the symptom of a deeper problem.” First, last, and always, though, the overriding idea was to see how government in Canada looked to the citizen.

The **ichannel**, which began broadcasting the *underground royal commission* documentaries in February of 2003, is one of the new specialty television channels. Originally called the ‘issues channel,’ its CRTC license was successfully applied for by some who had been part of the *underground royal commission* once it became clear that diverse, issue-based programming was not easily placed on the airwaves of establishment television in this country. Some programs were carried by TVO in Ontario, ACCESS in Alberta, the Global TV Network across Canada, and PBS in the United States. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, despite a stated policy that supports independent television production, will, more often only carry such material when it meets the CBC’s approved ‘formula’ for television journalism or with independent producers who work so closely with the CBC from the inception of the production that it, too, ends up looking just like an in-house CBC product. To provide the needed outlet for an alternate

perspective, the *underground royal commission* now works in conjunction with **ichannel**. Response from viewers to comprehensive and integrated explanations of what has really been going on inside Canadian government is one of welcome shock. Finally, the dots are being connected.

To reiterate, the results of the research compiled by the *underground royal commission* also helped inform the 16 books that have since been published. Several of these volumes consist entirely of the often colourful and frequently controversial interviews, consolidated by themes and issues.

Further, this educational material has also been carried to students through the Department of Political Science and the Office of Open Learning at the University of Guelph. A third year credit course, ‘Accountability and Canadian Government,’ has been developed based on this material and is currently in its third year of being offered, with a class of 130 students taking the course currently in summer term.

On-Going Program of Education. Getting the word out is implicit in the efforts of the *underground royal commission*, especially in its association with the Breakout Educational Network. As an officer of this not-for-profit corporation I should explain that name. ‘Breakout’ is about breaking free from out-of-date institutional arrangements and the attitudes and practices created by their operation over time. ‘Educational’ is about turning on the light of understanding so that people can themselves reach their own conclusions and see what they think needs to be done. ‘Network’ is about not creating a new organization but linking with those already functioning across Canada in shared efforts at ‘breakout education.’

One of the first public presentations of findings from the *underground royal commission* was made in 2001 to the annual conference in Ottawa of Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation (CCAF), the national organization of auditors general and others professionally concerned with monitoring and reporting publicly on the financial operations of governments at all levels. The leaders of CCAF knew they performed a major role – as the media and political response to the annual reports of the Auditor General of Canada clearly demonstrate – yet felt that somehow they were not “connecting with Canadians” and looked at the work of the *underground royal commission* to study more closely how this was being done. This on-going link between CCAF and Breakout Educational Network and the *underground royal commission* illustrates the “new trends, new developments” nature of this ‘network’ for ‘education’. CCAF has since made public new reporting principles designed to achieve greater transparency and carry reporting on the operation of government programs, by auditors general, civil servants, journalists and elected representatives, to “a higher level”.

The program of education about the findings of the *underground royal commission* also involves working with people in existing educational institutions such as our country’s secondary schools and universities. With respect to the secondary schools, Breakout Educational Network is now beginning to develop modules for civics and history teachers as part of the curriculum development. As for university educators,

earlier this year Dundurn Press e-mailed 166 Canadian political science professors to advise them of these 16 new publications and their availability to consider for course use. As of April 30, some 21 professors had already requested copies of “*Just Trust Us*” and another book, *Does Your Vote Count?* by Paul Kemp, had been requested by eight university instructors for possible use in their courses.

“*Just Trust Us*” and *Goodbye Canada?*, also by Paul Kemp, were selected by a jury of academics for inclusion in the catalogue *Books on Canada* published annually by the Association for the Export of Canadian books. It is distributed to all members of the International Council for Canadian Studies, to delegates attending international Canadian Studies conferences this year, and to major libraries worldwide. Since March the catalogue has also been posted on the Internet so these titles can be accessed online.

In many other ways, too, from on-campus forums and service clubs speeches by members of the *underground royal commission*, from the usual range of media interviews, book launch events and premieres for the television documentaries, efforts to ‘network’ on an educational basis are taking place. For example, the five hours of the documentary series entitled *A Question of Honour* and the five books dealing with the state of Canada’s Armed Forces were launched in Toronto in February at a day-long media and military “teach in” at the Royal Canadian Military Institute. This was in conjunction with the inaugural broadcast of these shows on **ichannel**, which is being repeated by request. That launch by the *underground royal commission* was hosted by Major-General (Ret.) Lewis MacKenzie, himself a fitting participant in this work since *A Question of Honour* is informed by the perspective of those on the ground who knew what was happening when Ottawa was officially silent, or worse. Always connected to his soldiers, MacKenzie’s critique of government complacency and problematic military decisions fits harmoniously with this quest for realism and accountability.

