ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Rudderless in the Storm? The Crisis of Adaptability in Canadian Governance

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Abstract

Conditions facing Canadian governments will be challenging for the remainder of this century. If dangers are managed poorly, Canada will not thrive, and in the worst case the Canadian state will not survive. Adaptability, the capacity to anticipate and manage threats, is a critical quality for state survival in turbulent conditions. Achieving adaptability is always difficult in decentralized polities because of tendencies toward short-sightedness, confusion, and miscoordination. Moreover, adaptability has declined in Canada in recent decades. This is partly attributable to socio-economic transformations, and partly due to choices that Canadian leaders have made about dismantling or redesigning government institutions. Four reforms are suggested to restore adaptability in Canada: more investment in long-term thinking, revival of national leadership summits, closer attention to the health of the Canadian public sphere, and independent review of Canada's public and political services.

Sommaire

Les conditions auxquelles les gouvernements canadiens seront confrontés seront difficiles pour le reste du siècle. Si les dangers sont mal gérés, le Canada ne prospérera pas et, dans le pire des cas, l'État canadien ne survivra pas. L'adaptabilité, la capacité d'anticiper et de gérer les menaces, est une qualité essentielle pour la survie des États dans des conditions turbulentes. La réalisation de l'adaptabilité

est toujours difficile dans les pays décentralisés, en raison des tendances à la myopie, à la confusion et au manque de coordination. De plus, la capacité d'adaptation a diminué au Canada au cours des dernières décennies. Cela est en partie attribuable aux transformations socio-économiques et en partie aux choix que les dirigeants canadiens ont faits quant au démantèlement ou à la refonte des institutions gouvernementales. Quatre réformes sont proposées pour rétablir l'adaptabilité au Canada : plus d'investissements dans la réflexion à long terme, relance des sommets nationaux de leadership, plus grande attention portée à la santé de la sphère publique canadienne et examen indépendant des services publics et politiques du Canada.

INTRODUCTION: DANGEROUS DECADES

At the end of the twentieth century, few Canadians expected that the next few decades would be so difficult for their country. The economy was growing steadily, secessionist pressures within Canada were contained, new information technologies still sparkled with promise, and the ideals of globalism and democracy seemed ascendant everywhere. Canadians were not alone in thinking this way. Most people in Western democracies were similarly optimistic.

The storm rolled in quickly. After 2001, a resurgence of Islamist terrorism triggered concern for domestic security and a retreat from open borders. The global financial crash of 2007-2009 led to a reappraisal of market-friendly economic policies. Austerity and rising inequality fueled a rise in populist nationalism. Techno-optimism was replaced by fears about the corrosion of civic discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic put new strains on the relationship between governments and citizens. Canadian politicians, like their colleagues in other countries, improvised furiously as one crisis followed another.

For several reasons, the remaining decades of this century will be just as challenging for Canadian governments. The effects of the climate emergency will be intense and complex. Geopolitical tensions are likely to persist, and the internal stability of the four big powers (the United States, China, the European Union, and India) seems likely to decay, as each grapples with the effects of climate change and other internal pressures. Technological advances will cause more disruption to the Canadian economy and society. At the same time, the country will continue to grapple with familiar problems such as slow productivity growth, population aging, and immigration. There are signs that regional and secessionist pressures inside Canada may intensify as well.

Any one of these problems would be daunting by itself. The difficulty for Canadian governments is that they will need to be managed simultaneously. Worse still, these problems may feed on one another, potentially overwhelming the capacity of decision-makers to respond in a timely and effective way. The collapse of political systems is often caused by such a cascade of events, which is sometimes called a polycrisis (Roberts, 2022, 40; Dinan et al., 2024). State failure happens more often than we recognize, and there is no guarantee that Canada will escape this fate in coming decades.

The way to avoid state failure (and, more positively, to promote economic and social development within a durable state) is by enhancing the adaptability of the Canadian government system. Adaptability refers to the capacity of a system to anticipate and respond constructively to major challenges (Roberts, 2024, 10-14). An adaptable system performs four functions well. The first is *anticipation*: the system must be good at taking a long view to identify potential dangers. The second is *invention:* the system must be good at devising grand strategies that seem likely to be effective in managing the complete set of anticipated dangers. The third is *legitimation*: the system must be good at building political support for one strategy or another, among leaders and citizens. And the fourth is *execution*: The system must be good at translating strategy into action, by renovating institutions, drafting laws, and executing programs.

