

The McGuinty Government and Image Branding

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In mid-2006 a flurry of media and partisan attention was focused upon the awarding of a collection of advertising contracts related to the refashioning of the Ontario provincial logo and the reworking of the name and corporate logo of the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation. Government and OLG representatives argued that the re-design represented rejuvenation of symbols for the modern age. The reworked logos and labels were a proud assertion of new identities and were tools of public education. Critics challenged the appropriateness of the expenditures, the choice of ad agencies, and the value of the newly designed logos and labels, among other things. This debate and the varying ways of understanding logos as part of government and public sector image management are the principal concern of this paper. A much larger scandal subsequently engulfed the Lottery Corporation related to the disbursement of prizes and the inadequate supervisory climate, but this growing calamity is beyond the confines of this essay.

What do we make of provincial government efforts to establish identity through the design and circulation of official logos? How do we make sense of this aspect of government communication and branding policy? Is there a significant public policy purpose at stake? Should there be more scrutiny of the relationship between governments and advertising agencies? These and other questions all arise in light of the kind of circumstances noted above. Using these selected Ontario government examples this paper will contemplate the areas of inquiry noted above.

The issue of government logos and branding will be examined through three possible ways of understanding the issues at hand. First will be taking the rationales offered by government and advertising spokespeople at 'face value'; that is to say that these efforts serve an informational and public education purpose. The second will be to assess the branding matter in light of the literature which senses pitfalls in the close ties between advertising firms and governing parties. This is a common perspective in light of the negative publicity associated with the federal Gomery Commission and the corrupt practices which accompanied government advertising and national promotion under the Chrétien regime. Finally, such branding will be looked at in terms of political marketing and the fostering of a modern political identity through the manipulation of symbols. This paper is meant primarily as an exploration of a slice of a much larger topic, namely government branding and its administration. Hence, there is more an attempt to work through the three possible approaches than a definitive attempt at a definitive characterization. There are obvious overlaps among the ways of examining these logos but this is not a major methodological limitation at this preliminary stage of inquiry.

Organizational branding is a major topic in the field of government efforts at image building and news management. It may be seen as an element of the trend to understand the nexus of politics and marketing. Jennifer Lees-Marshment expressed it this way:

Political marketing is not just about spin-doctors or election campaigns; it represents the application of marketing to a wide range of political areas. Political marketing is about political organizations adapting techniques (such as market research) and concepts originally used in the business world to help organizations achieve their goals. (2004; p9)

Another noteworthy contribution to the refinement of this approach from a Canadian perspective can be found in Rose (2003) wherein he works with the concept of public sector branding, the conscious effort to shape public impressions through the cultivation of a defined government brand with advertised attributes.

After discussing the nature of government logos and developing the Ontario case studies, each of the three analytical perspectives will be applied in turn. Given the preliminary nature of the commentary the paper's goal of thesis development will be modest. First is the basic observation that there is limited study in the Canadian literature about government institutions and public administration about the contribution of logos and branding efforts to provincial political life. The literature developed by scholars like Lees-Marshment (2004) and Jonathan Rose (2000 and 2003) on government advertising, issue promotion, and organizational branding is an illuminating trailblazer but more remains to be done. Their work is obviously about much larger themes than the more limited matter of logos and the associated linkages with advertising agencies. Yet, logos are a definable and significant element of the larger branding endeavour. Finally, it will be asserted that however one understands the logo reform efforts there is reason for worry arising from the tepid and limited attention devoted by the McGuinty government to selling the symbols in question to the Ontario public. Symbols are complex entities with uncertain lives encompassing traditional and aesthetic values, not to mention associated cost considerations.

In short, this paper is a survey of competing understandings of public sector logos and the relation of their creation and design to political and partisan debates. It is hoped that more work will ensue regarding this interesting yet often overlooked issue. There are questions which go beyond the limited agenda tackled here. Among these possible research questions are topics associated with the costs and administrative protocols associated with introducing a government logo, the governmental decision-making channels and consultative mechanisms, and the rise and fall of contending provincial emblems as time and governments pass.

