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# The State of Research on Canada's Parliament

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*In 2009 the Library of Parliament commissioned the author to conduct a study about the state of academic research on the Parliament of Canada over the last decade. The 200 page report looked at publications on our representative institutions in books and refereed and other journals, papers presented to mainstream political science conferences, and grants to support research from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council, including the Canada Research Chairs program, and at the programs of the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences. The goal was to locate activity centred on Parliament, casting as wide a net as feasible. This article is a selective summary of that report.*

Why study Parliament? Parliament is at the centre of Canadian democracy, whether its components function well or poorly. No matter how powerful the executive may appear to be, the House of Commons remains the public face of the government and the opposition, and the site of final decisions regarding how money will be spent both domestically and internationally.

The House is the forum in which the government lays out its public policy strategies. It is the place where bills and regulations are published. The House holds the Government's life in its hands through its ability to refuse confidence. One hopes that the conduct in the House of successive Governments will be observed by citizens, and that the electorate will punish or reward with discernment. A nation's capacity to maintain

widespread, deep, and fair-minded understanding of how its form of democracy should, can and does function in different hands affects the quality of the democracy that will be delivered to citizens. The breadth and clarity of public understanding likewise sets the parameters for citizens' capacity to encourage serious scrutiny by elected members and to influence governments by sending signals to the Government through constituency representatives.

This study indicates that over roughly the last decade, scholars have not shown much interest in Parliament's organization and operations by any available yardstick. The lack of dedicated interest matters because wholesale reform of the representative institutions is a constant refrain of politicians, the media, and of many "experts," who are too often expressing only their unfounded insights. Why are functions and tasks in the representative institutions organized the way they are? How does each component work, and what proximate and distant effects does each have on other elements? If we do not study our institutions as they are in our own time, we cannot even pretend to know how major reforms or small, carefree but cumulative shifts in practice will make them better or worse in the future. Living in ignorance, we will be unable to reverse unexpected and unwelcome results.

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## Academic and Non Academic Publishing

The research began with the hope of capturing a considerable body of scholarly publication, and then looking for "pipeline" activity like seeking grants

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for research and presenting papers preliminary to publication. The standard definition of an academic publication is that it is one whose editor has engaged scholars who are expert in the field to serve as disinterested anonymous referees to judge the adequacy of scholarly apparatus of a submission, as well as its importance.

For books from academic publishers, a first “built” list from a visual search of *Canadian Books In Print* and its paper supplements was fattened by searches of international monograph indexes and of websites of academic presses. A similar attempt to capture the contents of all arguably relevant edited books (collections) was unworkable because most would have required physical examination, and time did not allow. The obviously-relevant collections were however recorded.

For periodical literature, the search took in print and electronic journals specializing on Canadian topics, including journals on constitutional affairs, public policy, parliamentary government and Canadian studies. It also looked very carefully at the three “mainstream” Canadian political studies journals in both French and English, the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* and its French-language equivalent, *Politique et Sociétés* and *Canadian Public Administration*. We took up the English language international journals that accept submissions on all topics of interest to students of political science, government, or governance. For these periodicals, all accessible search engines were used. When necessary, visual searches of journals’ tables of contents were conducted.

The search of a decade’s academic literature on the representative institutions revealed fewer titles than expected. The researcher then decided to bring in work appearing in specialized journals, where expert editors execute the screening and development functions. As well, it was decided to capture titles on Canadian political institutions that are contextual to the representative institutions – primarily parties, the electoral system (but not studies of individual elections), federalism as an institutional form, and the judiciary as it impinges on the legislative function. The counts of titles for the broader definition allows one to form a rough idea of the importance to Canadianists of institutions generally.

In all qualitative work, especially where counts are presented, caveats are a matter of honour. There is no known population or census of publications on Canadian representative institutions – no official “evergreen” bibliography – therefore the body of work captured is not a census nor is it a proper sample.

