

Book Review

David A. Good

The Politics of Public Money: Spenders, Guardians, Priority Setters, and Financial Watchdogs Inside the Canadian Government
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007

This is a large, thick and worthy book. That is as it should be, because David A. Good is as fine a theorist and practitioner in public service as can be found. *The Politics of Public Money* studiously reflects his considerable experience as an academic analyst and senior public official. He examines and worries about questions of policy coherence and ethical credibility. He does so meticulously.

Not much is omitted. People like me, who tend to root our studies in history, may be disappointed by his first chapter that seems to begin the historical narrative with Walter Gordon's first budget in 1963. For those of us of a certain age, this was a "tipping point" after which much was to be expected and little of use was to be achieved. (This, of course, was the problem of Canadian nationalists, whether of the radical, liberal or "red Tory" variety – a failure of their imagination, nerve and political acumen, and not a more general failure of our government or polity or their combined hopes for a "kinder and gentler" society.)

David Good is not likely to let us off the hook. His somewhat dense and simultaneously sensible volume eschews ideology. He writes rationally, as though Max Weber's interpretations had somehow turned true.

Accordingly, *The Politics of Public Money* stands as a pluralistic treatise in which the common weal of a democratic society can be held to be the ineluctable outcome of brokerage politics. There are, of course, problems with such an analysis, but not any that invade David Good's interpretation of what government is intended to accomplish, of what government is for.

This may sound churlish. It is not meant to be. David A. Good works his way through the federal bureaucracy, finds problems and suggests solutions. The diagnoses are clear, and the therapies are wise ... provided that the sound, sensible and sophisticated world of Canadian government is accepted as some kind of "real" world.

David A. Good speaks eloquently of issues such as budgets, financial watchdogs, parliamentary oversight, and so on. He works within, and knows the language of, the senior civil service.

I worry some. From an external perspective, it is easy to find social agendas of one sort or another intruding on the “rational-legal” Weberian framework within which David A. Good seems most comfortable.

And yet, people outside the bureaucracy, whose symbolic and material demands are excluded and people inside the bureaucracy whose practices and politics seem sometimes indifferent to the plight of real people in the official hinterland, could all profit from reading this book.

Long-time public administration analyst Peter Aucoin says that this is a “superb” book, an “essential text,” and so on. That is as may be, for Good’s good book is a defining narrative. It assiduously interprets the influence of the many layers of governmental structures, while cleverly finessing “politics.”

One wishes, upon completing it, that *The Politics of Public Money* had sought more strenuously to link public accounts with public needs, and public resources with political priorities. This, however, is not to be expected at a time when all attention seems to be focused on accountability and accounting.

Nonetheless, two important statements can be made about *The Politics of Public Money*. First, it is a detailed, comprehensive and thorough treatment of public expenditures in Canada. Anyone wishing to learn about how decisions are made and monitored could do no better than to become intimately familiar with this book. Second, it brings together the necessarily interrelated fields of funding and policy development in a way that reveals the inner workings of government prioritization and policy execution. Third, it supplies people who are not normally part of or party to the formal political process with insights into how government really works, at least from the perspective of elected and appointed officials.

What David A. Good does best is to bring the public financial and policy process together in a way that will make governmental systems transparent. This is not an exercise that will be easily followed by political or administrative amateurs, for David Good does not “talk down” to his audience; it is, however, a worthwhile endeavor for serious students and practitioners of public administration. As such, it deserves the highest praise.

About the Author

Howard A. Doughty is Book Reviews Editor of *The Innovation Journal* and teaches at Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology, King City, Canada.