
Building a Better Politics

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In September 2011, subject to review and approval by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, Carleton University will admit the first students to a new graduate program in Political Management. The degree is conceived as an innovative and intensive professional undertaking, though grounded in the academic understanding and critique of existing democratic processes. It will seek to equip its graduates with an essential grasp of the professional skills appropriate to work as a political manager and strategist. It will hone, through practice, the judgment and reflection of its students, not simply with a view to short-term partisan advantage but in relation to the public interest. It will insist on ethical comportment as a guiding principle at all times. This article outlines the background to the establishment of this program.

Universities across this country prepare their graduates for careers of consequence and responsibility in a myriad of disciplines, and necessarily so. Imagine if there were no courses of study for nurses, teachers, economists, agronomists, accountants, journalists, veterinarians and all the other essential services. How would we function?

Imagine a young teacher on the first day of the job, suddenly responsible for the education of an entire class of grade five students, but with no formal practice in what is expected of him or her and no mentorship to speak of.

Such a thing is unthinkable, except in failed states. Of course we prepare our teachers for their responsibilities, just as we require preparatory training for military officers and social workers. It is a mark of a mature political collective that it both provides and expects apposite education in a range of crucial occupations.

And yet heretofore there has been no formal course of study in Canada for an essential element of democratic

governance. Picture the young ministerial chief of staff on the first day of the job. Consider the range of competencies and understandings he or she should command in order to serve the minister, and the political process, well. Consider the cost to the minister, to his or her department and the constituencies it serves, to the government, to democracy and ultimately to the young chief of staff him- or herself, of rudimentary mistakes made while learning on the job.

Canada has very good schools of public administration that prepare graduates for careers as civil servants. We have fine schools of journalism, similarly, that tutor their graduates in how best to cover the political forum. These programs exist because they are of manifest benefit to the students and to the larger civic project: the nation is better served when its journalists and bureaucrats have been formally prepared for their responsibilities, schooled in essential skills, equipped with a moral compass, and taught to think critically about the consequences of their work.

But despite the fact that political staff at all levels – municipal, provincial, federal – wield considerable authority over how Canadians are governed, their professional formation has been until now *ad hoc* at best, with a consequent weakness in the apparatus of governance.

As a contribution to the common weal, then, Carleton University announced in May 2010 its intention to establish a one-year graduate program to prepare students for positions and careers in electoral and legislative politics: as staff members to cabinet

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If formal, university-based education is appropriate for journalists and public servants, surely it is equally appropriate for those who make decisions in legislative and electoral politics.

ministers and elected representatives, strategists for political parties, government relations consultants and political liaison officers for civil society organizations that seek to influence policy and legislative priorities. The program is made possible by the single largest philanthropic commitment in the university's history from Calgary businessman Clayton H. Riddell. It is both an expression of the need for such a course of study and of confidence in the university's ability to mount a high-quality degree of value to its graduates and the country as a whole.

Considered in the context of their influence on public policy and priorities, the duties of political staff are daunting. They are policy advisers, dealing with their political party and helping shape policy proposals the minister will take to cabinet. They prepare the minister for Question Period and other parliamentary activities including dealing with opposition critics. They manage the progress of bills sponsored by the minister through the legislative process. They control the minister's agenda and activities. They serve as gatekeepers controlling access to the minister. They are the main contact point for dealings with other ministers' offices and with central agencies such as the prime minister's or premier's office and their related bureaucracies. They are also the key link in dealings with public servants in the department and with outside interest groups. They have to manage offices, some with more than 50 employees, including hiring and evaluating those working in the office and dealing with the full range of human resources issues that emerge in a workplace of that size. They also manage the minister's communications and can play a crucial role in shaping the minister's public image. They must deal with the minister's constituency business and play a role in positioning the minister to enhance his or her re-election prospects. Finally, they can often be the minister's advisers and confidants, acting as a sounding board, listening to problems the minister faces and proposing solutions, or acting on the minister's behalf in dealing with others in the party, the government, parliament and his or her constituency.

The same applies to the offices of opposition party leaders, and indeed to those of backbenchers and individual members of legislatures. Staff in individual members' offices may be less numerous than in ministers' offices, yet they must deal with and master many of the same issues, facing much greater challenges as each staff member juggles several of these responsibilities.

The long hours, constant pressure and demands, and overwhelming degree to which a staff member's life is dictated by the activities of the member or minister, means that in most cases these jobs are filled by the young, who make up in enthusiasm what they lack in experience. This has become all the more pronounced at the federal level since the passing of the *Accountability Act* in 2006, which prevents federal political office holders (which includes staff to MPs and Senators) and senior public servants from engaging in lobbying the federal government for five years after having left a political position. One of the effects of the legislation has been to discourage mid-career individuals from accepting positions as political staff, as it hampers and limits their further career options, with the consequence that the government's political offices are increasingly populated with people in their early 20s who lack the necessary experience and institutional memory, and are without next generation mentors who can tutor them. Similar effects will soon be felt in industry associations and lobbying firms as they, too, have depended heavily on former senior public servants and political staff for their talent.

For many, the constraints of the job are more than offset by the experiences gained, the opportunity to be close to or involved in decision-making, the all-consuming nature of politics and the chance to be close to power. Those benefits tend to fade with time in the job, and many use the experience of working as political staff as a stepping stone to something else. Some want to run for office themselves. Others want to move into the public service for a more predictable and certain future. Still others use find their time in politics to be valuable experience in the private sector.