Certain bodies of newer literature such as that on the representation of women in legislatures, and in politics generally, were omitted, as was work on minority representation, because the focus is not the institutions per se, but representation. The Library of Parliament’s bibliography of its own work was not integrated, nor were government publications, or studies published to the Web by think tanks or university institutes. There is no comparison of relevant activity now in comparison to work acquitted in earlier eras; faculty sizes and publication outlets change over time. The question is, what are university scholars doing? Another issue is the question of exactly how much fine-grained published research would be “enough” to inform reformers. This is answerable only by saying that if a significant feature has not been looked at in a decade, we really are not adequate householders. In effect, the distribution of interest must speak for itself, and be weighed by each reader.

Our various searches uncovered, in the last decade, approximately 470 titles on the political institutions generally. One hundred and fifteen titles (by fewer than 100 authors), taking in the few on provincial legislatures, were thought to be most directly on the representative institutions (“Parliament”).

The 115 titles most relevant to Parliament were then classified by topic. The counts by topic for these titles are presented below.

The following topics were studied with greater frequency (six or more titles) in the body of work captured.

- 21 on general background on accountability (from many angles) in parliamentary government, including general critiques
- 9 on the Senate
- 8 on cabinet and ministers
- 7 on partisanship and the opposition in the House of Commons
- 7 on mixed constitutional titles, including legal matters, the impact of globalization and deregulation, judicialization, and the role of the Attorney General
- 6 each on the need for reform in general, mixed political accountability topics, and budgetary and fiscal accountability

There was also a group of 8 mixed scrutiny topics on the need for better surveillance by both executives and legislatures: improving legislative surveillance of executive action including political appointments, improving procedural correctness in making policy, and political surveillance of police activity.

Lower frequency topics (five or fewer) included prorogation, Officers of Parliament, House of

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Commons Committees, representation, and theory of Westminster Government. Unique topics included Parliamentary Secretaries; powers to send for persons, papers and records; and search warrants in a legislature.

We then compared this list with a list developed from a visual search and classification of 80 out of the 140 selected articles published in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* for the same period. The Journal is chosen to serve as a comparator because its contents are intended to be focused on topics of interest to Members of Parliament and parliamentary officials. (Articles by academics were omitted, to avoid duplication from other lists.)

The highest frequency (six or more titles) topics in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* were:

- 9 on the role of the private member
- 8 on Committees of the House of Commons or of a Legislative Assembly: The articles are wide-ranging across sub-topics, including audit committees, fairness in committees, coercive powers of committees, the confidentiality of committee reports, and reforms of committees in Ontario and Québec
- 7 on the role of Parliament in general – malaise, decline and need for reinvention
- 7 on power and privilege
- 7 on the Senate including reforms, committees, role in scrutiny of legislation, the speakership, and the legislative process in general
- 6 on Officers of Parliament/Legislature: There is one general article on the role of Officers in one legislative assembly among the six, and another on methods of funding for Officers. The rest take up individual Officers; Parliament's Budget Officer, the OAG in Ontario, the Public Service Integrity Officer, and whistle-blowing in Canada
- 6 on Elections: including the difficulties with fixed-date elections, the Governor General's right to grant dissolution, methods of financing parties

Lesser frequency topics were: new communications technology and cyber-democracy; the future of the Crown in Canada; modernization of Royal Assent; estimates/supply; the speakership including procedure for challenging the Speaker; election of the Speaker and use of the casting vote; the constitution including one essay on parliamentary privilege in this context; Question Period; procedure; party switching; women in legislatures; the sub-justice convention; access to information; youth, and; the media and Parliament.

Overall, searching for a way to interpret these differences, one might say that the topics chosen by parliamentarians and the experts who assist them appear to be about the boundaries of the role of the private member, and on understanding conduct (the

role of privilege) within the House and in standing committees. Parliamentarians are also naturally interested in rules on election dates and party financing..

