

# Ideas, Resiliency and the Parapublic Service: A Methodology for the Criticism of Government Publications

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“He hath heart who knoweth fear, but vanquisheth it; who seeth the abyss, but with pride”  
*Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathoustra (trans. Thomas Common)*

*Abstract: Institutional developments of the past decades have led us to examine the changing nature of policymaking in Canada. The development from the 1980s onward of a Parapublic Service composed of consultants, special advisors, political staff, lobbyists and interest groups has altered not so much the formal decision making process but rather the ideas according to which government activity is judged to be legitimate. The paper proposes an approach to examining how this process takes place. Building on a theoretical framework which contrasts the use of policy ideas of central agencies to those of line departments, it aims to explore a framework through which the impact of the Parapublic Service might be understood. Ideas understood as a source of policy language can help illustrate the impact of the Parapublic Service on policymaking. Detachment some in the Parapublic Service have from the classical ethos of public service can lead them to value the managerial policy prescriptions prized by central agencies. The paper aims to offer a methodology as to how we might measure such a process. It further argues that this methodology might be useful in promoting in public managers a resiliency to the potentially deleterious influences of the Parapublic Service.*

It seems a moot point to argue that transformations of the monolithic department with which the Westminster tradition is historically associated have been the subject of concern for Public Management scholars. Studies in Public Management have uncovered several reasons to believe that transformations have occurred beneath the veneer time has waxed upon our institutions of government. In the name of comparative clarity between yesterday's and today's institutions, we should question whether the unqualified use of the term “Westminster tradition” should continue, considering the concentration of power around the Prime Minister, the evolution of the balance of power between Ministers and their deputies and the numerous structural transformations affecting the Public Service of Canada (PSC). This paper's discussion can be filed within the latter group of concerns. As with many before it, it is concerned with the issues of autonomy and the capacity for government to act.

This paper aims to uncover and add to existing approaches to the study of the PSC's capacity for autonomy in policymaking. It posits that a form of policy “liberalisation” took place no later than the 1980s. It concludes that beyond the very real structural transformations of policy units within the PSC, the rise of a multitude of participants, from think tanks (university, private, or government funded), to consulting agencies and pressure groups has forced a competition over the ideas of public policy. In the process of losing its monopoly over these ideas, the PSC's

policymaking foibles might have been exposed, which might have led to more effective and efficient policies. But the PSC might have simultaneously lost some of its capacity to manage the borders of the State, by which I mean the legitimacy of purpose and instruments of policy action. I am here saying nothing which has not in some way been alleged previously, notably by the numerous critics of New Public Management (NPM). This opening up of the control on the borders of the State through the relentless pressure of a collection of varied actors is perhaps the most significant clue to the much maligned loss of policy capacity.

The paper sets out from the study of what it terms the Parapublic Service (PPS), a broad concept which is designed to encompass these differently characterised organisations and individuals whose purpose is attached to that of government. A distinction is imposed between those individuals and organisations actively involved in providing support to the government's activities, such as special advisors and political staff, and those on the outside of the nonetheless porous borders of the State but still actively seeking to engage the policy process, such as pressure groups and lobbyists. The finer points of the distinction between the inside and the outside of government is willfully unclear. Simply put, all those who engage in the war of ideas over the purpose and instrumentation of government action but who are not members of the core departments are connected to the PPS. (Arms-length agencies would already be a bit removed, though we might hereafter be able to figure out by how much.). A special focus is reserved for consulting groups as some studies (Howlett and Migone, 2013, 2014; Saint Martin, 2005; Perl & White, 2002) point to a particularly well-developed capacity on the part of policy consultants to intervene and support policies anchored around their services. In other words, consultants operate on both sides of the fluid divide between the inside and the outside of the State. Consulting groups participate in both the active production of policy, in whatever capacity, but also in regulating the wider societal discussion on policymaking through their publications and other research activities. Whether the decline of policy units (ibid, 2002) in favour of "special" advice or the more broad

decline in capabilities of public managers<sup>1</sup> is or not beneficial to the State's policy capacity is not what is meant to be resolved here. I simply wish to see how we might study such a phenomenon.