Unfortunately, there is evidence that the adaptability of the Canadian governmental system has declined over the last forty years. In this article, I will briefly describe several reasons this is so.[1] In part, the country is the victim of its success: Canada has become a larger and more vibrant polity in which collective decision-making and coordination are more difficult. Adaptability has also suffered because of exogenous shocks, like the destruction of traditional media by innovations in information technology. Adaptability has been compromised by governmental blunders as well. Leaders have abandoned institutions that once promoted adaptability, or failed to respond appropriately as societal and technological shifts undermined that quality.

Loss of adaptability can be fatal for any country. However, steps can be taken to improve adaptability in Canada. I will identify four reforms that would improve the capacity of the governmental system to respond constructively to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

A BIGGER AND MORE COMPLEX SYSTEM

In terms of formal regime design, Canada may be one of the most decentralized countries in the world. Power is diffused in several ways. Canada was set up as a federal system, with sovereignty divided among federal and provincial governments. It is also a liberal system because individuals have a sphere of autonomy that must be respected by governments. It is a democracy as well, which means that power is shifted from elites to voters. And the Canadian economy is premised on market capitalism, which means that businesses have a significant degree of autonomy too.

There are good reasons for organizing Canadian society in this way. This system seems more likely to maximize individual freedom, creativity, and economic growth. However, this sort of system may struggle to perform the four functions essential to adaptability. For example, democratically elected leaders may have an incentive to focus on short-term election pressures rather than long-term challenges. Federal and provincial leaders may disagree about national priorities and even face incentives to fight rather than cooperate. Building consensus about national strategy, either in the elite or among the general population, may be more difficult because governments have foresworn the tools of propaganda, indoctrination, and censorship. Even when there is consensus about national strategy, follow-up action may be difficult because so many public and private players must coordinate with one another.

In short, the Achilles heel of such an open and decentralized system is that risk that the many parts contained within it may not work well together. Positive steps are necessary to promote a common worldview and coordinated action. The need for such steps increases as the system becomes larger, more decentralized, and more complex.

This is what has happened in Canada over the last forty years. Most fundamentally, there are sixty percent more Canadians today than there were in 1980. Contemporary Canadians also

enjoy more autonomy, because of the adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, judicial decisions that have breathed life into the Charter, and how political culture has been shaped by Charter values. Today, Canadians are better educated and more effective in resisting state intrusions on their personal lives.

There are other ways in which power has been diffused within the system. Provinces are more influential than they were forty years ago, and federal institutions have even recognized a qualified right of secession. Federal and provincial governments have also begun the process of transferring authority to Indigenous communities, and have generally recognized the need to obtain consent for policies that affect those communities. Governments have ceded more autonomy to the marketplace as well, by abandoning interventionist tools like state ownership, investment controls, and trade barriers. The volume of economic activity has increased sixfold since 1984.

THE RISE OF SHORT-TERM POLITICS

A second threat to adaptability has to do with a shift in the character of politics and political culture in Ottawa. Politicians and senior bureaucrats are more likely to think about long-term questions of strategy if they are reasonably secure in their positions and are not distracted by the immediate pressures of work. However, such conditions are increasingly rare in Ottawa.

Political competition has intensified. Among citizens, party loyalty has declined sharply. Governments are less likely to enjoy durable majorities than they were in the twentieth century, and parties have experienced dramatic reversals in fortune. The Progressive Conservative Party that dominated Parliament in the 1980s collapsed in the 1990s and disappeared in 2003. The Liberal Party that governed from 1993 to 2005 was pronounced dead in 2011, only to recover power four years later, and it may suffer another electoral debacle in 2025. The New Democrat Party has also experienced substantial swings in its parliamentary representation.

Under such conditions, political leaders have become increasingly fixated on the short-term task of winning elections. Parties themselves have sharpened their operations: they are more centralized, professionalized, and technologically sophisticated than they once were. Meanwhile, party platforms have become more detailed and function as quasi-contracts with voter blocs. Parties make promises that are designed to be fulfilled within one mandate, and dedicate their time in government to delivering on these commitments in time for the next election. Public servants who once played an important role in long-term planning have been sidelined in this new style of platform-driven governance.

An additional challenge for decision-makers in Ottawa is an escalation in workload. Advances in information technology mean that leaders are bombarded with more information and demands for attention than ever before. As the 2023 Rouleau inquiry observed, mass protests can emerge "at previously unachievable rate and scale" (Public Order Emergency Commission, 2023, 29). Meanwhile, globalization means that Ottawa is more vulnerable to economic and political shocks originating abroad. A more dynamic information environment also means that political gaffes can have sudden and dramatic consequences. One result is an unprecedented, and sometimes counterproductive, emphasis on centralized communications control in Ottawa. Leaders want to maintain "message discipline" in an increasingly noisy environment (Marland, 2016, Chapter 2).