The academic publications, on the other hand, look at the behaviour of actors within the House of Commons from a distance. Overall, few academic authors execute finer-grained empirical work on single important components of parliamentary democracy or single procedural tracks, including appropriations or supply. Authors who do demonstrate interest in the representative institutions prefer to write, often prescriptively, on general themes.

One cannot find much material evidence on committee systems, nor analysis of whose interests are served by the overall number of committees in operation in given periods, or on the way work is done in committee and its perceived significance. Related to these gaps, scholars today are not often taking up the roles and the implications for democratic government of the statutory "accountability" officers in the House of Commons, including the impact of unilateral product and role adjustments on MPs' understanding of their traditional duties of scrutiny.

Summarizing, the broad contrast is between finer-grained topics reported in *Canadian Parliamentary Review* and more general academic work. Without wanting to over-state the case, the difference between the CPR's decade and the decade's topics taken up by academics would seem to be that committees and their roles do (proportionately) preoccupy parliamentarians and their expert officials; as does the power of the legislature relative to the executive; parliamentary privilege; how the independent "Officers" fit into legislatures; and changes to provisions for elections. MPs and the career officials who support them are interested in what is called "the industrial organization" for its work of the legislature.

The next question is whether the topics chosen in other types of scholarly activity will lead to significant research of the type that CPR and practitioners indicate is of interest.

### **Academic Activity Apart from Publishing**

This section begins with a summary of papers on Parliament presented to the largest mainstream scholarly conferences, then examines the relative proportion of scholarly grants to study or conduct original research on Parliament, as compared to political institutions generally. A caveat is that one cannot know whether submissions were few, but a good success rate, or whether submissions were

many, but academic peers believed the work proposed was not of sufficient value to win the competition for support. Papers and awards are classified on the basis of their titles.

### *Offering Papers to the Mainstream Scholarly Conferences*

What follows is a highly summarized review of the contents of programs of the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) annual conference from 2003 to 2009, and those of the Société québécoise de science politique (SQSP), available online from 2004 to 2009.

For the CPSA, the 2009 program was analysed well before the event. For 2003 to 2008, the online programs were used. For the seven years, the total number of papers on political institutions is 310, with about 60 papers offered on the representative institutions. Year by year, the count of papers on Parliament never exceeds 12 (in 2006, from 43 on all political institutions), and the lowest counts are for the years 2003 and 2004. In 2009, ten topics on representative institutions are offered in the preliminary program, but we do not know how many materialized.

In the case of the SQSP conference, in the period, there are six communications on the representative institutions from a domain of 24 on political institutions generally. The relative emphasis is similar to that for the Canada-wide conference.

### *Grants: The Social Science and Humanities Research Council*

The program clusters chosen for review from the work of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) are: 1) Canada Research Chairs, 2) Fellowships, Scholarships and Prizes (three post-doctoral programs; three doctoral programs and two masters degree programs), 3) Investigator-Framed Research (two programs), and 4) Targeted Research and Training Initiatives. The period 1998-2008 was reviewed.

There are no Centres of Excellence for “political science” or “politics and government.” Although the Research Communication and Interaction and Strategic Research Development do have programs for individual research under “politics and government,” political institutions or representative institutions did not turn up.

The list of grant totals below cannot be construed as a *census* of grants for study of the broader domain of political institutions that is the environment for the representative institutions.<sup>1</sup> The list was obtained from the SSHRC’s search engine, covering the approximate

61,000 grants awarded over the categories chosen, including 3,800 in political science, for the years 1998-2008.