This paper examines the process of policy liberalisation as a phenomenon whereby the field of policymaking became populated by actors seeking to offer a valuation of policy ideas according to their own objectives. The paper seeks to outline how we might detect the process by which ideas discussed outside the PSC come to find resonance within it. Going beyond a position of overt policy transfer (already addressed by the literature on policy learning, see Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; 2000), it seeks to offer an explanation which raises the potential of a weak flank exposing public managers to the untested influences of policymaking fashions. The ways in which ideas can shift are infinitely subtle and often pass unnoticed. Recent software developments for the analysis of text invite the opportunity to examine if, how and when ideas shift in government policy documents. We might even come to better understand as to why. An approach which clarifies how administrative fashions are set, one which offers a valuation system to policy positions, is best placed to explain the effects of opening up the market of policy ideas.

After discussing the development of the PPS, I move on to demonstrate in broad strokes how its arrival created new needs of control for central agencies and how this process can be understood. I advance that the appearance of the PPS in the 1980s was parallel to the rise of a new capacity to control the breadth and range of policymaking through the deployment of a literature that seeks to frame the anxieties of public managers and prepare tailored euphoric solutions. This new capacity is not ideological, as Saint Martin (2005) seems to indicate. Rather it was the result of a generalized newfound evidence regarding the malleability of policy ideas and the simultaneous realisation, outside of government, that managing ideas can be monetised and/or used to further one's objectives. Since the 1980s, central agencies, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) chief among them, have been able to concentrate power as a result of the suddenly real possibility of managing the terms of policy debates.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as in the field of IT, where significant portions of the work is undertaken by contract employees, under what might here be labelled as "management consulting"

## The Parapublic Service

I will not at this point engage in a discussion already largely held by others, on the growing use of policy consultants, special advisors from the 1980s onward. I will simply skip to arguing that this proceeded from the sudden realization that the ideas of policy debates could be managed through various communication tactics and even sold as products. It is quite possible that this awareness is as old as politics, but it certainly reached new peaks over the past three decades. Consulting groups were particularly keen to participate in this new regime of policy ideas (see Saint-Martin, 2005). The literature on excellence was part of a mountain of publications by consultants which culminated with *Reinventing Government*<sup>2</sup>. Much of this literature can be said to reflect the core beliefs of NPM and its attendant system of values (see Hood's (1991) now classic discussion of NPM's values). It also has the advantage of lending itself to an easy packaging process. The upbeat tone it conveys is meant as a sure sign of its rectitude. It is a bit of an understatement to say that NPM opened to the door to a redistribution of the PSC's tasks, including its involvement in policymaking. Perl and White (2002) seem quite clear that the rise of policy consulting is attributable to an NPM-mandated decrease of administrative and operational personnel.

Using the power accumulated by its predecessor, the Mulroney government actively developed sources of policy supported by the government but distinct from the PSC. To my knowledge his government still holds the record for the biggest PMO, at around 250 employees. In addition to adding staff to the PMO, the Mulroney government, orchestrated the creation of several new task forces and special advisors. This decision unleashed the policy genie and forever put the monopoly over the ideas of policymaking beyond the confines of the State. Those confines, as a result, became hazier. And with regards to policymaking, the process is one by which the monopoly on what is a government concern (purpose) and how it should go about it (instrumentation) was ended. In its place emerged a field of policy-making in which a multitude

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<sup>2</sup> There is reason to doubt that copies sold were copies read, but from the sheer number of books printed, these were indeed mountains.

of actors henceforth had the capacity to self-accredit their participation. These participants can be thought of as constituting the PPS through situating themselves at various distances from the hazy contours of the State.