Appreciating the Role and Importance of Logos

Before setting out the two Ontario cases in greater detail a few general observations are in order about the use of logos and the dimensions of their appreciation. The use of design symbols to signify corporate, governmental, religious, or some other organization or movement is of course a widespread trend. Advertising firms offer services to aid in the branding of organizations or movements so as to establish their identity for use on buildings, equipment, correspondence, and charitable contributions. Their import encompasses social, cultural, legal, and aesthetic concerns as well as more

formally political concerns. It is worth bearing this in mind so as to gain some sense of the breadth of their significance.

A few illustrative examples will offer a glimpse into the considerations that go into the design and assessment of these symbolic representations. There are diverse considerations at play. Logos must accord to some extent with societal preferences and taboos. The Globe and Mail of February 22, 2007, for example, carried a business story on the need to add a fourteenth dot to the corporate logo of Brussels Airlines, the successor to the merged Virgin Express and SN Brussels. Apparently the additional dot was “prompted by a flood of disapproving e-mails and calls when it was unveiled” (B14) due to fears relating to the number thirteen. Additionally, logos seem to reside in the public consciousness as both shorthand for their parent organization as well as familiar aesthetic symbol for users and for citizen observers. When in late 2006 the US National Emergency Management Association retired the traditional ‘C and D’ symbol of civil defense in the U.S. the story made the New York Times (24). Its passing “was eulogized by Riichard Grefe, the executive director of the American Institute of Graphic Arts” who declared that “The old mark fits in the same category of simplicity and impact occupied by the London Underground map.” (24) This is celebrated company for the Underground map was accorded serious notice as a primary example of Modernism in a major 2006 exhibit at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. Logos are also promoted as contributing to public mobilization and the fostering of enthusiasm for new plans and possibilities. When, for example, the logo for the London 2012 Olympic bid was unveiled the Chair of the London Bid Committee Barbara Casani reported that the winning logo has triumphed over in excess of 1000 entries. She boasted that “This is the first really physical representation of the bid here in London – it is a very important step along the way.” A feature that she was especially proud of was that the logo incorporated the Thames River with the Olympic colours.

Whatever else they may represent, it is also important to recall that corporate and organizational logos are a form of legal trademark which is protected at law and which has set design specifications. Quick reference to the Heritage Canada website, for example, reveals an entry entitled “Canadian Heritage Signature and the Canadian Wordmark” which clearly declares that “The “Canada” wordmark has been defined as the dominant symbol of the federal identity, this aspect should be reflected when presenting the wordmark.” (Canadian Heritage Website) There are strictly observed design and colour features. Trademark infringement or misrepresentations are potentially serious legal problems.

Examining Two Ontario Cases

This paper will explore two Ontario cases where reform of public sector logos produced controversies. What the two cases have in common is that they occurred during the term of the same provincial government, that of Premier Dalton McGuinty, and that they rose to the fore at about roughly the same time. The case relating to the OLG (formerly the OLG) went on to become a secondary element of a much larger scandal regarding lottery retailers and prize disbursement. This larger scandal is generally beyond the narrow confines of this exploratory story. This paper is not so much a detailed dissection of scandals so much as a preliminary exploration of the various issues

surrounding the politics of logos utilizing conveniently coexisting and contemporary cases.

