

Book Review

Donald J. Savoie

Democracy in Canada: The Disintegration of Our Institutions
Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019

Reviewed by Donald R. Officer

New Brunswick born scholar and author, Donald Savoie has spent most of his full and distinguished career in his native province where he studied and completed his basic higher education before topping it off with an Oxford doctorate. Topping it off, however, is not a truly accurate way to describe a career which has involved much more education of a different kind.

Savoie has published 47 books and over 200 research-oriented articles, several with coauthors. He has received multiple scholarly fellowships with prestigious universities in both the United Kingdom and the United States. He holds eight honorary doctorates from Canadian Universities. In 1983 he founded the Canadian Institute for Research on Regional Development at l'Université de Moncton where he also teaches public administration.

I spent many years in Canada's government but unlike professor Savoie, was never privileged to share the high-level perspectives afforded by his noteworthy federal appointments. These special interludes plus his advisory consultancies to many overseas nations have further enriched Savoie's decades of Canadian political scholarship. Looking back over my experiences inside several departments of the federal government, I'd nevertheless concur that Donald Savoie profoundly appreciates the principal mechanisms driving, limiting and changing Canada's governance. I would recommend reading this book to anyone who wants to know why Canada's government functions as it does.

In *Democracy in Canada* Professor Savoie lays out a strongly articulated case for change to the status quo of the nation's institutions. Many grievances predate Confederation while in the century and a half since, many of those remain unaddressed. Meanwhile, new ones have come about through internal friction or been imposed from without. Several of these have likewise been ignored. Basically, Donald Savoie believes Canada's original sin was the short shrift given to the other regions outside its two most populated provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

History seems to support this conclusion. Canada has undergone continuous adjustment in allegiances, population numbers, cultural composition, community dispersal, ideological variegation, degrees of deference and shades of tolerance. Throughout the 153 years of Confederation, wealth and power have continued to be concentrated in central Canada, notwithstanding resource booms and trade arrangements involving the rest of the nation.. The Maritimes in particular, have been marginalized and left behind.

For the country's east coast citizens, the hurt is twofold. Not only is their slice of the pie and place at the table less of a factor than the domineering pre-eminence of their central Canadian counterparts, they also carry the persistent knowledge that in pre-confederation days intercolonial relations were not so unequal. Western Canada has not always been fairly treated either, but Canada's movers and shakers can't afford to ignore them because of their economic impact.

If regional disparity was the sin, then Sir John A. Macdonald was the principle sinner.

The author of *Democracy in Canada* describes how the executive architect of confederation manipulated the colonies, diverse interests and the Colonial Office, promising and dragooning as circumstances shifted. To be fair, the stakes were high in the 1860's as Savoie acknowledges.

Consider this scenario: The large battle-hardened Union army had just defeated the Confederacy on the continent with which Canada shared an indefensibly long border. Only 15 years earlier American forces had grabbed a huge tract of southwestern land from Mexico by force, and now, just as Canadian Confederation was forming, the American government purchased Alaska from Russia in yet one more brazen piece of creative cartography. Would the new country of Canada be devoured piecemeal or compressed to the size of a continental dukedom?

Donald Savoie appreciates the urgent need to meet the challenges that confronted the new dominion, but believes some key mistakes were made. Perhaps the fathers of Confederation acted in haste or gave in to a Eurocentric bias. Britain like most of the nations across the Atlantic was a functioning unitary state – an obvious template. It was a handy prototype that could and would be applied to all the colonies of the imperial power with institutions based on counterparts in the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, it was obvious to Canada's founding fathers that the vastness of the North American continent and the distances between settlements would require some form of federation. The United States had created a means to address that stubborn challenge.

So, a Canadian federation was pulled together reflecting both unitary and federal characteristics. Macdonald and his allies at home and abroad shared a strong bias towards continuity of familiar (i.e. British) institutions. Quebec took a pragmatic approach. Lower Canada had been treated reasonably well under British rule for over a hundred years but liked the idea of more co-equal status. Centuries had passed before the tiny kingdoms of the British isles coalesced into something resembling a cohesive viable state. The Americans were unlikely to offer us that kind of time to pull things together. Macdonald and his allies were also not comfortable with the American tolerance for disorder. Confederation would keep the provinces on a long but firmly held leash. Just in case, although rarely used, constitutional provisions were drafted to permit disallowance of any provincial laws deemed problematic

With one major reset in the form of constitutional patriation in 1982, the hybrid system we see today was broadly designed in the 19th century then adapted ad hoc, to balance the forces pulling regions and the country's core principles asunder with a governing structure that reinforced the founding fathers' bias towards centralization. Considering the internal tensions and disruptive forces of the past century and a half such as the constitutional debates or the controversial National Energy Policy the union of the provinces has held up well. That was the plan. But at what cost? The scars of these and other conflicts remain take the shape of vast

stretches of Canada's capacious geography enjoying irregular access to the halls of government. Other nations are also divided. More than most, Canada's splits look a lot like our geography.