An increasing number of presentations is underway. Even this paper can be seen spreading the word about the *underground royal commission* and its long, thorough and relentless review of Canadian government operations from a citizen’s perspective.

Readers of at least some of these books may encounter things they do not believe, some assertions that might seem to emerge from unwarranted cynicism. Parts of my own book, “*Just Trust Us*”, may certainly strike a reader that way, for instance. Yet these conclusions and insights about contemporary Canada arise from an extensive research and an in-depth interview process meant not to be rampantly critical but to seek genuine understanding. The full back-up documentation is available to support, chapter and verse, what a reader will encounter in any of these published works. The extended interviews used in *Days of Reckoning* are compiled in two books, *Taking or Making Wealth?* and *Guardians on Trial*. *A Call to Account* is the companion book to *Does Your Vote Count?* while *On the Money Trail* backs up the personal journeys detailed in *Secrets in High Places* and *Down the Road Never Travelled*. The published volumes which capture, in text, the complete interviews used in the television documentary, *A Question of Honour*, are found in *Talking Heads*, *Talking Arms* (3 volumes) and *The Chance of War*.

Erosion of Accountability in Canada -- a case-study for the *underground royal commission*. The dramatic decline in deference to authority and an erosion of trust in institutions became, in essence, a case study by the *underground royal commission*. As documented, our citizenry has born decades of effectively unaccountable government – practices and performance only doggedly brought to light by the determined efforts of auditors general, some members of a parliamentary public accounts committee, certain rare journalists – and now the *underground royal commission*.

From a grass-roots perspective, this change in Canadian outlook about government might be described differently. It might, for instance, be seen as justifiable disregard of unresponsive authority or a turning away from dysfunctional institutions. The plummeting voter turnout in elections, the soaring robustness of our underground economy, and the flight of capital and people from the country, can be condemned or viewed sympathetically, depending upon whether one is marching in the parade or watching it pass by from the sidelines.

Evidently something needs fixing -- but what? The most successful reformers, despite all their variety, share one thing in common. Prior to working for change, they have a clear understanding of what is wrong.

Before taking remedial action, a citizen today faces the daunting reality that the problem of Canada may itself be too large to be seen, too complex for individual skills. Even well-educated, well-off and well-connected Canadians -- though able to master their personal situations pretty well and recognize the interplay between cause-and-effect in their own lives -- encounter this problem when it comes to the larger picture of Canadian society and our government. As individuals we show understanding of the concept of “opportunity costs” in our personal lives. If we chose to do one thing, it will consume time, energy and money in ways that preclude doing something else. Resources are scarce.

Yet when it comes to evaluating the decisions of government, linkages and tradeoffs evaporate. This means failure to appreciate the consequences of demands we make on government. When government is amorphous, incomprehensible and disconnected, we need never weigh choices and make tradeoffs, just assert claims and let someone else worry about potential costs.

The reason we have become like this, even as an ostensibly self-governing people, is not mysterious. Rather, it has a real logic to it. The requirements for evaluating opportunity costs are two-fold. First, you need to know all the relevant information. Second, you have to be able to operationalize the concepts into costs. Neither of these conditions is met with respect to government in Canada. So what is an individual citizen to do? This was the question asked by those participating in the *underground royal commission*. They wondered how it was possible for a nation that had been so promising and prosperous in the early 1960s to end up so confused, divided, and troubled.

The role of holding government accountable is where Parliament and the practice of ‘responsible government’ are intended to be in play. The concept of “accountability” means being bound to give an account; it means being responsible *for* things and being responsible *to* someone else. Accountability is how we figure out, as best we can, what happened. It is how we connect causes with effects so we can correct mistakes and do better the next time. Accountability is the soul of our democratic process of government by which those who govern are held responsible for their decisions to the citizens, by the citizens both directly and through elected representatives to a Parliament which historically has that as its *raison d’être*.