The PPS includes several distinct forms of actors, some inside (tied to purpose) and others outside of government (autonomously engaging policy ideas). It is difficult, in any area, to come up with a complete list of relevant actors who attempt to shape the government's agenda. Through a collective access to the ideas (and not only the actual process) of policy, each can manufacture policy proposals whose validation engages a process of framing (see Dutil and Ryan (2013), citing Campbell and Pederson (2001)) the purpose and instrumentation of the State. We might first list political staffers. Inasmuch as the advent of the PPS can be tied to the growth of the PMO in the 1980s, it can be said to be at least 30 years old. The PMO appears more numerically restrained today. However, significant details emerged during the government of Stephen Harper to underscore that the influence of political staffers on the policy process has not waned in proportion to their numbers. Next, we might find the special advisors, advisory board members, task force directors, all individuals with often temporary and specified purposes vis-à-vis government activities. Like political staffers, they tend to exist within a regime of regulated remuneration, subjecting them to that classical Weberian characteristic of the bureaucrat that is contract-based pay (if only they are released from some of the more hierarchy-oriented characteristics). It would indeed be very interesting to employ what follows to study these groups and assess the degree of autonomy they manifest in their ideas.

Consultants are however the focus of this paper. Consultants must win their remuneration. They exist within a monetized rapport to their policy contributions. This underscores how their position straddles the boundary which otherwise tends to divide in two broad categories (inside/outside) the various groups which make up the PPS. It also reveals their unique perspective on the policy process, as organisations which have accumulated extensive practices in developing products for the PSC and as organisations which have a view from the inside on government activities. Saint Martin's (2005) discussion of their publication activities reveals a temptation to

frame the problem to then offer solutions in line with how the issue has been defined. When policymaking becomes monetized, Saint Martin seems to say, there is at least the risk that questions will be tailored to answers, instead of the other way around.

Many have noted the conceptual difficulties of defining a consultant (Howlett and Migone, 2013; Saint Martin, 2005). This speaks to the complex realities which define the boundaries of what we term the 'State'. A consultant might be a support workers, a policy expert, a defense contractor, an IT manager or any other person providing a service mandated by the government but who is not formally a part of the PSC. The distinction between management and policy consultants is a relevant one (Howlett and Migone, 2013). And to be clear, formal policy consultants are probably a minority. However, as is later assumed, public managers are also significant producers of policy, though perhaps not so much the one which takes the form of official documents<sup>3</sup>. But while most contemporary consultants might be more concerned with providing key infrastructure and other forms of support for public managers, policy ideas continues to be fed from the outside by publications of the major consulting firms and think tanks supported by them. Without condemning *a priori* all the work that this arrangement produces, the inherent risk of framing is rarely publicly addressed but often simply covered up with a quick reference to the firm's integrity and service record.

The machiavelian undertone of portraying consulting groups as profiting from their position on the boundary of government should also not lead us to confuse as part of a grand conspiracy the provision of service in the pursuit of a goal (management consulting) and the simultaneous provision of advice, be it strategic, analytical, operational or evaluative (policy consulting, see Perl and White (2002, p.51) for clarifications). It is also possible that the influence of policy consultants has waned over the years. The grand conspiracy by which consultants might rule government is not the road I believe is the correct one. The process is rather cultural in nature and has much more to do with a way public managers are fed policy ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> The messy reality of working documents is where public managers would make policy.

## Ideas in the Era of Centralized Government

Like all large organisations, the PSC is naturally prone to speaking in many voices (see the numerous works of Frank Fischer for an exploration of the notion of organisational voice in public policy). For such is the nature of ideas in organisations that one cannot learn them without also learning how to use them differently. One could even characterise the Weberian model as instilling in the public servant a personhood adept at handling with precision and technical proficiency a set of ideas communicated through directives and legislation. It might be in this sense that bureaucratic personhood (see du Gay, 2007) is to be thought of as the capacity to navigate the policy environment with a dispassionate ethic that resists sudden radical transformations. Hassenteufel (2011) underscores that Crozier long ago demonstrated how intentions can diverge throughout the implementation process. Ideas in organisations (as elsewhere) present the problem that unless we literally repeat each other, we will at a minimum occasionally diverge from the message. Crozier seemed to have this in mind in his critique of the “self-evidence” of a policy mandate, which assumes that all the relevant considerations of a policy are written in the letter of the directive. Far from it, directives can invite an infinite variety of interpretations, the range of which the adept bureaucrat is proficient at limiting.