Another result is stress and burnout among decision-makers. Ministers, their political advisors, and public servants have all described how an increasing workload has corroded their

capacity to deliberate well. Moreover, decision-makers are less likely to have the time needed to consider long-term challenges. In 2023, government house leader Mark Holland described the pressure on Ottawa politicians to work eighty or ninety hours a week and asked, "Where do you get the time to sit back and reflect?" (*Paul Wells Show* podcast, March 20, 2023).

DISINVESTMENT IN FORESIGHT

The capacity of leaders to take a long and broad view of national challenges has also declined because of governmental decisions taken after the 1990s. In the mid-twentieth century, leaders within the federal government had devised institutions to counteract short-term thinking. However, these institutions were abandoned after the 1990s.

Between the 1930s and 1980s, the federal government often relied on royal commissions to examine long-term challenges. The model was the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, also known as the Rowell-Sirois Commission, which completed its work in 1940. Political scientist Donald Smiley described its work as "the most exhaustive investigation of a governmental system that has ever been made" (Smiley, 1967, 1-6). The commission had a profound influence on the evolution of Canadian government after World War II. It was followed by several other commissions with similar ambitions. The last was the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, which completed its work in the 1980s, and charted a course for Canada in the age of globalization. Its chair, Donald Macdonald, said that the commission's mission was to help Canadians see where they "were going as a nation, as well as the great events that were going to shape the world around them" (Laidler & Robson, 2005, 6).

Enthusiasm for royal commissions of this type waned after the 1990s. Evert Lindquist observed in 2018 that the days of the forward-looking commission were "long gone" (Lindquist, 2018, 424). Governments may have thought that commissions were no longer useful in a world in which politics was more accelerated and contentious. Commissions operated slowly, while governments felt pressure to launch new programs and deliver results more quickly. And commissions were independent, which meant that they might deliver advice that was at odds with the government's own ambitions.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government also devised another instrument, the independent advisory council, to study long-term challenges. One prominent example was the Economic Council of Canada, which emerged out of decisions taken by the Diefenbaker and Pearson governments. By the 1990s, the Economic Council was the largest think tank, public or private, in Canada. Another prominent example was the Science Council of Canada, established in 1966.

The Economic and Science Councils were eliminated in the 1990s, along with many others. The Mulroney government justified this action as an austerity measure, although some observers thought ministers were actually frustrated by council reports that contradicted government policy. Some warned about the harm done by elimination of these councils. Political scientist John Trent said that the Mulroney government was "blindsiding the Canadian polity for decades" (*Ottawa Citizen*, February 28, 1992). Nobel Laureate John Polanyi warned that it was "shooting itself in the head" (Kinder & Dufour, 2018, 289).

At the time, government officials suggested that private sector organizations would pick up the work previously done by royal commissions and advisory councils. Experience has disproved this hypothesis. Canadian think tanks do not have the staff and resources to undertake long-term policy work on the same scale, while Canadian universities prioritize basic research

rather than policy research and public education. The journalistic community was never well-equipped to do this sort of work, and in any case its capacity has been degraded because of the internet revolution.

The federal bureaucracy has also struggled to fill the need for long-term strategic capacity. A 1996 report documented its limited ability to "look over the horizon to identify new issues and position the government to deal with emerging trends" (Privy Council Office, 1996). In response, Privy Council Office launched a project to promote long-term thinking known as the Policy Research Initiative (PRI). However PRI was moved out of PCO and restructured after the election of the Harper government in 2006 (Zussman, 2015). Its lower-profile successor, Policy Horizons Canada, is now located within Employment and Social Development Canada. A 2015 study of policy capacity in the federal government found the same weaknesses in strategic capacity that had been described in the 1996 report (Wellstead, 2019).

Nor are political parties capable of filling the gap in long-term thinking. This is a crucial deficiency, because parties have become more important actors in the policy process over the last thirty years. As I have noted, party platforms are more important determinants of policy for new governments than they once were. But parties are almost completely lacking in policy capacity. A 2021 study found that there was no federal party in which senior officials considered policy formation to be a priority in the central party office (Cross et al., 2022, 182).