- Of a total of 2,600 grants (in three programs) for post-doctoral studies awarded by the SSHRC in the decade, 170 were won by political scientists. Eight topics on political institutions were counted, and three on representative institutions.
- Of 14,600 doctoral grants (three programs) again in the decade, a total of 1,100 went to the political science discipline. Four awards are for proposals on representative institutions, from the domain of 37 on political institutions generally.
- Of 5,600 masters awards to students during the decade, 340 are in the political science discipline. Four awards are to persons proposing study of representative institutions, from 25 for work on political institutions.
- Of 326 investigator-framed “Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Grants” (47 to political science), there are three scholars proposing work on political institutions, and none (zero) on the representative institutions.
- Of 23,000 investigator-framed or “Standard Research Grants” (1,400 in political science), 14 grants are to scholars for the study of representative institutions, from 76 on political institutions.
- Of 3,200 Targeted Research and Training Initiatives’ grants (260 in political science), 25 are for proposals on political institutions with four on representative institutions.

For the decade, therefore, and noting the exception of election studies, there is, in absolute terms, only a small amount of study of representative institutions.

More impressionistically, SSHRC awards to political science, which have not been tabulated, appear to be for conceptual work, for studies of other countries, and for work on international politics. Representative institutions represent only a minor specialization within political institutions.

Overall, the small flow of SSHRC grants to scholars for the study of Parliament – even they were to be multiplied several times – indicates both a resource problem and an interest problem.

### **Canada Research Chairs 2000-2008**

In February 2009, an announcement of 134 final awards for 2008 under the Canada Research Chairs Program brought the total of Chairs funded since the Program’s inception in 2000 to 1,998 individual Chair awards – just two short of the program’s mandate.

The list of the total 134 awards for 2008 for all fields had to be examined visually. Two awards (one political science and the other multi-disciplinary) were thought marginally relevant for the present examination, because policy outcomes are attributed to the electoral



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system in one, and to financial institutions in the other – an implicit judgment of the importance of the representative institutions.

The historical list from 2000 to 2007 is however searchable. A first search was conducted to identify all Chairs in the SSHRC's lists awarded to applicants under the disciplinary identifier, "political science," yielding 35 CRCs. These were topical, making it difficult to find a fit with the categories in use here. Next, searches were conducted on the various multidisciplinary categories, using a variety of keywords such as "Canada," "government," and "institutions." This approach led to the identification of another 14 CRC awards (to persons other than political scientists), but the project descriptions emerging from the multidisciplinary categories second group was even less classifiable under our broader headings. One award was perhaps marginally relevant, and only that member of the interdisciplinary group had publications in political science outlets that we could find.

Not one single Canada Research Chair in the life of that Program has been explicitly and directly granted for study of the Canadian Parliament. Not one CRC award has been made that even approximates the descriptions of the University-endowed Laval Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions awarded to Louis Massicotte in 2007, or the endowed Bell Chair at Carleton awarded to Bill Cross in 2009 for study of Canadian Parliamentary Democracy.

We studied the descriptions for the 35 CRC awards for research programs the SSHRC had identified as belonging to the discipline of political science. From these, a total of 14 were selected as being of some interest to scholars of Canadian political institutions. Seven are identified as more likely than the others to generate work that might be of interest in the representative institutions.

Two Chairs from this number (Christian Rouillard and Kiera Ladner) treat Canadian institutions. Four others (André Blais, Ran Hirschl, Leo Panitch, and Robert Young) propose comparative work that could enlighten Canada's general situation. In addition, there is Donald Savoie's Chair for continuation of his comparative work on executives and public services.

The remaining CRC awards in political science identified topics such as: international relations, security, law, inter-state and global concerns, and public policy issues (ageing, the environment, oil and gas). Of these, two scholars are studying civilian-military and civilian-police relations.

### *The Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences (CFHSS)*

The CFHSS is a not-for-profit, membership-based organization made up of Canadian scholarly associations, universities and colleges, representing more than 50,000 scholars, students and other practitioners across Canada. The Federation has an annual budget of approximately \$2.5 million.

Because topics relevant to Parliament show up so seldom in its guest lectures and book prizes, only the program of grants to aid scholarly publication will be reported on here. It supports publishing costs for up to 150 scholarly books yearly, often specialized books whose contribution builds over time. It has assisted over 6,000 titles since 1942.