To start, the old wound of provincial neglect which Donald Savoie regards as a chronic if not fatal infliction still festers consuming attention and resources. Over recent generations, the self-sufficient, culturally cohesive provinces and regions have become restive. What has held them in check has been various species of dependence on federal authority i.e. money in the form of redistribution payments. Some observers referenced by the author have observed that Canada was crafted in some respects like an empire within an empire.

From the Northwest Rebellion through treaty violations and gross insensitivities such as the residential school system, vulnerable communities subject to federal power and fiat have been treated with cavalier indifference. Through multiple instances of central government intervention in the control of resources, many groups and jurisdictions have experienced that centralizing bias. The power of the centre has been broadly enforced by court orders or deliberate delays in litigation altering Canadian history.

Most political scientists and historians acknowledge the original political imbalance between the federal government and the provinces has had unintended effects. Provinces and regions have fought back sometimes banding together to oppose policies or initiatives that promise to infringe on provincial sovereignty. Regional influence in the marketplace and at the ballot box is likewise not inconsiderable.

Modern more transparent mass communications and the 1982 charter of rights and freedoms have further emboldened many parties and individuals to challenge federal dominance. Surprisingly, given his thoughts on provincial injustices, Savoie seems more exercised about the downside of these developments. Truthfully, these shifting factors have led to a reactionary secretiveness that pervades an Ottawa under fire. Every successive federal government first praises open government then proceeds to smother it in the cradle as criticism rolls in. Access to freedom of information requests offer a striking example. However, all the unwelcome new pressures on Ottawa have also led to begrudged progress in spite of official resistance via Kremlesque suppression of information by successive administrations.

The courts, the media, and a general decline in deference to authority, have reinforced another trend invisible to anyone unaware of what truly happens in federal government circles. For almost 40 years, regardless of party affiliation, Canadian prime ministers have been grabbing more and more of the power within the federal ambit. Maybe it's due to a circling of the wagons in the face of the challenges cited by Savoie and listed above, or maybe it's just the consequence of there being nothing to stop the process. Many say the trend started in the "post-post-war" period as change in the political climate accelerated. With it both "gotcha" journalism and a culture of complaint emerged. As one anonymous cabinet minister describes the current situation, today's Canadian federal government cabinets serve more as "focus groups" for the prime minister and his advisors in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) than as credible sources of legitimate influence. Every unapproved opinion or comment has potential to spark scandal.

Author Savoie has invested much time and attention to a topic many Canadians frankly prefer to ignore out of indifference or envy. And that, tragically, is a lost opportunity of huge

proportions. Canada once had an effective, efficient and focussed public service. In the late nineteen seventies, that changed.

I could see it happening and sensed the subsequent deliberate demoralization and degradation of careers. Around the same time, the impact of public service unionization led to more respectable incomes for many underpaid public servants which some of us suspected was compensation for the steady encroachment of disarray in the workplace, the encouragement of arrogant straw bosses and the rise of deeply discouraging working conditions.

Donald Savoie attributes the dramatic shift in public attitudes towards government employees to frustration with programs among vocal members of the electorate as the growth economy slowed down and career opportunities shrank as administration costs (i.e. higher taxes and user fees) rose. I could see all that too. It was in the air. Much of the trumped-up resentment was pure envy. Corporations learned to surf the waves of neoliberalism, cut back on wages and benefits then pointed to well off government workers in Ottawa all the while proclaiming a kind of perverse pride in employee mistreatment by boasting business would never tolerate those fat paycheques and low productivity. Accountability became the *cri de jour*.

The centralization of power in the PMO did not help as the government's own workforce became the scapegoat for program stagnation. Decisions were taken for arcane reasons related to "optics" as the media, the courts and declining deference created the stereotypic self-fulfilling prophecy of the overpaid and underworked government worker. Savoie says as much in *Democracy in Canada* although he might not totally share my framing of this particular aspect of our nation's still unfolding, slow-moving disaster.

Our public service is still full of talented, educated and industrious individuals. Many are very busy, but doing what? Traditionally, as this book underscores, the pathway to success in the bureaucracy lay through special expertise or inflated reputations useful to the minister and of course, the PMO. Management of the departments was left to those "grunts" unworthy of the royal jelly top civil servants and specialists receive from elite schools and well-connected mentors. Unfortunately, generations of support staff that once took care of departmental business with skilled administrative acumen and carousels of rubber stamps have no place at the table in the new millennium. Nor can all the real work be outsourced. Consider the travesty of the Phoenix pay scandal exacerbated by the indifference management showed towards its victims.