DECAY IN ELITE DIALOGUE

Adaptability requires more than a capacity to foresee dangers and invent strategies for managing them. An adaptable system can also build political support for one strategy or another. Political support has two dimensions. There must be some measure of agreement within a system's leadership group, and also agreement among the general public. In a federal system like Canada's, the challenge of building the first sort of agreement is complicated by the fact that the leadership group is divided. It includes ministers within the federal, provincial and territorial governments, all accountable to distinct electorates.

Over the last eighty years, Canada has developed an elaborate system of intergovernmental diplomacy that is designed to reduce the risk of miscoordination among governments—or to express the point more positively, to promote coordination within a formally divided leadership group. This includes routine interactions among bureaucrats working in different levels of government, as well as routine meetings for ministers handling specific portfolios such as finance or health.

From the 1940s until the 1990s, this system of intergovernmental diplomacy was capped by near-annual meetings of first ministers. One observer said in this period that first ministers' conferences (FMCs) were practically "built into Canada's constitution" (*Calgary Herald*, December 10, 1965). However, the practice of holding annual FMCs was abandoned after the 1990s. By that time, FMCs were closely associated in the public mind with failed efforts at deal-making on constitutional reform.

At first, a retreat from annual FMCs seemed like a good way of reducing contention in national politics. But this retreat has now proved to have bigger costs. FMCs were never about deal-making alone. These meetings were also an important mechanism for building rapport among first ministers and encouraging a shared understanding about the national policy agenda. FMCs also showed the public that leaders were capable of engaging in dialogue despite sharp differences of opinion.

Paradoxically, the institution of regular FMCs was abandoned just as the practice of summitry was being more deeply institutionalized in other contexts. For example, first ministers in Australia now meet more frequently than they did in the 1980s. Similarly, the European Union has entrenched regular meetings of government heads in an effort to provide "strategic direction" to the Union. Canadian prime ministers also participate actively in international summits like the regular G7 meeting. In the international realm, summitry is defended as an essential practice to promote understanding and coordination among allied governments. But the same logic is not applied at home.

DECAY OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The case for democratic government hinges partly on the assertion that citizens, when given the opportunity to engage freely in deliberation, will devise creative solutions to the complex problems facing their community. Moreover, deliberation is expected to generate more support for the policy ultimately adopted by government. In both ways, democracy promises to improve the adaptability of the system.

However, this promise can only be realized if there is a space in which Canadians are able to engage in deliberation. Habermas referred to this space as the public sphere (Habermas et al., 1974). A healthy public sphere would be one in which the agenda for deliberation is set by Canadians rather than foreigners, the agenda is sufficiently stable to allow a proper conversation, and deliberation is civil and well-informed.

Constructing a public sphere that meets these requirements has always been a challenge in Canada. The population is relatively small, diffused across a vast territory, and divided by language. The national conversation has always been heavily influenced by debates in larger powers such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Throughout the twentieth century, Canadian governments wrestled constantly with the question of what should be done to create a space for conversation among Canadians about national priorities. Their efforts were constantly upended by innovations in communication technology such as radio, and broadcast and cable television.

The Canadian public sphere has deteriorated badly over the last thirty years. The digital revolution is a prime cause. Revenues of newspapers and broadcast media collapsed as advertising moved to online platforms, and the number of full-time journalists has declined as well. Social media has reconfigured the social networks of Canadian citizens to include a larger number of non-Canadians, and there is good evidence that it has degraded the quality of public conversation too. The walls of the Canadian public sphere have eroded, the agenda has been destabilized, and civility has declined.

There are other challenges to the Canadian public sphere. One side-effect of continued immigration, amplified by the digital revolution, is the increased salience of diasporic politics. Problems in other countries now echo more loudly within Canada. Other governments also appear to be more actively engaged in efforts to disrupt Canadian politics through disinformation campaigns and other forms of covert influence. Meanwhile, observers continue to warn about low levels of civic and historical knowledge among Canadian citizens. There is considerable evidence that some Canadians do not understand the differences between Canadian and American government and tend to confuse American and Canadian political debates.

BUREAUCRATIC SCLEROSIS

A political system can only be counted as adaptable if it is capable of translating plans into action. Shifts of national strategy inevitably require the construction of new public institutions and programs, and the dismantling of institutions and programs that are no longer needed. Much of this renovation work is done by bureaucrats. An adaptable system is one in which governmental bureaucracies can respond nimbly to the new requirements of strategy.

Canada is properly credited for having high-quality bureaucracies at all levels of government. At the federal level, though, there are mounting concerns about the onset of bureaucratic sclerosis. Many informed observers have suggested that the federal public service has become less nimble, outside moments of crisis. Risk aversion, according to one senior executive, has become "a core feature of the system" (Institute on Governance, 2022, 73).