First, let us review the debate over the re-design of the Ontario provincial government logo. The original logo was a product of the early 1960s and the search for an expression of the modern province. Central to this logo throughout its various forms is the trillium, the provincial flower. The trillium has long been recognized as a primary Ontario emblem. “Under Ontario’s 1937 Floral Emblem Act, the *trillium grandiflorum*, or the white trillium, gained its revered status as the “floral emblem” of the province, adopted after a special committee of botanists recommended it to the Ontario Horticultural Association.” (Bhattacharya; D12) Norman Hathaway, the graphic designer of the 1964 design and its refinement in 1972, explained the choice of the trillium symbol this way:

Some ministers wanted to see gear wheels, and others wanted to see lakes and rivers, and everything that you can think of that identified Ontario as a wonderful province. We wiped the slate clean and took what, to us, was a beautiful and understandable element, the trillium flower, and stylized it.” (Design Edge Canada, July 6, 2006)

The trillium has remained the core of the logo ever since despite revisions in colour (1994 and 2002) and design (2006).

The 2006 revision involved removing the box surrounding the trillium and the addition of three figures along the edges of the trillium seeming to reach out beyond the flower. This was the work of Bensimon Byrne an advertising firm which was reported to have received \$219, 000 for this project. Controversy ensued over the choice of the firm, the design, the public expenditure at a time of provincial deficit, and the cost of implementing and replicating a new logo throughout the provincial government. Opposition leader John Tory suggested that “it could cost \$11 million just to replace the existing symbol on 3,500 government buildings and 10,000 vehicles.”(Benzie and Ferguson; A8)

Bensimon Byrne was questioned given its work on Liberal election advertising in the preceding provincial election. Opposition parties queried the choice of the firm and challenged the government about their past statements about avoiding partisan government advertising. Reports also surfaced about a sharp increase in provincial government work for the firm once the McGuinty Liberals were in power. In the McGuinty government’s first full year in office the firm did over \$6 million worth of business after doing less than \$100,000 the year before. (Howlett; A11) It might also be noted that in November 2005 the provincial Health Minister reported “that Bensimon and Byrne would handle all advertising for his ministry.” (Editorial: Exploding ...; A12) The resulting uproar led the provincial government to release a statement from the provincial Advertising Review Board upholding the legitimacy of the contract.

Critics lamented the loss of the clear and elegant lines of the trillium and the jarring addition of abstract figures marring the edges of the trillium. Commentators further asserted that there had been no need for reform. In response the government replied that addition of the figures was “meant to symbolize unity” (Editorial: Exploding ...; A12.) Premier McGuinty boasted that it was time to re-awaken impressions of Ontario and its people. “It’s just a refreshing of the logo we’ve had in place for 30 years. We’re not the same province we were 30 years ago.” (Benzie and Ferguson; A8)

At roughly the same time a second logo debate sprang up, this time relating to the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation when the Corporation opted to drop the letter C from its acronym and thereby became the OLG (Ontario Lottery Corporation). Press reports soon tied this decision to a sizable expenditure on advertising and marketing advice. In early September, 2006, the Toronto Star, for example, weighed in with the following harsh denunciation.

So whether the Crown agency calls itself OLGC or OLG is largely irrelevant to everyone who places a bet.

Consequently, the \$4 million to \$6 million the agency has just spent to drop the C from its name and “rebrand” itself as the OLG is a colossal waste of money that could have been put to better use in a hospital or a few schools, which the lottery supports by feeding the government’s coffers. (Editorial: This Lotto ...; A18)

Provincial government links to the Lottery Corporation were also challenged. The Toronto Sun’s Christina Blizzard linked the issue to the decision that Jim Warren, a McGuinty communication advisor, would become the OLG Vice President of Strategic Relations. (Blizzard; 23)

There was an interesting skirmish when OLGC/OLG officials appeared before the Standing Committee on Government Agencies on September 6, 2006. Duncan Brown, the Chief Executive Officer, and Michael Gough, the OLG Chair, represented the Corporation. Brown defended the rebranding as public education in response to corporate research that indicated “that less than 10% of the population could actually identify all or our lines of business and knew what the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp. was.” (Standing Committee Testimony; A-234) When asked about how dropping of the C would benefit taxpayers Brown attempted to relate the contribution of the logo to the broader issue of rebranding. “The interesting thing about the logo is that it is one part of rebranding, but it is only one part. The logo is a visual symbol, an identification that sparks in the public who see it a particular reaction. So this is not about dropping a “C”. This is about creating a brand that will represent trust, integrity and effective gaming operations.” (Standing Committee Testimony; A-234) These were brave words for the leader of a public sector corporation which would shortly be plunged into a morass of scandal over financial and prize supervision and ethics.