Like many consultants, auditors and angry citizens Savoie believes more accountability is the answer. I'm reminded of a joke once told to me, ironically, by a public service auditor:

Auditors resemble soldiers who, seeing the battle is lost and the field is strewn with the fallen, rush out to bayonet the wounded.

The public service is already turgid with complicated, demanding and frequently contradictory regulations promulgated in response to somebody's idea of accountability. Not that a reckoning is not due for the most egregious instances of mismanagement. Who among the senior ranks knows exactly who the worst offenders are? Unless of course, they themselves should be included in the list of delinquents.

Alas, gone are the days of true ministerial responsibility. Like the abused day labourer who comes home in the evening and kicks the dog, politicians and senior executives in federal departments set up approval processes so convenient scapegoats can be found or set up to pin responsibility for misdeeds on. At least as often, red tape and unclear lines of authority make it impossible to find a culprit. Whether intentional or not, ambiguous outcomes are certainly convenient. Consider the ramifications of this under the radar maneuver on accountability. One invisible result: government leadership is incentivized to hide even minor deviations from public scrutiny since only the scandalous side of an issue will attract attention.

Donald Savoie shows us how political indecision about which model of government Canadian federalism should embrace in his chapter on the Senate. Appropriately titled “The Senate: The Institution that Never Was,” he explains how the upper chamber might have represented provincial interests at the federal level or otherwise served as more than a club where members would express their “sober second thoughts” as the BNA constitution of 1867 stated.

Unfortunately, the country has never cared enough to form a consensus on the role of the appointed increasingly redundant body. Senate reform was twice put to referendum failing to pass both times. Hardly a democratic institution, the chamber doesn’t seem to represent much in particular, although some decent legislation and quite a few important amendments have been produced as a consequence of Canadian Senate deliberation. But was the legislative and investigative output worth the outlay in salaries, process delay and expenses over the decades?

The labyrinthine peek-a-boo accountability in Canada’s federal government is also an unfortunate consequence of our contemporary imperial prime ministry described in disturbing detail by Savoie in this book. According to current practice, even routine decisions or minor miscues are referred to the PMO if there’s even a hint of controversy or charter rights involved. Blame that might fly upwards must be quickly quashed then redirected. Such dissembling can only have a chilling effect on democracy and in maintaining an informed public. This is not the kind of accountability most citizens would appreciate.

Having seen the process spread from within, I remain angered by the waste of so many promising, talented individuals who could have made this country much more expansive and successful by any measure had they been permitted to try out their ideas safely and work with their colleagues in innovative energetic ways. In this respect too, Macdonald’s idea of a miniature Westminster on the Ottawa has proved limiting and may yet prove perilous in the perpetuation of paralysis by analysis when we could have accomplished so much more.

In his thorough and detailed fashion, the author of this book mostly looks backwards in making his evaluations – at mistakes made or possibilities ignored that would have aligned with the original urgencies Confederation might have addressed more perfectly. How our politicians met the challenges of the federation evidently created or perpetuated a number of injustices. Nonetheless, time moves on and many of those early shortfalls no longer carry the same animus they once did. The disintegration of our institutions might make way for new more robust ones better suited for this millennium. Unless of course, everything collapses overnight.

Like much of the industrial world, Canada is now far more urban than rural. Immigrants entering this country are differently skilled than they were even in recent decades. Yet, we still set criteria that reflect eras gone by. We simultaneously encourage unrealistic expectations. When it comes to identity, we behave like intellectual pack rats, unable to discard the remnants of earlier pretensions and unwilling to adopt more appropriate outlooks.

Meanwhile, opportunities around the globe wither while we fail to do all we could to take full advantage of them. Is our society and economy robust enough to weather political storms now forming? If our regions suffer from imbalances within our boundaries, we are fully able to enlist technologies and skills that could remove the remaining differentials and erase the artificial dependencies.

There is one advantage to the fortress Ottawa mentality that now holds sway. We are less likely than many nations to make catastrophic errors. We know how to assume a poker face while we watch other players lay down their cards. But we must also learn to play our hands boldly when they are strong. Our mistakes are too frequently those of the timid who honour vanishing circumstances. Innovation is a poor cousin lost in the halls of the federal bureaucracy.

One ray of hope, in terms of getting things done, is the growth of less formal arrangements across federal-provincial or interdepartmental lines. Not only do such cooperative initiatives obviate territorial disputes, they also permit freer creation of viable alternatives than would be available within the scrutiny of rule bound functional units. As the world at large enters a post-ideological phase where only the most outrageous policies are off the table, we need strong reconfigured institutions maintained by competent, versatile, energetic and innovative individuals who are not afraid to take acceptable risks and will not be abandoned when they do. This new world is going to require versatile, imaginative and very resilient people. Where are they hiding?

