
Developing Better Political Leaders: The Case for a School of Government

by Paul G. Thomas

The quality of our politics and the caliber of our politicians matter to the economic and social progress of Canadian society. This is the underlying premise for the case that Canada needs a school of government to better provide creative ideas and skillful political leadership to meet the challenges of a more complicated, pluralistic, interdependent and rapidly changing world. At present, Canadians believe they do not get the politics and government they deserve. More competent, credible, innovative, effective and ethical political leaders will help address both the serious policy challenges and the public disillusionment which exist today.

Opinion surveys tell us that among occupations, politicians are ranked last in terms of trustworthiness. The same surveys also reveal low levels of public confidence in the capacity of governments to deal effectively with such major policy challenges as climate change, healthcare reform, poverty, aboriginal issues and law and order.

Mistrust of politicians and pessimism about the capabilities of governments are related. Politicians have become both the creators and the captives of an increasingly cynical public. Over the years political parties and their leaders have made election promises which they never intended to adopt or which were too good for the voters to resist and impossible to implement. Along with over promising and under delivering, politicians have shown little regard for the intelligence of voters and their potential to learn about complicated policy issues. Instead of seeking to play an informing and educational role, politicians use polling, focus groups, psycho-demographic analysis of the electorate and sophisticated communications strategies to arouse an apathetic public and to manipulate public opinion to gain voter support.

It has been said that politicians campaign in poetry and govern in prose. During elections, simple, emotive

stories are used to establish a dominant narrative and to make an emotional connection with voters. Between elections the proceedings of legislatures, especially as covered by the media, resemble a permanent election campaign in which the competing political parties engage in highly adversarial, negative, personal and theatrical attacks. Governments attempt to “spin” stories and to manage the news, while opposition parties interpret every revelation of a problem in a highly suspicious, accusatory light. Very little informed, balanced discussion of their real issues of governing complex societies takes place and very little learning for the parties or the public (if it is watching) takes place. Slogans, sound bites and feigned indignation certainly ignore the ambiguities, uncertainties and risks of governing in the 21st century.

Partisanship, competition and some degree of negativity is appropriate in a pluralistic society where there are legitimate disagreements over both the ends and means of public policy. Competition among parties provides the energy which drives elections and the legislative process. Parties help to shape voter choices at election time, they serve as recruitment agencies to fill public offices, they perform the roles of government and oppositions in our cabinet-parliamentary system of government, and in these ways they provide a basis for achieving responsiveness and accountability to citizens.

If politics is essentially about the representation

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and accommodation of divergent values and interests, the channeling of social conflicts in a constructive manner and the mobilization of public consent and support for new directions within society, then we need better informed and more skillful political leaders. We also need a higher quality and more constructive partisanship from all the political parties which compete for office in this country. Yearning for charismatic, transformational political leaders who by the power of their ideas and their eloquence transcend social divisions and unify large majorities behind a shared vision is an unrealistic basis for the achievement of good government.

The novelist Robert Louis Stevenson once observed that “politics is the only occupation for which no preparation is thought to be necessary”. This is wrong. Even in previous centuries when the scope and complexity of government was far less challenging, “amateur” politicians and their parties still found it difficult to diagnose social problems, gain public support for their policy ideas, set agendas within government and translate their ideas into effective programs.

Overtime politics has become more professionalized, but the emphasis within political parties has been on campaigning and communication to build support, not on the tough tasks of developing sound policy ideas and building skills to lead public organizations. Despite generous public subsidies, political parties have invested little time and effort into policy development. Campaign schools for candidates and short orientations programs for newly-elected legislators do not prepare people for the real challenges of public life. Working in legislatures is something like attending a school of politics but the mindless partisanship and the lack of meaningful opportunities to gain in depth knowledge, and even more importantly to apply that knowledge in a constructive manner means that the talents of most elected representatives are not developed or fully utilized.

In order to obtain sound policy advice and the managerial skills to implement public programs effectively, governments have created public service schools, executive development programs and exchanges with the private sector. Few such opportunities exist for politicians. When ministers are not well prepared in terms of background knowledge and leadership skills there is the risk that senior public servants will dominate the partnership of shared leadership which we depend upon for creative, quality government.

A School of Government for Politicians

The most basic question is whether politics can be taught. I believe that it can. The National School of Government in the United Kingdom and the Graduate School of Political Management in Washington, D.C. have produced graduates who practice politics effectively and with greater ethical awareness because of the opportunity to broaden their perspectives and to gain new skills. Some individuals will have more innate skills as leaders, but everyone can learn how to be a better leader. These schools are not involved in training more spin doctors, pollsters and media manipulators, their goal is to provide elected representatives with a broad education that enables them to cope with rapid change, uncertainty and issues which are divisive and seem to be intractable.