Regardless of their destination, there is a large and constant turnover in political staff during the normal four- to five-year cycle of a parliament or legislature. An election that produces a change of government leads to a complete upheaval with all staff being replaced by newcomers who may need months on the job to learn the skills they need to perform effectively for their ministers or members.

Although they come from different backgrounds they share in large degree some traits and attributes.

They display varying degrees of partisanship, but their jobs all depend on their member or party being re-elected. They have some knowledge of how some aspects of the political system and political institutions operate, although in almost every case that knowledge comes from an academic background rather than practical experience. In many cases they have less than a secure handle on the specific policy issues they must address, and are no match for the experience of public servants and representatives of interest groups who have much more policy knowledge and context, frequently accompanied by better understanding of how government, business and the public behave and perceive issues. As well, they lack the advantage of public servants and outsiders who have often been through the issue at hand several times before with previous ministers and governments. They must have the ability to find and build consensus among those with competing and sometimes contradictory interests within government and the civil service, within political parties and parliament and among interest groups and representatives of the general public. They must be well organized, perform well under pressure, and cope with a constantly changing set of demands and deadlines while always keeping a focus on longer term objectives.

The students admitted to the degree – like young people already drawn to political work – will be bright, enthusiastic, committed to the public good, and educated in a variety of disciplines, from History to Political Science. Though it will not be possible in less than a year, no matter how intensive the course of study, to prepare students for everything they might encounter in the cut-and-thrust arena of partisan politics, it will certainly be possible to lay down a bedrock foundation of knowledge and skills that will stand them in good stead as they take up positions of responsibility in the political realm.

There are currently 308 federal Members of the House of Commons and 105 Senators, all of whom require political staff. The various political parties also require staff, as do provincial and municipal politicians. The ranks of political staff members in Canada therefore number into the thousands. Although the Clayton H. Riddell Graduate Program in Political Management will admit and graduate only some 25 students per year, in the competition for positions with the most senior politicians a graduate of a reputable degree program in political practice would clearly be at an advantage. Such graduates might also find employment with advocacy groups, NGOs, lobby firms, and the government relations arms of private, public and third-sector organizations. It is our hope that

the reputation of the degree will build on the caliber of the students it attracts and the accomplishments of its graduates; that the graduates of the degree will go on to leadership roles in Canadian politics and elsewhere; and that over time they will form a professional cadre in political corridors.

The degree recognizes that politics are partisan and that students will be drawn from a range of partisan backgrounds, though the program itself will be avowedly politically ecumenical.

We see the “cross-partisan” nature of the degree as necessary and advantageous. It will require students of different political convictions to work together, often collaborating on group projects. At the very least, they will form professional connections that will be valuable as they enter the world of political practice, no matter that they may be on opposite sides of a partisan divide. We can hope – but cannot promise – that this close interaction with one’s partisan opponents might encourage a respect for honourable adversaries, and so temper some of the needless vituperative rancor that characterizes too much of contemporary politics.

Although this degree will be the first of its kind in Canada, there are a number of similar programs already established at universities elsewhere. The best known and largest is the Graduate School of Political Management (GSPM) at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., which began life as an independent graduate school in New York City in 1987. Neil Fabricant, the former Legislative Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, convinced the New York State Board of Regents that democratic politics would benefit from a school devoted to equipping its graduates with skills and understanding appropriate to careers as political staff to elected representatives. Relatively quickly, the School realized that there were advantages to being located in the nation’s capital rather than New York City, and in 1991 it opened a degree program on the campus of George Washington University. Four years later, George Washington acquired the GPSM and it became a component of the university’s Columbian School of Arts and Sciences.¹

When the GPSM opened its doors in 1987, it admitted 24 students. Today, the school offers three distinct degrees – in Political Management, Legislative Affairs, and Public Relations – along with certificate programs in Community Organizing; Public Relations; Political

Action Committee Management; Online Politics; and Campaign Strategy. Although Carleton has no plans to expand its nascent political management program beyond its initial enrolment projections of 20 to 25 students, and while not all of the graduates of the program would go on to work in federal politics, Carleton shares with George Washington the advantage of being located in its national capital. In addition to core tenure-track faculty hired specifically to deliver the degree, we will be able to call on upon practitioners – current and former staff of ministers and members, senior bureaucrats, politicians, political party officials and interest group executives – to teach elements of the program, bringing their experiences into the classroom and opening the doors to internship opportunities for students as they approach graduation.

As well, the new degree is perfectly consistent with Carleton's existing emphases on Canadian politics, signaled most recently and most prominently by the creation of the Bell Chair in Canadian Parliamentary Democracy. And the university already has faculty members with expertise in areas crucial to a degree stream in political management, notably electoral politics, legislative mechanics, voting behavior, public opinion survey design and the analysis of polling data, political advocacy, political strategy, communication, media and management, the politics of public policy, and the measured critique of existing political practice. We imagine, then, that the Riddell program in Political

Management will complement, marshal and extend established competencies at Carleton.

Finally, the new degree is in keeping with the traditions and character of Carleton University, an institution that from its founding undertook to offer instruction in fields ignored by the established universities, but that nonetheless could benefit from a rigorous course of studies. In 1946, Carleton's first graduates were students in Journalism and in Public Administration. At the time, these were entirely new subjects for university study in Canada. Over the years, what are now the School of Journalism and Communication and the School of Public Policy and Administration have established themselves as the national leaders in their respective fields and prestigious signature features of Carleton University.

We believe the Riddell Graduate Program in Political Management will make a similar contribution to the political culture of the country.

Notes

1. For more information of the Graduate School of Political Management see Chris Arterton "A School for Politicians and Political Staffers, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 30, No 3, autumn 2007.