Questions about advertising contracts came early on in the hearing. Although another firm had assisted the OLG with its adjusted logo, the firm of Bensimon Byrne figured in the Committee hearing.

Mr. Tascona: Bensimon Byrne, which was the Liberals’ 2003 election campaign ad agency, I understand, had a contract with the OLGC from April 1, 2001, to March 31, 2004, on a retainer of \$38,000 per month. A new contract with the identical description of the work expectations commenced April 1, 2004, and runs to March 31, 2007. The only difference is that the pay has more than doubled to \$78,500 a month. Can you explain the reason for this generous increase to Bensimon Byrne. (A-235)

Duncan Brown’s response emphasized OLG obedience to guidance from the provincial Advertising Review Board and the talent of his corporation’s marketing people in assessment of advertising firms.

Ways of Understanding the Politics of Public Sector Logos and Image Management

Governments across Canada and the world have engaged in efforts to revise public symbols and to check on the impressions of groups of consumers of one sort or another – citizens, electors, outside observers, travelers, trade partners etc. In early 2001 the CBC carried a report of the province of New Brunswick assessing fifteen possible new provincial logos. (“Province Considering ...” CBC; January 2, 2001) Much attention seemed to be directed to the issue of whether the traditional picture of a ship should remain central to the logo. More recently a major effort was undertaken in Manitoba to update their image. Businesses and volunteers contributed time and money and the Premier’s Economic Advisory Council oversaw the project. (“Manitoba’s ...” CBC News; June 15, 2006) In fact, as this paper is being written there are posters throughout this author’s home city of London advertising Saskatchewan and encouraging people to contemplate moving there to live.

Before us we have two specific instances where logos associated with the Ontario government and its agencies were the source of controversy and debate. What follows is the consideration in turn of three ways of working with the issues raised by the cases. There may well be some overlap among the differing approaches but there are fresh insights arising from each. First is to take government and OLG statements at face value, that what is going on an effort to modernize symbols in accordance with contemporary circumstances and the needs of public education.

The Premier spoke of the merit in refreshing the provincial logo and OLG executives spoke in terms of making people aware of their full range of lottery and gambling options. Accomplishing these objectives through advertising would correspond to the argument that of Doern and Wilson (1974) that governments often opt to proceed with policy instruments which are less coercive before moving on to more coercive instruments. While there are advertising, design, and copying costs involved, logo refinement is not coercive as a policy instrument. People are still free to react as they see fit. People may still, for example, still opt to avoid gambling or to remain nostalgic over the beauty of the traditional trillium emblem.

Viewing government logos through this lens has serious analytical limits. Unaddressed questions multiply. We are not told of any detailed survey measuring the reactions of Ontarians to their logo. Were they unaware of the trillium? What educational objective would be met by its reform? Why the heavy reliance upon advertising firms for a provincial symbol and for ongoing issue management? With regard to a provincial logo it is easily imaginable that design contests could be run through school contests or through a variation of the citizens’ advisory committee approach used by the same McGuinty government to review the provincial electoral system. There is little on the official record as to why professional design and advertising help was required. Why the lack of governmental statements or an ongoing educational campaign explaining the need for a new version of the logo or for increased gambling knowledge? In the case of the provincial logo government statements were reactive to media and Opposition criticism and were often of limited explanatory value. OLG statements were more detailed but still largely reactive. What emphasis there was was more often reaffirmation of procedural acceptability. What guided governmental and OLG choice of advertising firms? Were the logos and the corporate name change part of a larger, concerted effort to shape a provincial image in the political and advertising marketplace?