The proposed school of government would have a number of broad educational goals. One would be to develop a sense of history, but also to cultivate an awareness of the dangers of simple lesson drawing from the past. Helping politicians to think in systems terms and developing greater capacity to understand complex causal relationships between proposed policy interventions and potential outcomes in society would be another goal. In addition to strategic and integrative thinking skills, graduates would possess greater tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. They would become longer term in their thinking, something which election cycles and the problem-specific nature of the parliamentary and media processes discourage. They would accept the need to plan, but also the necessity for improvisation. Awareness of the potential and the limits of various policy instruments available to governments would reduce the frequency of policy failures or disappointments. A great deal of policy-making represents a form of hypotheses testing, through trial and error governments seek to learn what works. As part of this experimental approach, politicians would develop greater skills in risk analysis and the identification of valid evidence and usable knowledge for feasible policy making.

Numerous operational issues are involved with creation of the school, only a few of which can be considered in the space available here. The first is who will be admitted to the school. I would propose that the school be open to all “freshmen” legislators from across the country who would take a set of core introductory courses. Another set of courses would be designed for cabinet ministers and “shadow” cabinet ministers in opposition with the goal of easing the transition into leading departments and managing portfolios of non-departmental bodies. Courses should also be

developed for political staff who represent a growing and influential group of actors within government.

A second issue is what should be taught. The school should develop courses in such areas as Canadian society and the economy, the constitution, including federalism, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the principles of collective and individual ministerial responsibility, the machinery of government, including the role of the public service, public finances and the budgetary process, the numerous accountability requirements which now apply to public office holders and the increased importance of values and ethics in public life. Along with these broad core subjects, there should be customized, more applied courses for ministers on such topics as agenda setting and leading a department, policy and risk analysis, decision-making for busy people, working with public servants, dealing with lobbyists, preparing for parliamentary business (Question period and committee appearances), communications and political messaging.

Most politicians enter public life from other occupations which means that the school will involve adult education. It is also the case that few politicians are lacking in terms of ego, confidence and ambition. These facts mean that the “faculty” in the school must have credibility (not just credentials), excellent presentation skills and the confidence to deal with controversy in a way that will promote learning rather than talking past others. To bridge theory and practice, there must be a carefully-selected mix of faculty – including former respected politicians and public servants, consultants, think tank representatives, communications specialists and academics who are leading-edge researchers but also excellent communicators. The pedagogical approach must involve active learning with a minimum of formal presentations, lots of group discussion, the use of role playing, including taped sessions, the analysis of cases, group projects and so on. The content of the courses will have to reflect the shifting context of Canada’s public sector.

Good schools seek to measure and to improve their performance. Success for the proposed school of national government will have many dimensions:

- The reputation of the school and the demands for its courses;
- The careers and reputations of its graduates in terms of their sense of responsibility to serve the public interest;

- The achievement of a better balance in political life between the current heavy emphasis on the skills and techniques of “retail politics” and the knowledge and skills required to govern productively and ethically;
- The gradual emergence of more systematic, evidence-based approaches to policy formulation;
- Greater respect and support for the role of an impartial, professional public service as a partner in the production of quality government;
- Less highly charged partisanship in legislatures and more constructive exchanges across party lines, especially in relation to matters where partisan philosophical differences are not relevant.

One of the benefits of the school will be to allow individuals from more diverse social and occupational backgrounds to enter and be successful in elected public office.

Even if a persuasive case can be made for a school of government, there is still the practical problem of how it will be created and financed. There is the existing Canada School of the Public Service (CSPS) (previously the Canadian Centre for Management Development) in Ottawa which, after several shifts in focus over the years now concentrates on leadership development in the senior public service. Sporadically it has involved politicians and political staff in its programs, but mainly it has sought to create a “safe” place where public managers can discuss issues, including the constraints arising from the political process, in a candid manner.

The proposed school could operate as a virtual, networked institution, using venues and faculty from across the country. The existing Canada School of the Public Service in Ottawa might provide the physical home for the school which would have a small staff, mainly a director and administrative support personnel. Courses could be open to interested federal, provincial, territorial and city politicians. Fees could be charged, but on the assumption that improved governing benefits society at large private donations could also be sought. Scheduling courses and finding time for politicians from across the country to participate would be difficult, but on-line sessions and material distributed electronically would provide some flexibility.

Foresight, intelligence, judgment, prudence, civility and integrity are far more important in public life than the skills of selling illusions and attacking political opponents. Now is the time to invest in the development of better political leaders.