Accountability should accordingly be thought of as something much higher than merely a blame game. It is not the aggressive cynicism represented by a “gotcha” style journalism, nor the premeditated posturing for partisan advantage before the television cameras in Question Period. It is quite simply an effort to say that in organized human society there is a reasonable expectation that we should seek to apply our resources to meet our needs with, if not a full measure of efficiency, at least some correlation between cost and benefit. Accountability does mean recognizing and understanding that political actions and government decisions have consequences. If resources are limited, our choice to do one thing will cost us the opportunity to do something else. Is the political culture of our country adept at handling hard choices?

The point of a reality check is to take note of what we are actually doing. Yet what if, in our real world, we are so confused about government that we no longer know where reality ends and illusion begins? If we do not know that, how can we ever hope to have accountability in government? The more confusing and counterproductive government appears, the more a sane person will disconnect, tune out.

Once one begins to look at Canadian government from a single window – such as accountability – new connections can link things we have been troubled about but nobody has explained. Does large-scale tax avoidance or a huge underground economy just start spontaneously one morning? Do Prairie farmers simply get out of bed on the wrong side and start protesting the marketing constraints of the Canadian Wheat Board? How do businesspeople calling for freedom from government regulation wind up in the queue asking for government subsidies? If Parliament is accountable for controlling public spending, how did we manage, under the watchful eyes of its members (including my own for a decade), to achieve a national debt well in excess of \$500 billion by 2002?

These Canadian realities did not just happen spontaneously. They developed over time and had specific causes, as shown in the books and documentaries from the *underground royal commission*. Very real explanations exist for why the public mind soured, why consent among the governed withered away, why government lost its corrective controls, and why Parliament abdicated its primary role of calling to account those who wield power.

The *underground royal commission* endeavoured to hear the voice of Canadians with perspectives on issues such as these as recorded in these books and documentary

videos. These voices seldom filter through Canada's mainline news media or come within the purview of our country's self-referencing public affairs commentators.

The Authors and Contributors to the *underground royal commission*. Rather than attempting in less than 30 pages to condense a *Coles' Notes* version of the 16 books and the many hours of documentary programs, this paper is really meant to serve instead as a vehicle to report in overview fashion on this decade-long research project which itself has done all these things. It may be of interest, however, to give some flavour of the publications and their authors.

Reflections on Canadian Character, Bob Couchman's book, is a good place to start. He began as a social worker in the mean streets of Toronto and is older than many of the *underground royal commission* members, having grown up in the 1940s and 1950s, a witness to and participant in the very changes he describes and now reflects upon. Couchman's pioneering life took him from the back alleys of Toronto's inner city of Monarch Park to a role of national service leadership. He was a social agency director, foundation president, and co-chair of the Canada Committee for the United Nation's International Year of the Family. Couchman's observations accordingly offer a unique perspective on the changes that have taken place during the evolution of Canada's version of the welfare state.

His book guides a reader through his lifetime of direct experiences and draws numerous parallels between the changes in our culture and values, and how those had an impact in changing our political culture and social welfare systems.

"As we will see, when Canadian character changed, personal responsibility and the sense of social obligation as tangible Canadian values were eclipsed", he writes. "It was a change in these attitudes and values, indeed a change in the Canadian character, that slowly altered the principles underlying our social-welfare programs. This character change shifted us from a moral sense of reciprocal obligation to a firm belief in entitlement. It was this sense of being entitled that provided the fertilizer for the growth of universality." As Couchman repeatedly points out, prior to that "we lived in a culture where one's duty to family, neighbours, and country was the dominant value".

Couchman concludes that it was during the 1960s that this shift in cultural values took hold. He describes a "new generation of leaders" who grew out of the heady idealism of the late 1960s. "The era's passion for peace, love and justice was the basis for their humane instincts. These instincts, in turn, led to actions and policies, which seemed like the right thing to do. Having never experienced normal budgetary conditions, they were under the illusion that they could have it all. Social justice could, therefore, be achieved without loss of comfort and security."

The shift from informal natural support systems, says Couchman, was being justified on the basis that too many people had fallen through the gaps of the traditional system. What was needed was a universal social safety net run by well-trained professionals to ensure the social well-being of all citizens. As systemic rights guaranteed

by the state became Canada's new social vision, personal duty and obligations began to fade as Canadian cultural values.

Couchman points to another phenomenon, as well, which plagues our government and all its institutions. It is what he calls resistance to change. "Unless threatened with extinction, public institutions and systems are incapable of making major changes either to their priorities or the way they do their work. Modest incremental change is the best you can hope to achieve even under the most pressing external conditions...the appearance of concern and change is what is important in the political world." It is not so important to actually resolve a social problem.