The phenomenon which I term the ‘normalisation of the potential for deviation’ is a core component through which public managers must operate when navigating the policy environment of the PSC. The public manager’s work consists of attempting to honestly and disinterestedly navigate the many ideas that any directive might contain. The normalisation of the potential for deviation often becomes necessary at the implementation stage. The un-packaging of directives at the level of implementation is a significant contributor to the multitude of voices of any public service. In this view of government as a terminological environment fed by a constant flow of ideas, central agencies spend much of their efforts controlling the natural tendencies of line departments to adapt for their immediate purpose the ideas contained in policies. In doing so, there is a constant threat that the boundaries of the state are renegotiated, though without any ill intention, by the decisions of public managers. The work of central agencies becomes one of

supervising the excessive deviations as perceived from an NPM-inspired set of administrative values. The excessive tendency of the Harper government for symmetrical messaging is at least partially the result of a war on the potential for deviation of any policy idea. Ideological hostility to the PSC might only exacerbate this naturally occurring disposition of central agencies. Perceived deviations from the message are interpreted as a loss of control because of their potential contribution to diversity in policy ideas.

The multiplicity of voices which reverberate within the PSC became apparent to the collective political consciousness from at least the 1980s onwards. The (Mulroney) government's response to discovering this vocal dynamic was to begin a process of delocalisation of policy-making in the hopes of generating a new consensus around ideas best suited to limiting the possibility for deviation in policy implementation. The consequence of this process of delocalisation was the creation of the need for clear guidelines as to how to govern this space of competing policy ideas. The promotion of consulting services through publications and the funding of research centers (Saint-Martin, 2005) was part of this process. The normative content of the publications on offer worked at reducing the range of approaches to any particular problem. To borrow terms from Charles Lindbloom (1959), the products on offer presented themselves as "roots", but might have been closer to "branches". The development of the PPS is at least partially a product of the need to contain what might have been termed the policy excesses of the PSC. There was no doubt an element of ideology, and at least some resentment, but it is important to understand that these are also organisational phenomena. And while policy delocalisation was never going to be a perfect alternative to the PSC, it would at least end its monopoly on providing advice to the government, something for which citizens should perhaps also be grateful.

Perl and White (2002), in exploring the politicisation of policy consultants, conclude that as the growth of consulting budgets of line departments was greater, from 1981 to 2001, than that of central agencies, there is reason to suspect that policy consulting was mainly directed towards the need for specialist information expressed by the former. They conclude that politicisation, by which we might understand the imposed harmony between the firms' beliefs and those of the



government, is not necessarily observable. But they also admit that it is a possibility. And though an approach to the question through the Public Accounts and the Public Service Commission Annual Reports do point to an important reality, it does not take into account the quality of the advice offered. Policy consultants might be few in number, but they can have a tremendous effect. I would like to suggest that using budgetary figures alone Perl and White might simply have been unable to demonstrate the mechanism by which a politicisation of the policy advice offered might take place.

The slipperiness of policy ideas is the bane of centralised government. Centralizing agencies find quite useful the capacity of outside policy consultants to help control the parameters of the policy debate. This is particularly true of the ‘guru’ variety, who come with trademarked authority. The introduction by central agencies of measures inspired by this advice can significantly rearrange the field of policy choices by allowing for a renegotiation of what is a relevant government activity. In other words, the line between what is inside and what is outside government opens up for negotiation. This process takes the form of new vocabulary, metaphors, “referentials”, beliefs and values, the broad elements associated with ideas in policymaking<sup>4</sup>. By engineering a new conceptual universe around the appropriate limits of the state, it becomes possible to develop approaches to policymaking which undermine the autonomy of the public manager’s efforts to normalise the potential for deviation. Instead of monopolizing policymaking, central agencies might simply control the state by working within an established consensus.