A second cut at the issues raised by these two cases would involve focusing on the close and complicated relationship between governments, political parties, and advertising and communications firms. In their research report for the Gomery Commission Sandinsky and Gussman make the observation that over Canadian history this general relationship “could be characterized as an unholy alliance” (305) Governments have favours to bestow and close connections to favoured advertising agencies have been long discussed in debates over accountability and government advertising. Questions have been frequently raised about bidding procedures, potential lists of favoured firms, and alleged instances of patronage. With reference to the two cases before us there were indeed questions raised about the government allocation of advertising work and the financial magnitude of the work. Looking at the choice of firms such as Bensimon Byrne does reveal significantly more information than a basic public education perspective. Media and partisan commentators queried the awarding of contracts and the nature of the connection between work done in the preceding election campaign and subsequent allocations from the victorious McGuinty Liberals. While these questions do raise legitimate fears it should also be noted that the relevant provincial agencies accepted the legality of contract procedures and legislative committees were provided a broad ranging inquiry. It might also bear noting that in the case of the appearance of OLG officials before the Standing Committee on Government Agencies questions about the advertising contracts were evident but secondary in volume and time to discussions of other gambling-related matters.

The issues raised by the two Ontario cases are about more than simply the connections between a Government and one or more advertising firms. It is contended here that the central issue is the apparently self-serving and sporadic attention paid by the McGuinty government to the provincial brand and its resonance with Ontarians. Vague references to updating trillium designs or to acquainting Ontarians with added lines of retail gambling do not suggest sustained or deep thought about the political weight of familiar emblems and the related expenditures of public funds.

Edelman reminds us that “Symbols become that facet of experiencing the material world that gives it a specific meaning. The language, rituals, and objects to which people respond are not abstract ideas. If they matter at all, it is because they are accepted as basic to the quality of life.” (8) It is this quality of life that merits recognition in the symbolic representations of a province. When the Manitoba Government sought to refashion their provincial image through rebranding there was coordinated involvement from various sectors of provincial society. The result was an attempt at a new representation of the province that would have resonance with internal and external audiences. Manitoba rebranding campaign co-chair Robert Ziegler stressed the magnitude of the task this way to CBC News in light of the \$2.1 million allocated: If you look at Saskatchewan, they’ve spent \$14 million for their campaign. Montreal has a budget of \$23 million for that....

We have to balance the resources we have, and it really is partners, community involvement. So it’s not enough money to make it work, but Manitobans have a spirit – when we want to make something work, we’ll find a way. (“Manitoba’s New Brand ...”, CBC News; June 15, 2006)

The Ontario logo remodeling efforts seem by comparison far less interested in community involvement, less visible, and less part of a larger, more coordinated plan.

Conclusion

The argument of this preliminary inquiry into two case studies of recent public sector logo adjustment, rests on the following points. First, provincial government logos are important as they contribute to citizen identification and to the fashioning of a shared sense of the Provincial character both internally and externally. Furthermore, logos have cultural, legal, aesthetic, educational, and financial dimensions. Their service as catalysts for citizen participation and public education warrants increased scholarly attention. Second, there are various ways of looking at the Ontario logos in question (public education, a product of government relations with advertising firms, government branding.). Each yields insights but in light of the debate over the cases at issue here it would seem arguable that the first two are too limited to capture some of the larger dimensions of the issues raised. In the public debate over the two cases there was a quickly established a two-sided pattern. Government explanations defended the updating of symbols while Opposition and media complaints centred on the nature of government advertising contracts. The nature of the symbols and the value of broad-based public participation went largely overlooked. Thus, in many ways the most striking outcome was the realization of the desultory and seemingly piecemeal way in which the McGuinty government approached the whole issue. Their explanations for their decisions were after the fact and out of keeping with the concerted public sector branding campaigns seen elsewhere in the country. This is disappointing given not only the expenditures involved but also the importance of citizen identification and engagement with the traditions and symbols of Ontario life.

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