Couchman happily soars above a narrow focus on financial accountability, a good thing in the social service sector. Service accountability must also be used as a tool, which cannot be measured in dollars. He notes that rational logic in the French civil service required the public servant to ask a simple question before implementing policy, "Does this make sense?"

In his book, *Secrets in High Places*, Jay Innes tries to make sense of the Canadian Infrastructure Works Program, a government initiative to fix the crumbling roads and sewers of Canadian cities. By attempting to track the pattern of decision-making and the trail of a dollar through this \$8.3 billion dollar infrastructure program, Innes and seven other researchers found accountability to be non-existent. Innes holds a master's degree in journalism from Carleton University and brings his tenacious researcher's instincts to this project which produced, not only the book but a 2-part television documentary as well.

Using access to information requests, numerous in-person interviews with government officials and contractors, close scrutiny of government documents and pouring over newspaper accounts just drove them to keep looking further. Not only could they not find answers about where public money goes, but the obfuscation and smoke screens set up by the numerous officials revealed important truths about the separate universe these public functionaries inhabit from the population they purportedly serve.

This in-depth investigation of the inner-workings of a government spending program may enable perplexed citizens to understand why the Government of Canada, delving so deeply into *municipal* government matters such as sewers and bridges, should end up funding a golf course in Nova Scotia, a bowling alley in P.E.I., a theatre renovation in Montreal, bocce courts in Toronto, a museum in Winnipeg and bicycle paths in B.C. for a municipality that had never requested them although it had applied for funding that never came through to replace a dangerous highway intersection.

The Canada Infrastructure Works story is further enhanced by one researcher's personal account of her journey. Talk about government where it hits the street! In *Down The Road Never Travelled*, a raffish quality enlivens the writing of Brigitte Pellerin, a skill which will be greatly valued by readers. Pellerin, a freelance writer and

journalist, is also author of *Épître aux tartempions: Petit pied de nez aux révolutionnaires de salon*, is former editor of the French Press page in Sunday's *Montreal Gazette*, and currently is a weekly columnist with *The Ottawa Citizen*.

She started her surrealistic voyage of infrastructure discovery by researching what was going on in Quebec with the infrastructure works program. It takes talent to turn the saga of a tri-level government program to spend more than \$8 billion on bridges and sewers into a non-fiction farce, but Pellerin richly displays her skills in doing just that, all the while bringing out the disturbing truths revealed by those directly involved inside the labyrinth of this project.

What is more, the comic aspects of what really happened with this unaccountable government boondoggle come from the stunning accuracy with which this insouciant Quebec writer tells the inner story of how government really operates in Canada today. She holds a mirror to behind-the-scenes political Canada. If we laugh, it is only because it's better than crying.

In both books about the Infrastructure Program, the *underground royal commission's* premise was that in such a straightforward aspect of government, it would be easier to see the nature of contemporary public administration in Canada than by wading into immensely more complex jurisdictions such as health, transport, agriculture or education. In the end, there was nothing straightforward about this journey.

In *Does Your Vote Count?*, which is both a scathing inquiry and a sad tale, Paul Kemp tells how Canada's system of so-called representative government has slipped into a highly centralized decision-making operation. Kemp had just finished his term as president of the student council at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg when he joined the *underground royal commission*. For quite some time already, he'd had a quirky disbelief about many of the things he was officially told about government spending. If his view was jaundiced, that was perhaps only in the eyes of the political establishment that kept trying to rationalize programs and spending which he clearly saw, from his own independent study, did not compute. In hindsight, it is now obvious that someone with Kemp's instinct to get the real story should have been drawn to the *underground royal commission*, and just as obvious that he would rapidly mature to become a producer of television documentaries and author of two books in the Breakout series.

His book *Does Your Vote Count?* is a case-by-case study of party politics, the decline of the MPs' role in Parliament, and the impact of the media on this ostensibly democratic process. Whether dealing with federal budgets, the enactment of new laws, or holding the government of the day to account, Kemp's compilation of the evidence presents a stunning portrait of our parliamentary system as it has evolved, and demonstrates by direct quotes from current and past members of parliament themselves, why this system seems decreasingly able to represent the best interests of citizens.

In *Goodbye Canada?*, Kemp brings to print a television documentary that he produced from video research of the *underground royal commission*. Aired as “Canada’s Brain Drain: A Wake-up Call” on the Global TV Network and Prime TV, the documentary was one of the early releases of work from the *underground royal commission*.

