

Book Review

Alex Marland

Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in an Age of Message Control
Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press, 2016

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Alex Marland has an impressive résumé. He is an Associate Professor and an Associate Dean at Memorial University in Newfoundland. He has worked for provincial and federal governments. He has been a researcher and a media relations specialist with a major public opinion polling firm as well as a research manager with public relations and advertising agencies. He has served as Director of Communications of several departments in the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. He is co-editor of a UBC (the re-branded University of British Columbia) Press series on Communications, Strategy and Politics and was lead editor on two books — *Political Marketing in Canada* (2012) and *Political Marketing in Canada: Meet the Press and Tweet the Rest* (2015). In addition, he is responsible for the open-access project, *Communication, Strategy, and Democracy*. He is a busy, busy man with an earned reputation for negotiating the political world in times of extraordinary secrecy (at least in putative liberal democracies) and top-down control by government and opposition leaders all of whom are urgently trying to maximize the popularity of their respective personal and political party brands in a contentious and highly charged political atmosphere.

This, of course, is also happening at a time of unprecedented public access to government information via various disclosure protocols, the ubiquitous Internet, and shared knowledge and opinion on the expansive social media — never mind endless instances of hacking and releasing everything from campaign strategies to state secrets in the never-ending battles of cyberspace. In this confused and confusing context, trying to control seemingly uncontrollable multiple platforms in the multi-media information environment would appear to be a futile endeavour; but, by keeping tight reins on their own organizations and making a strong effort to disrupt and suppress others, at least some politicians have succeeded surprisingly well.

For insiders, inquisitive outsiders, political junkies and policy wonks, *Brand Command* offers remarkable insights into the political process. It is aided not only by Marland's considerable experience, but also by his unique access to the archived files of Thomas E. Flanagan who was the mentor and chief advisor of former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper (the master brand manipulator and perhaps the most secrecy-obsessed political leader in Canada's admittedly short history). Flanagan, of course, has told his personal story of being decisively dumped under a fast-moving bus by his former protégé in *Persona Non Grata: The Death of Free Speech in the Internet Age* (2014). If Flanagan's monograph reads like quasi-pulp fictional tale of high level mendacity, *Brand Command* assumes the form of an acutely aware anthropologist's field notes upon the observation of a rather remote, generally disagreeable, but thoroughly fascinating culture. In both cases, in turning the pages, there is a rare air of a "guilty pleasure."

What should especially interest public sector administrators and workers, as well as students, researchers, analysts and theorists in the study of public administration, however, are not so much the titillating details and Machiavellian machinations of political leaders and party functionaries as the overall effect of the preoccupation with branding on the public service.

Marland devotes about half his book to illuminating the ways in which the public sector has been influenced, altered and reconstructed by people whose efforts are directed toward simplifying the communication of public services, regulations and policies, and encouraging public acceptance of (and compliance with) government initiatives. Throughout, there is an understated culture of contempt for the public and an overriding concern with the strategies of information manipulation on the foundational premise that the citizenry is (and must remain) a trifle doltish and that every available psychological insight, propaganda tactic and trick of the marketing trade must be ruthlessly applied if power is to be gained and held.

Branding strategy is an evolution of marketing. It is a philosophy that envelops an entire organization and becomes a way of being.

Marland traces government's new advertising, sales and promotion approach to public relations back to the early 1970s when, in the afterglow of Canada's centennial celebrations, a concern with image — both the government's and the country's — began to undermine the quiet, somewhat uninspired and uninspiring perception of the civil service and civil servants and offered instead the possibility, particularly during the administration of Pierre Trudeau, that there could be something unusually appealing about innovative bureaucracies doing important work in the public interest and embodying the notion that government could be an active source of good. In those days, we are reminded, the "vision of centralized communications was realized when Information Canada was created in 1970 and put in charge of coordinating government communications campaigns."

Critics excoriated the innovation and claimed that it provided nothing but Liberal Party propaganda under the guise of needed public information. In retrospect, the alleged offences seem rather mild (not that many of the complaints weren't legitimate). Moreover, the benefits of having consistent messages, a central source to which citizens could turn in order to learn about public policies and public services in accessible language and familiar formats were seemingly well justified. Innovations in information dissemination were nothing if not up-to-date and reasonably well received.

