Book Review


By Ian Brodie

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Ian Brodie is in an exceptionally rare position to offer thoughts on the burning issue of prime ministerial power. After earning a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Calgary, where he met individuals who would later shape his career, he taught at Western University and published Friends of the Court: The Privileging of Interest Group Litigants in Canada (2002). Brodie was very active in conservative political circles, both in Calgary and in London, Ontario, and rose to become Chief of Staff to Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper. When the Conservatives were asked to form a minority government in 2006, he became the Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister and would serve as such for 2.5 years, until June 2008. Based on what he experienced, he tests in this book the prevailing notion that governmental power has become too concentrated in the hands of the prime minister. It is an argument he rejects, taking particular aim at Donald Savoie’s Governing from the Centre (1999) and Democratizing the Constitution: Reforming Responsible Government (2011) by Peter Aucoin, Mark Jarvis and Lori Turnbull.

This is a short work that sometimes reads like an opinionated textbook. Readers looking for a rich meal filled with insightful anecdotes about life in the Prime Minister’s Office or about the nature of Stephen Harper’s management style will be disappointed with the nugget lunch that is offered instead. There are juicy morsels, here and there, that make the book a valuable read nevertheless. Brodie first examines the origins of the prevailing view that the prime minister of Canada is suffocating democracy. He then probes the key powers of the prime minister, focusing more on the theory than on the practice. A chapter follows on how cabinet is appointed by the prime minister but focuses on the real limitations that present themselves. Brodie indicates (at least in the Harper years of 2006-2008) that the Prime Minister actually had few options given the requirements of provincial representation and the quality of people who were in the selection pool. Regrettably, there is little in that chapter except for a rationalization of Harper’s choices.
The best sections of the book focus on how Parliament has become more and more of a check on prime ministerial power. Brodie points to the increased number of private member bills and the frank discussions in caucus that he witnessed and makes a strong case that where parliament should be stronger is in examining estimates. Admitting that even ministers hardly know what is in the spending projections of their departments, he argues that even they would welcome more parliamentary scrutiny. He is not alone in making this argument and perhaps this book will advance it further. The problem (unacknowledged in this book) is that the House of Commons calendar has become progressively lighter over the past twenty years, dramatically reducing debating time and forcing governments to pass massive omnibus bills. Everyone agrees it is undemocratic, but the practice persists.

The book challenges various arguments that have been made over the last decade to change the nature of political life and very effectively dismantles them. He does not spare those who argue that political staffers have too much influence. Drawing on his experience of power, the author is keenly aware of the delicate balances of the Westminster system, and demonstrates how the various models that have been promoted by its detractors would actually be counterproductive. For Brodie, the system is functioning reasonably well, especially when considering how political life is evolving in Canada.

Readers looking for more insight on how the office of the prime minister functions will be disappointed. The image presented is one of frantic activity dotted by endless surprises, big and small (here he follows the work of Eddie Goldenberg and some of the writings of Tom Axworthy). Surprisingly, the book says nothing about the communications obsession and “permanent campaign” that now predominates political life in a media environment that requires round-the-clock attentions. The 2006-2008 period was particularly contentious in this regard as the PMO drastically limited access to the PM and to Ministers, thus fuelling the charge that the prime minister was centralizing power all the more. There’s a lot more to say, in other words. Hopefully, Brodie has not written his last word.