If all they've known is the political ecosystem described in *Democracy in Canada: The Disintegration of Our Institutions* our public servants both appointed and elected will find themselves ill-equipped to embrace the evolving order at home and abroad. Donald Savoie makes a point of distinguishing the two paths in Canada's federal government: advisory functions and management. In the latter part of the last century politicians and consultants began to notice that the management side suffered from risky neglect because the best way forward for the ambitious seeking a public service career was to become a trusted advisor.

Most observers concede the initiatives to improve management practices which followed, failed for three reasons. Although Savoie doesn't go into the process beyond noting immediate consequences, here is what I saw. First, departmental senior executives had no clue about how authentic leadership works in a knowledge worker environment. They preferred a Victorian command and control style or to neglect functional responsibility and hope for the best. Second, senior public servants remained reluctant to delegate the all-important advisory responsibility; above all they sought to avoid sharing the secret sauce they hoped made them indispensable. Third, the controlling ideas about management shared by both the continuing senior staff and their political bosses involved selectively delegating accountability and blame while reserving credit for themselves.

There were and are exceptions to the rigid enforcement of these iron rules embracing whole divisions, directorates and departments where more humane and intelligent supervision somehow emerged. But unfortunately, the exceptions have always been hard to find as they come into and go out of existence as leaders move on. Managerial style in the Canadian public service has always been more often than not simply a matter of individual choice as it used to be in most private sector organizations – too unimportant for serious attention. Savoie appears to be aware of this failure of leadership, but in this book, he doesn't explore what went wrong.

Naively, I once asked a well-known management professor and advisor to governments why a country of our size and maturity did not separate the function of advising ministers from the administration of needed services to the public. The model of the well-run Crown corporation whose managers report to parliament just as corporate managers report to shareholders has a solid track record. (McQuaig, 2019). The advisors meanwhile, would have a more direct relationship to the political side without the conflict of interest both operational employees and lobbyists must juggle. Competent managers would develop a proper grounding in the best ways to provide the services their departments administered. The professor stared at me in quiet dismay. I never found out why.

Previously, in this journal I reviewed a book analyzing the several ways bureaucracy defeats the purposes and visions of so many organizations. The inescapable conclusion is that the cure for inefficient or inappropriate administration can be worse than the disease as it so often leads to discouraging and mindless crackdowns. Decades ago, I read a remark in a management publication noting that overcontrolling a process amounted to no control at all! Blanket restrictions sabotage effectiveness. How can we manage better with less bureaucracy? One new book worth a look is Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini's *Humanocracy: Creating Organizations as Amazing as the People Inside Them*. The following sentence summarizes the management principles the authors advocate:

We can't go back to the nineteenth century, but every organization can become a confederation of owners and thereby catalyze the pride, proficiency, and performance that are the hallmarks of humanocracy (p. 143).

Employees are not the owners in most organizations, obviously not in the sense that stockholders, partners or, in the case of government, citizens are. In the interests of democracy, free societies need to advance beyond medieval notions about employment contracts. As it is, all employed workers, including public sector employees or officials are regarded by law as members of a class one cut above serfdom. In our more increasingly complex times, staff at every level in every organization will need to make more decisions themselves than is common today. Ever increasing responsibility, challenge and accountability will require each individual to take ownership of roles played both as worker and citizen.

The citizens of today's societies already suffer grievously from overwhelming delegated responsibility burdens without knowledge, mindset or authority to cope. For example, how will we be able to manage automated functions intelligently and safely without greater individual responsibility? Without this broad delegation, our institutions will be stretched to survive the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic and the aftermath.

In a gotcha culture like ours, we tend to delegate and outsource to avoid either professional ownership by competent, confident staff or investment in responsibility for outcomes. This overlooked jeopardy is summarized in Vikram Mansharamani's 2020 release, *Think for Yourself: Restoring Common Sense in an Age of Experts and Artificial Intelligence*:

You may not realize it, but you've lost your mind. We all have. In fact, we lose our minds all the time, often several times a day. We do this when we blindly outsource our thinking to technologies, experts, and rules (p.11).

Considering such challenges, public servants (elected or appointed) everywhere must become appreciative of the risks run when they fall in with the flow and unquestioningly follow every mindless direction coming from some bigwig, a set of superfluous rules or instructions fabricated online. We must pick our battles for sure. What consequences will accompany compliance or non-compliance? Are the demands faced urgent or important? What are the ultimate outcomes of actions taken or ignored for those with no hand in their initiation?

"Path dependent" is an expression Donald Savoie uses repeatedly in *Democracy in Canada* to describe a theory of political systems he finds applies to Canada. It refers to practices based mostly on local precedence with the most recent and memorable likely being most influential. The words lead me to visualize a herd of cows wending its way home for evening milking. Whatever impulses entered old Bossy's head as she meandered through the meadows, laid the roadbed of civilization. A quaint and charming picture, but hardly mindful. The paths of our future are being trail blazed for us now. We can only hope not by domesticated livestock.

About the Author:

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