It was not, however, until the 1980s that the triumphal ideology of neoliberalism and the popularity of "new public management" wholly transformed the perceptions and practices of the public sector. Thereafter, branding became less an instrument of engagement than an obsession with manipulation by holders of high office and their enablers both within and without the public service.

Again, there were commendable reasons to support communications innovations. A more business-like approach could be said to create a more responsive public service and a centralized call centre (1-800-O-Canada) could minimize citizens' (now called clients) frustrations at getting the endless bureaucratic run-around. These well-meant intentions, however, were less evident in practice. Marland supplies numerous examples of communications improvements being largely

subverted by “overthinking and delays” in dealing with the media — mostly as a consequence of the dominance of “practices imported from the private sector.” The desire to maintain administrative control too often trumped the responsibility to promote open and transparent consultation and interaction. The results were mixed, but fell short of the expectations of anyone who took then-popular notions of citizen empowerment and participatory democracy at all seriously.

Uniquely combining the strengths of the past (Goebbels) and anticipating the methods of the future (Google), the public sector discarded its somewhat stodgy, fusty, dispassionately professional and unapologetically patrician attitudes and converted to the manners, morals and methods of the competitive, corporate, top-down, rigidly controlled, market-based, private sector. With citizens increasingly redefined as “customers,” it was possible to look upon the role of the public sector as similar to that of commercial vendors of deodorants, house paints, fast food and automobiles.

Alex Marland describes and explains the rise and current ascendancy of the branding mentality in a detailed and satisfactorily non-partisan manner. Since he deals mainly with current and recent events, the main focus is on the three successive administrations of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper; however, neither Harper’s predecessors nor his single successor escape scrutiny.

The Harper government (as it branded itself) displayed singular qualities. Only the most trusted members of the Conservative caucus were allowed to speak extemporaneously on major matters. Most Conservative Members of Parliament were held to fixed talking points, lest their loose lips compromise the needs and demands of its leadership. The much expanded Prime Minister’s Office dictated the range, depth and content of government communication. Elaborate “pseudo-events” were scripted, orchestrated and choreographed to provide partisan support to the governing party, while simultaneously limiting the amount of actual information disseminated to the press and the public.

Today’s journalists are pressured by audience ratings and click statistics to treat politics as entertainment and pique the public’s interest.

As for public servants themselves, there were rigid limitations on public discussions. Most well-known were the gag orders placed on government scientists (especially on the environmental file) and diplomats who were sometimes fired and sometimes subjected to humiliating personal attacks when their research and experience ran counter to the government’s ideology and policy.

One result was the virtual fusion of the supposedly professional, non-partisan civil service and the ruling political party. A spectacularly maladroit example was the Economic Action Plan. Large outdoor billboards and public service announcements in the print and broadcast media touted a vast range of Conservative Party initiatives that promoted hundreds of initiatives in infrastructure investment, tax cuts and the like (many of which had barely a tangential relationship to the economy). Ministerial announcements were made from coast to coast (though the media were not always invited to attend, but were regularly given media kits (“events-in-a-box”) lest embarrassing questions arise in face-to-face encounters. Over \$750

million of “taxpayer dollars” were wantonly expended on what were obviously partisan ad blitzes, many of which celebrated programs that didn’t even exist because they required provincial consent, which was certainly not forthcoming. Included was a plan to spend \$13.5 million to promote the Conservative Party’s pre-election budget and an array of handouts intended to ensure a Conservative victory in the 2015 election (they lost).

Public servants, of course, were compelled to participate in these and other ventures. Marland discusses the production of departmental “vanity videos” which, for example, showed a pre-campaign-mode Minister of Employment and Social Development, Pierre Poilievre, celebrating his government’s aspirations and chatting amiably with grateful constituents. The results were dutifully posted on YouTube and the minister’s Twitter account. Says Marland: “To critics, the commandeering of government resources — in this case, employees were paid overtime on a weekend — ... was an unacceptable exploitation of public resources for partisan purposes.”