In light of these observations, it becomes possible, as a starting point for further observation, to see the advent of NPM not so much as a reform movement but as a new front in the battles of ideas which occur under centralized government. This understanding also contains a mechanism for the introduction of ‘new’ approaches to policy when existing ones fall out of style, ensuring a continuity to the string of fashions in policymaking. While this arrangement might be mutually beneficial, in providing a sense of control to central government and lucrative

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<sup>4</sup> The literature on ideas in policymaking is a varied and complex one, best left for another discussion. The works of Pierre Muller and his French colleagues, as well as Vivien Schmidt’s discursive institutionalism, are wonderful discussions of how ideas operate in policymaking.

contracts to consultants, the natural multitude of voices which emanate from the PSC might tend towards reduction when subject to a continuum of passing trends. The much maligned decline of policy capacity may have less to do with a decline in the educational attainment of public managers than it does with the constantly evolving attempts to maintain control over the ideas which inform their activities.

The mechanism by which this phenomenon takes place is one framing agony and transforming it into euphoria thus providing a conceptual universe which subjects the public manager's normalising efforts to the current prevailing needs of central agencies. Ideas are here thought of as providing the means of creating individual and collective senses of agony. Agony has no pre-existing normative content and so remains eternally susceptible to framing. Agony might be light and susceptible to being framed in a way to maximise the ease of its transformation into euphoria. Euphoria is the unbridled expectation of a fitting solution. But the role of public managers is to resist euphoria. This resiliency might take the shape of a capacity to recognise the ideas at work in policy proposals. But most importantly, this resiliency should guard against an overuse, a misuse or a lazy use of the accumulated metaphors which conjure the organisation's ideational universe. For it is through overreliance on a centralised process of ideational influence that "self-evidence" becomes an acceptable mode of operating. Operating within an organisation consists of adopting and maintaining these to some degree, but the sceptical mind's purpose is to resist the easy trap set by light agony and excessive euphoria. The sad fate of the public manager is to spend his career agonising without the promise of an easy solution. She must know fear, but vanquish it, see the abyss but stare at it with pride<sup>5</sup>.

Since at least the 1980s there has existed an understanding regarding the need to manage the policymaking fashions in a way which has probably robbed us of a good many practical ideas about what government might do and how it might do it. Between the central agencies, and especially the PMO, looking to maintain their influence and consulting groups at least partially

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<sup>5</sup> A decent salary and a comfortable if modest retirement seems a minimal compensation for such a life.

mindful of the need to supply a manageable network of ideas to inform policymaking, we have the makings of a system which regards ideas as manageable things. This system has the capacity to orchestrate ideas to the benefit of the crusade against the potential for policy deviation at the implementation stage. These networks of meanings, terms and beliefs work to reduce the anxieties of public managers and other decision makers by framing the problem within manageable solutions, in a process not necessarily removed from Herbert Simon's (1947/97) early work on organisations as decision-making bodies. But it leaves less room for innovation at the implementation level and little capacity to develop solutions organic to the problems faced by line departments (who then turn to consultants, in line with Perl and White's (2002) overall assessment of the situation). Management of these systems represents, in the PSC as elsewhere, an attempt to build the bank of ideas which best allows for control over the range of possible deviations. This notably provides data from which might spring a managerial language capable of defusing the potential of ideas to renegotiate the borders of the state beyond those sought by the PMO and other central agencies. But the functionality of the PSC is seriously hampered when meaning and belief close off possibilities of action or certain policy tools by the transformation of the parameters of acceptable policy.

## Methodology

In order to make sense of what precedes it is necessary to study government publications. Significant work here remains to be done in identifying the various types of documents one might encounter in such a research. Internal documents are of great interest, but we might at least begin with what government publishes. I posit that, far from being normalised, government publications contain titanic struggles for meaning and purpose between a wide array of voices, especially across time. These struggles reflect the multiple influences which lean on policymaking. Tracing the influence on these documents of the wider, outside, PPS and identifying a reliance on ideas must proceed from a comparison of the relevant established streams of textual production. It is advisable to begin by selecting the external publication, to then look into the publications of the

government organisations concerned with its content. Thus, as a first step, any investigation must first narrow down two or more streams from what is a massive flow of publications.