The CFHSS' web site's search engine was used to review the titles supported. The search term "Cabinet," found two grants in the 1990s. "House of Commons" turned up two grants in the 1960s and 1970s, and a single title in each of the 1990s and 2000s. The "Senate" has one contemporary title, in 2003. One book on Canadian Ministers, written in 1970, was found. "Parliament" turns up nothing on the workings of the institution.

It is important to keep in mind that relevant titles might not have come forward in applications for publishing grants.

The forthcoming section addresses the question of why scholarship on our representative institutions – on "Parliament" – is so difficult to find and/or so inadequately supported.

### **Incentive Systems in Academic Publishing**

In most areas of science and less often in social science, research is conducted by teams and articles are written by several authors. In political science, scholars who analyse large compilations of quantitative data, including voting data, have always been far more likely than students of institutions to work in groups. Institutional scholars are usually dedicated students of documents and archives. Therefore it was not a surprise that teamwork to produce work on Parliament proved to be rare in our search for publications.

One recent major exception would be the team of scholars invited to participate in the Democratic Audit project at Mount Allison University. Two other smaller-scale examples of academic collaborations focused on the representative institutions involve Bruce Hicks of Montreal, and Christopher Kam of UBC, not with each other but with different scholars.<sup>2</sup>

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But another, newer reason for the relative lack of academic publications on parliament may be the increasing tendency for Canadian scholars to seek publication in foreign periodicals in order to become known to and cited by a foreign readership without losing Canadian exposure. This phenomenon was taken up in an evidence-based article by Éric Montpetit and colleagues. The authors conclude:

An article is more likely to be widely cited if it is published in a prestigious journal, if it is written by several authors, if it applies quantitative methods, if it compares countries, and if it deals with administration and public policy or elections and political parties.<sup>3</sup>

Montpetit also conducted, working as an individual, original quantitative work on “the comparative turn” in Canadian political science. His chapter provides a convincing explanation of why Canadian scholars now plan their more topical work to cover Canada only as one of several countries. The downside is that comparative work takes up topics that can be compared.<sup>4</sup>

This “turn” has apparently changed political science curricula in universities. In January, 2009, Rosanna Tamburi had a short article in *University Affairs*, published by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). Tamburri noted that while there was no shortage of experts on the small screen to discuss the constitutional crisis of December 2008-January 2009, media presence masked the fact that Canadian politics has suffered “a disconcerting slide in interest”:

Enrolments are on the wane. Fewer PhD theses are written on Canadian politics. Faculty members specializing in the field are in short supply. And some courses that were once the staple of the Canadian political science syllabus ...are going untaught.<sup>5</sup>

Why would this happen? Simon Hix covers the sources of English-language scholarship (effectively western Europe, North America, Israel and Australia). He shows that the ranking of departments and institutions depend upon the cumulative citations of members of their faculty in the most prestigious field journals, none of them in Canada.<sup>6</sup>

But perhaps the most pertinent issue, one that goes to the core of the CRC program’s impact, is the question of how these emergent incentive systems affect the sub-disciplinary structures of social science disciplines. This topic is addressed by Kyle Siler and Neil McLaughlan, in their quantitative study, “The Canada Research Chairs Program and Social Science Reward Structures”.<sup>7</sup> The disciplines they chose

to investigate are economics, political science and sociology. In comparison to economics, political science and sociology are characterized as weak disciplines, meaning that longer-term or classic problems do not necessarily draw elite scholars.

The extent to which the scholarly elite (both CRC-rewarded researchers *and* elite scholars who have not benefited from the CRC reward system) is concentrated in the most prestigious research universities is striking. In the pooled data set of all three disciplines, scholars from the three institutions, McGill University, University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto, claim six of the top 10 publication counts in the top 20 journals, and eight of the top 10 citation counts.