Public sector branding stems from the use of marketing practices in politics and a New Public Management approach to public administration. In theory, political marketing ought to embody the essence of democracy ... However, marketing and branding in the Canadian public sphere leave something to be desired.

The book, as Marland describes it, “uses the word *branding* as an amalgam of the outcome of marketing theory, image management, centralized decision making, and communications simplicity.” As a result, “the days of haphazard communications and MPs who speak freely in public are gone.” Marland goes on to deliver a remarkably even-handed appraisal of the seemingly inexorable trend. He says:

A democracy is only as strong as its ability to engage the electorate beyond the intelligentsia and the attentive public. On this score, in many ways, political marketing and branding are inclusive. The dumbing down of communications that accompany branding is driven by a desire to reach citizens who interact with government and/or vote but pay little attention to politics and public policy.

Marland seems almost content with the outcomes and their implications. “Arguments against branding,” he believes, “tend to be alarmist and are built on idealistic assumptions about how government and politics should work.” He goes on to insist that “histrionics about the politicization of government communications need to be reined in.” This is far from a ringing endorsement of democratic politics at their finest — especially in light of his previous observations about the pervasive presence of politico-bureaucratic spin doctors, the compromised ethical position of plainly partisan public servants and the degree to which political leaders have forced public sector workers to toe party lines or face the consequences.

Alex Marland, of course, has not forgotten the ideals of a professional public service. While he understands the frustrations of public officials confronted and coerced by partisan politics and punished for speaking out about the efforts of politicians to turn the public service into its own cheering section and to stifle attempts to be open about evidence that government policies are wrong-headed and doomed to failure. He maintains, it seems, at least one “ideal” of his own.

So, when Stephen Harper's government was defeated and newly minted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made an appearance in the foyer of the Global Affairs building, Marland reports that "ministers were greeted with cheers by public servants (mainly women, he somewhat gratuitously adds). He describes the event thus: the crowd that had "previously expressed disloyalty to the Conservative cabinet ... mobbed Prime Minister Trudeau [as] an expression of liberation from Conservative politicization." Plainly appalled, he muses that "perhaps some federal civil servants believe open expression of opinion in the workplace about political leaders is acceptable." If so, he sternly adds, "they are wrong."

From what Marland tells us, the current state of affairs in Ottawa (and, I suspect, most other capitals in Canada and the world) is indicative of a considerable malaise, a rather profound democratic deficit and a need for readjustment of attitudes and reform of actions. At the close of the book, he offers nine concrete suggestions to restore balance within and confidence in the public sector. They include a request for a regular parliamentary update on communications policy, a political communications code of ethics, annual reports about government spending on "photo ops," the creation (inexplicably by academics) of media guidelines for improved news coverage, and so on. Apart from his final recommendation to "empower and legitimize the Canadian Senate" (*à quoi bon?*), given the depth of the problems that his book has either brought to light or clarified, makes his mainly non-binding and probably inconsequential correctives seem like pretty thin gruel.

Alex Marland is to be commended for supplying detailed information about what some have only suspected as the sales game played by all political parties, though brought to new levels by the former Conservative government. He is also to be applauded for raising a number of key issues about the overall health of our parliamentary democracy, plagued as it is by uncommon levels of political ignorance and indifference among the citizenry. If he brings matters to a less than satisfying conclusion, this should not be the cause of further complaint, but should rather be accepted as an implicit invitation to the rest of us to undertake a much more critical inquiry and to formulate and advocate more substantial reforms.

Above all, we must reflect thoughtfully on the proper political role both of the public service and of our elected representatives. Simultaneously more remote and more invasive, the government, both elected and appointed, has unprecedented power to monitor citizens' behaviour, organize citizens' lives and mete out punishments to the non-compliant. With centralized control over public information, however, comes an expectation of increased public servility. And, with the overwhelming presence of the new electronic communications systems and devices comes a new way of living that Marshall McLuhan himself would fear to describe or explain.

Finally, we are at risk of falling victim to what Hannah Arendt (1965) controversially called "the banality of evil," covered by a political discourse that features what Everett Knight (1960: 82) termed "the nauseating insipidity" of public declarations and debate. The time for a broad reconsideration of politics and government is surely at hand.

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