Dutil and Ryan (2013) offer a way forward with the analysis. The digital humanities have opened an opportunity to subject government literature to a content analysis which can best reveal how issues have been framed. By understanding framing as a process by which signification enters our deep linguistic consciousness through the use metaphors and key semiotic references it becomes possible to identify core terms and nominal groups within the publications of the PPS and then see if, when and where can they be spotted in government literature. Further developing this approach around selected terminology might be useful in examining the evolution of their meaning and use over time, which might in the end tell us something about why government talks the ways it does (from its staid passages, to its sometimes bizarre political hyperbole). I am particularly keen to examine the phenomenon of overuse, a process which I suspect deprives words of meanings capable of being fixed in practical reality. Meaning can be emptied long before terminology continues to grace the covers of reports. Along this line, Dutil and Ryan find that the Clerk of the Privy Council's Annual Reports contain some disconnections with the concerns of the wider public service. The digital humanities have opened a vast new opportunity to understand policymaking by allowing us to zero-in on transfers of ideas-as-language. This represents, in my opinion, a huge new step in the already extensive literature on policy transfers (see Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 2000).

The discursive institutionalist approach employed by Dutil and Ryan, as well as Pierre Muller's (2000; 2005) concept of the "référentiel" can be useful in shoring up the analysis and expanding beyond what could be a counting of words of misleading use. But the choice to examine governmental use of language in the hopes of building a case of institutional transformations is a risky one and fraught with the many challenges that qualitative analysis represents. But the promise of providing an understanding which could add a new layer of complexity to policy shifts is too enticing. Furthermore, developing tools to subject policy documents to qualitative analysis may be useful for public managers interested in more effectively orienting the production of their

colleagues. We could potentially develop grids that strengthen the rigour of the occasional tendency of analysis to fall back on what is assumed to be a shared belief but which might simply be the latest fad in an endless string of policymaking fashions. This heightened capacity may represent an immunization against some of the more corrosive efforts to dislodge meaning. It might, to return to the theoretical, help increase the resiliency of public managers.

## Conclusion

The policymaking process in our Westminster tradition has for some time now been characterised by a situation where many sources of policymaking are not principally found within formal government organisations, nor within the political class, but shared with a variety of external groups. These groups, especially consultants, can significantly influence the terms of the debate around policymaking and unless policy analysts and public managers within the PSC manifest a sense of resiliency, there exists a danger to fall back on the latest set of metaphors in order to plug loose ends in policy argumentation. In this process of delocalisation of policy capacity the formal approval process remains untouched. But the limits of what is possible and what is desirable (Wildavsky, 1987) are modified in the process of framing our collective agony.

Much of the literature on public administration is at the least accepting that the State is no longer hermetically sealed. I wish to again highlight that the result of such developments is not inherently “good” or “bad” and may in fact engineer its own claim to truth. The argument here is not that the PSC should become impermeable to the outside. Such a situation would set us on a backward track with regards to public sector transparency. I happen to believe that there is an as yet unrealised promise in government engaging with the citizenry and using its ideas to define policy. But the value of engaging with citizens will be greatly reduced unless public managers are aware of the difficulties of ideas, equipped with the tools to properly (and respectfully) handle them, and free to deploy the resiliency for which they should be known. The risk is that if engaging with citizens produces results which are incompatible with whatever administrative, managerial or political belief, it will simply become another subsumed and discarded voice (all the worse as

it would've originated from the citizenry). Departments should engage with citizens and part of this capacity to engage requires that we find a way to ensure that policymakers remain immunized from the deleterious effects of the liberalisation of policymaking.

It is arguable that the PSC is best placed to provide a form of advice to the government which incarnates a version of the public good which is dispassionate (Du Gay, 2008), in part through its ability to “speak truth to power”. It is today in open competition with the PPS, some sectors of which have great incentive to provide advice the governments wants to hear. Traditional bureaucratic hierarchy might be able to manage a plurality of views, and the PPS is capable of doing many things. But I am arguing that the approach to ideas which best suits the public sector is one which does not suffer the oppression of passing fashions, but one which is capable of articulating policy which reflects the needs of the population, however controversial those needs might be. It would be wise to embrace the capacity for fluidity in ideas and allow for it to disinterestedly inform implementation so that policy might be allowed to be written for central agency executives, line department managers and street-level bureaucrats alike.

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