The authors believe that academic disciplines work as a particular kind of network (a “scale free network”) where actors will tend to attach themselves to a few high-activity nodes in the network. Preferential early attachment allows academics in a network to benefit from each other’s early connections and thinking.<sup>8</sup> Thus group members rise together in citations and the concomitant local and national rewards. But networks break fields and disciplines into chewable chunks. The authors cite Abbott as the source of expertise on the downside of abandoning disciplinary fields for “problem-based interdisciplinarity.” Networking on problems leads to good citation counts, but also to “fads or politically salient topics and other trends that cool off before the normal life-cycle of the career of a tenured professor runs its course.”<sup>9</sup> It was earlier noted that many of the awards to political scientists under the CRC program in political science were difficult to place into categories, apart from the ubiquitous “comparative” descriptor.

Thus a quick look at recent research on scholarly incentive systems and how scholars find security in their own institutions indicates that Canadian political scientists will surely not return anytime soon to study of the complex institutions that shape the performance of Canadian democracy.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to create an empirical base to assess the current state of publishing and other research-related activity by academics focusing on Parliament. This study’s ten year review of publishing is a qualitative effort for which strong validity claims are inappropriate. Nevertheless, the low absolute counts of publications and other activity reveal gaps in research activity. The worst case would be that Canadians, including Parliamentarians, will lose their

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grasp of how the institutional framework is intended to work and can work. Therefore, reforms and our real problems may not meet, and unhelpful reforms may prove irreversible because they will serve the interests of intense minorities.

It would also appear that scholars are almost irrelevant to the effort to capture institutional realities. Non-profit bodies, the Library of Parliament and Parliament itself will determine whether and how well Canadians generally as well as scholars of comparative government will understand Canadian representative institutions.

## Notes

1. The following options were used for SSHRC award clusters: All Regions, Provinces and Organizations; All Disciplines (taking Political Science, Economics, History, Law and Philosophy for focus); All Areas of Research (using "Politics and Government" for focus); and various parliamentary keywords in searching on title and project descriptions: Canada and Parliament/Canada et Parlement; Parliament/Parlement; Cabinet; Committees; Institutions; Democracy/Démocratie; Accountability and Governance/Imputabilité et gouvernance.
2. There are a few more collaborations in the writings found in the larger domain of political institutions. Paul Howe (UNB) had five publications with other colleagues; then three times each for Herman Bakvis (UVic), David Docherty (Wilfrid Laurier), Manon Tremblay (U of O) and Linda Trimble (U of A ), writing with different colleagues. The study of election data and polling (two separate categories for the SSHRC) has a long history of collaborations, for one example, those led by André Blais.
3. Éric Montpetit, et al What Does it Take for a Canadian Political Scientist to get Cited?, *Social Science Quarterly*, vol 89, 2008, pp 802-816.
4. Éric Montpetit, "A Quantitative Analysis of the Comparative turn in Political Science." In Linda A. White et al (eds) *The Comparative Turn in Canadian Political Science*, UBC Press, 2008: pp. 17-37.
5. Rosanna Tamburri, "The Fall of Canadian Politics," *University Affairs*, AUCC: January 12, 2009: 3 pp.
6. Simon Hix, "A Global Ranking of Political Science Departments, *Political Studies Review*, vol 2, 2004, pp. 293-313.
7. Kyle Siler and Neil McLaughlin, "The Canada Research Chairs Program and Social Science Reward Structures" *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol 45 no. 1, February 2008, pp. 93-119.
8. Robert K. Merton, "The Matthew Effect in Science," *Science*, 159 (1968): pp. 56-63; and Robert K. Merton, *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, Chicago, IL:University of Chicago Press, 1973. (The "Matthew Effect" is the self-fulfilling prophesy, in which the researcher's initial acquisition of resources will compound advantages through the career. )
9. Andrew Abbott, "The Disciplines and the Future." In S. Brint (ed.), *The Future of the Intellect: The Changing American University*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002: pp. 205-230.