Sclerosis is the result of a decades-long accretion of controls over the public service. Some of these might be characterized as "model employer" controls. They are intended to ensure that departments and agencies respect important values such as respect for collective bargaining, official languages, employment equity, privacy and other human rights. In addition, there are probity and accountability controls, designed to reduce waste and deter misconduct. The Federal Accountability Act of 2006 is a prominent illustration of the move toward more stringent probity and accountability controls; but there are many other controls of this type as well. Many of these controls are overseen by independent watchdog offices, such as the Auditor General or Information Commissioner.

Canada has shown a distinctive enthusiasm for the creation of independent watchdogs over the last fifty years. The proliferation of rules and watchdogs has had a significant effect on political debate and may have reinforced a fixation with problems of control. Watchdogs provide opposition politicians and journalists with a steady flow of reports that seem to substantiate the idea that federal bureaucracy is plagued by rule-breaking.

Political as well as administrative controls have expanded since the 1980s. The number of political staff working for ministers has increased substantially, so that the total size of the political cohort now rivals the staffing for the Department of Finance. Political staff frequently intervene directly in the work of the public service, often for good reasons, but also with the effect of promoting a bureaucratic culture of short-termism and risk-aversion.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the federal government periodically established independent inquiries to review the condition of the federal public service and consider whether the right balance had been struck between control and performance. The most prominent example is the Glassco Royal Commission, which reported in the 1960s. However, the practice of convening independent reviews was abandoned after the 1970s. The result is that there no adequate check against the continued accretion of administrative and political controls, and entrenchment of a culture of risk-aversion.

CONCLUSION: RESTORING ADAPTABILITY

The adaptability of the Canadian system has declined over the forty years. It does not perform as well as it should in anticipating and managing long-run dangers. In calmer times, a decline of adaptability might not be troubling. But conditions of governance in the coming decades are likely to be turbulent and dangerous. Under such conditions, a decline of adaptability is worrisome. It puts the survival and health of the system at risk.

Canadian governments can take steps to improve adaptability. One step is to invest more heavily in the capacity for forward thinking. The federal government might explore the idea of an inquiry like the Macdonald Commission of the 1980s, but redesigned for the digital age. Or it might improve the policy capacity of political parties by creating European-style party think tanks, as the Lortie Royal Commission recommended in 1991 (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991). Or it might restore independent advisory councils charged with promoting public understanding of long-term challenges.

The practice of holding annual FMCs should also be revived, with some adjustments. The emphasis should be shifted from deal-making to agenda-setting. Meetings should be preceded by the publication of a negotiated agenda and concluded with a negotiated communiqué. A secretariat might produce background reports to support the shared agenda. Indigenous leaders should also be included in these reinvigorated national summits. Regular meetings of this type would help stabilize the national policy agenda and orient it toward long-term challenges.

At the same time, federal and provincial governments must develop a more deliberate and energetic approach to repair of the public sphere. This may include measures to improve civic knowledge among Canadians, protect Canadian journalism, discourage further corrosion of civic discourse, and reduce illicit foreign influences. Governments have already taken some measures to achieve these objectives, but overall reform efforts have lacked coherence and intensity. The central problem, the threat to self-determination posed by the decay of the public sphere, is rarely identified explicitly.

It is also past time for an independent review of the federal public service and our *de facto* political service—that is, the stratum of political staff. Some commentators have questioned the usefulness of an independent review, suggesting that an internal reform effort, perhaps led by the Privy Council Office, would be quicker and equally effective (Caron et al., 2023; Wernick, 2023). But an internal review would likely be limited in scope: for example, it would probably avoid potentially controversial questions about legislative reform and the role of political staff. And even if controversial questions were addressed, the credibility of an internally guided review would be questioned.

Readers may question the soundness or adequacy of these reforms. In that case, we should step back and consider the broader question. It is difficult to dispute that conditions of governance will be challenging for the next several decades. Similarly, it seems beyond dispute that the Canadian system is complex, being composed of many loosely joined parts, and consequently vulnerable to problems of shortsightedness, confusion, and miscoordination. No one thinks we should remedy these problems by re-concentrating political power and restricting rights. But what is the alternative path? How do we encourage far-sightedness and coordination without compromising our commitment to an open society, in which political power is broadly diffused? This is the critical question for Canada and other liberal democracies in the remainder of this century.

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ENDNOTES

[1] I develop this argument more fully in a recent book, *The Adaptable Country* (Roberts, 2024). Evidence to support the more general statements in this article is provided in the book.

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