Through a variety of on-the-ground interviews with Canadians on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border, Kemp analyzes how international trade agreements and the free movement of workers and capital are threatening Canada’s economic relevance on the world stage. His evidence suggests that in the face of this phenomenon the Canadian government has seldom responded imaginatively to the challenge. Not only does his book explore reasons for this, but asks the even deeper question of how Canada can reverse this trend.

Roy Rempel, a foreign and defence policy advisor with a PhD in international relations and author of *Counterweights*, was hired by the Reform Party’s national caucus to shore-up its policy work on defence and military matters. Although highly familiar with his subject matter, Rempel’s experience on The Hill proved a political eye-opener for him.

From his altered perspective as an insider of Parliament Hill, Rempel suddenly discovered, and discusses in telling detail in *The Chatter Box*, another book in the series, how Parliament has become increasingly irrelevant in scrutinizing national policy. In particular, given his involvement with the Official Opposition defence critic and work with the parliamentary defence committee, Rempel examines Canada’s involvement in conflicts such as Afghanistan and Kosovo. Prior to the outbreak of the war in Kosovo, few questions had been asked in Parliament and MPs, confronted with this crisis for the first time, chose simply to read from speeches that had been prepared for them by bureaucrats. The Appendix to Rempel’s book is one of the most damning of documents: speeches on Kosovo of six government MPs printed in columns beside the virtually identical texts written by civil servants obtained under Access to Information requests. In the absence of meaningful debate, he documents how Parliament serves little more than the role of legitimizing the prime minister’s foreign policy decisions. If Canada’s international influence is slipping, and our national sovereignty eroding, Rempel’s account provides chapter and verse why this is so.

For instance, our lack of military preparedness is shown in several lucid examples in Rempel’s analysis of the campaign in Kosovo. “The problem is that without the requisite capability, the use of persuasive rhetoric is of limited value. Neither adversaries nor allies are likely to ‘consider and weigh the views’ of a country that can bring little in the way of hard power capability to the table. The soft power myth can only be sustained in an environment made safe by the hard power of allies,” he suggests.

Quite apart from interpretations of Canada’s role in the world, which will always be debatable, virtually every Canadian who reads Rempel’s book will form a unanimous view, I think, about the appalling inadequacies of decision-making and responsibility for

military matters within our own country's governing apparatus, most notably including Parliament. In reviewing the Trudeau years, Rempel concludes "Not only was departmental advice from experienced officials completely ignored, but so too was the Liberal-dominated House of Commons standing committee on external affairs and national defence." Moving through the era of the Mulroney Government, he considered that "defence policy became even more schizophrenic" with, for example, the prompt abandonment of the election promise to increase defence budgets.

The accountability shortcomings and the sometimes surrealistic decision-making processes which emerge as a hallmark of contemporary Canadian government – sadly all too richly documented by the *underground royal commission* – can be both maddening and costly when they pertain to domestic programs. When extended to military and international affairs, the costs can be far more deadly. *The Chatter Box* bears witness to that bleak truth.

My own book, entitled *Just Trust Us: The Erosion of Accountability in Canada* joins this series, in part as an effort to synthesize a number of the findings from the *underground royal commission's* investigations, but also in part as my own integration of ideas about the workings of our governing institutions acquired over the years as a journalist, lawyer, parliamentarian, author and teacher. Themes about accountability already mentioned earlier in this article are greatly expanded upon in *Just Trust Us*, but so is a wider-lens view of Canadian public affairs.

From reconsidering the true nature of federalism to the reasons Quebec nationalists were the strongest defenders of the Constitution, from the role of special interest groups and lobbyists and opinion pollsters on to the shortcomings of our electoral system, turning from the justifiable reasons for a tax revolt to the understandable causes of an underground economy, I seek to draw together new patterns that help explain why Canadians who care deeply about our country nevertheless feel perplexed, angered, and even embarrassed by the way we now govern ourselves.

What we teach children, of course, is that Canadian government is "responsible government," meaning that it is *responsible to the elected representatives of the people*. We explain that in order to govern, the executive officials who run the government (the prime minister and Cabinet ministers), being themselves elected members of the House of Commons, are required to explain about the decisions they are making and the ways they are wielding the power of government. There are a few wrinkles, but that's essentially how, since back to the 1840s, even well before Confederation, it has worked in our country's government when it comes to who has the power and how they are held accountable in its use.

If since the late 1700s 'representative government' has been part of our Canadian birthright, since the 1800s this form of 'responsible government' has additionally been a constitutional foundation of our country. That the forms of both endure, but not their substance, forms the thesis of my book. The consequence is an absence of accountability in Canadian government.

Partly this was hard to see because the erosion of accountability has been taking place gradually, as the venerable institutions and practices meant to achieve accountability first atrophied into irrelevance, and then irresponsibility. This atrophication was also hard to observe because getting perspective in a democracy is not easy. Perspective is about distance, the kind you need to see clearly. Because we inhabit a self-governing democratic state we get so busy with the tumble of our urgent affairs that we need more distance in order to see the longer historical perspective and gain insight about the relative significance of daily political events. Finally, it has been hard because most of what we know about government is from the government's own perspective, as already considered in this paper, not analyzed from the citizen's point of view.

At the University of Guelph where I now teach courses on governance, corruption and political ethics, my colleague Richard Phidd, who is a political science professor of public administration and public policy, says "Beneath the surface of all the proposed organizational changes we contemplate, and certainly beneath the surface of those reforms being actually implemented, are conflicting and competing norms, values and ideas which operate in the direction opposite to such reforms."¹⁷

We need greater clarity, and less partisan heat, to really see what is going on. Douglas Fisher, former NDP Member of Parliament and today dean of Ottawa's Parliamentary Press Gallery, quickly grasped this when he first read *'Just Trust Us'*. He wrote, "If we are to succeed we must not lose sight of this crucial truth: before we can undo the mistakes of the past, we have to clearly understand how and why the mistakes were made in the first place, and how the system as it exists today came to be." This drive toward understanding is, in fact, what fuels this entire series of works.

Emergence of New Politics. Much attention at the start of this paper was given to specialization of learning and fragmentation of knowledge and the difficulty in our age of achieving comprehensive understanding of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. That trend becomes more problematic in an age when, at the same time, some insist, "Everything is political." It has already been a very long time since Aristotle referred to man as 'a political animal'. Now every sentient Canadian through the course of a day interacts repeatedly with government's many faces and tentacles. Just to cope, a citizen must become a small 'p' politician. Everything is political. Yet when the operation of government is incomprehensible and incomplete, disconnected and unaccountable -- whether you are interacting with it from outside or from within -- such exercise of our political persona acquires a surreal quality. In Canadian governance this situation has brought about a gradual drifting apart, a separation of the directing head from the operating body, the structure from the citizen.

Since power abhors a vacuum, however, the space of this 'disconnect' is being filled in by a newly emerging form of politics. This re-expression of politics does not fit the old patterns. It does not, first of all, precisely because it represents a reaction against the

¹⁷ See *The Leadership Challenge*, Patrick Boyer (ed.) (Guelph: University of Guelph, 2002), p. 10.

increasingly dysfunctional ways -- as in the turning away from traditional party politics, the bypassing of legislative bodies, a shift to a parallel economy, the replacement of judicial confrontation in courtrooms with 'alternate dispute resolution', and so forth. Secondly, this emerging form of politics may not be readily recognizable through traditional methodologies nor easily placed in established categories of political analysis, simply because it embraces new methods, structures and technologies that did not exist when the forms of the older order were themselves created.

Conclusion. It is clear that I am neither bringing forth here a current review and synthesis of academic literature on accountability in Canadian government, nor reporting on the results of surveys or studies conducted from my office in the Political Science Department at the University of Guelph. This paper is about something refreshingly different. The purpose here is simply to introduce fellow political scientists to a novel, imaginative and sobering front-line study conducted with remarkable thoroughness and energy by dozens of our fellow citizens during the last decade. Because turnout is fair play, it was only fitting that the much-studied citizens of Canada should turn the lens around to look, for a change, at the workings of their government.

Government did not write the terms of reference for this study, did not pay for it, and does not get the recommendations to do with as it will – simply because there are no explicit recommendations and because whatever is in the *underground royal commission* is for citizens themselves to deal with in a self-governing democracy. Anyone can draw upon the experience of the *underground royal commission* for what it tells us about the state of Canadian government, about the ways traditional analysis of public policy formation and its implementation has demonstrable shortcomings, and about the disquieting nature of civil society and the marginalized role of citizens in the contemporary operation of democratic government in our country.

The results are not only refreshing but formidable, suggesting that the wise and wily Machiavelli may have been right when he said it is only ordinary citizens who can comprehend fully the nature of those who rule them.