

# Parliamentary Bookshelf: Reviews

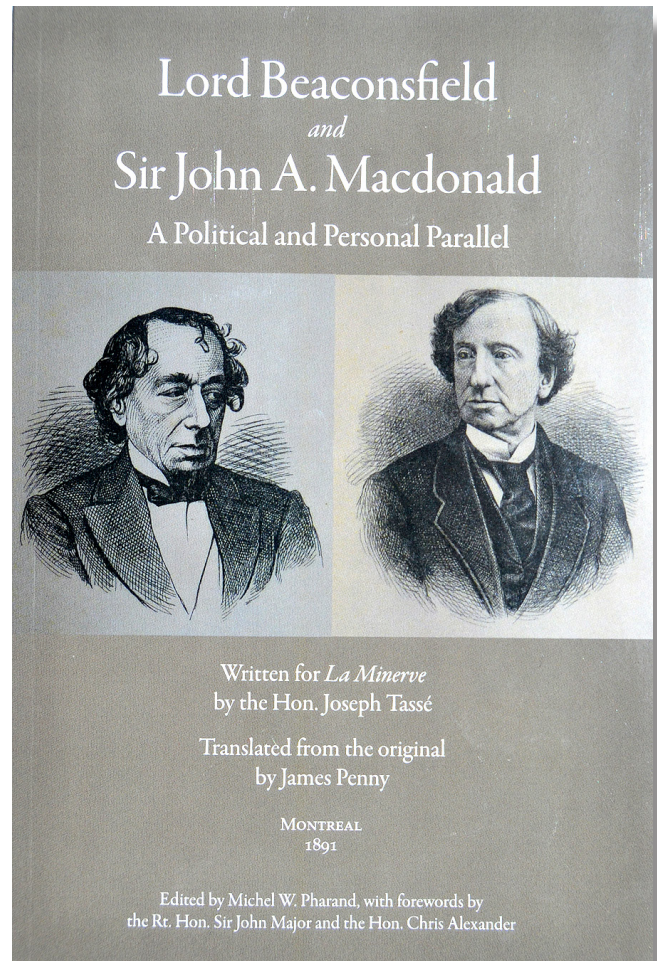
Joseph Tassé, Lord Beaconsfield and Sir John A. Macdonald: A Personal and Political Parallel (Montreal, 1891) Translated from the original in French by James Penny. Edited by Michel W. Pharand, School of Policy Studies, Queen's University and McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015, 85 p.

This is a welcome addition to the small production of books published in this year of Sir John A. Macdonald's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Michel W. Pharand, the long-time director of the Disraeli project at Queen's University, brings together both the original version of Tassé's pamphlet, first published in 1880, as well as the translation produced by James Penny in 1891. Pharand brings a rigorous scholar's attention to the original text and the translation and alerts the reader to his numerous corrections. He also provides an admirably complete set of notes to establish context as well as enlightening explanations.

The revival of Joseph Tassé's study of two giants of the epoch gives today's readers an appreciation of how Macdonald was seen in his own day, although Tassé was hardly an objective observer. Born in what is today Laval, Tassé had trained as a lawyer but had no taste for its practice. He worked as a journalist until he was offered a job as translator in the House of Commons in 1872. Tassé also took on an ambitious literary project, a massive two-volume work entitled *Les Canadiens de l'ouest* which appeared a few years later.

When Tassé decided he had had enough of translating the words of politicians he sought the Conservative nomination for the riding of Ottawa and was elected in Macdonald's 1878 landslide victory. He was a 32-year-old member of caucus when he wrote this tract.

Ever the journalist at heart, Tassé knew a good story when he saw one. Macdonald was in London in the late summer of 1879 and was invited by Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield) to visit him at Hughenden Manor, his country estate some 50 kilometres west of London. On September 1, 1879, Macdonald travelled to the splendid mansion in Buckinghamshire and spent the evening in animated conversation with his British counterpart. We know very little of what was discussed, except that Disraeli



did observe that Macdonald was "gentlemanlike, agreeable and very intelligent; a considerable man." Macdonald took leave early the next day and soon thereafter returned to Canada.

Inspired by the event, Tassé wrote his 25-page essay comparing the two men and it was published by *La Minerve*, the Montreal-based Conservative newspaper, in 1880. Much of the text consists of parallel biographies, but it is striking to note how very different the two men were. Disraeli's origins, his arduous climb of the proverbial greasy pole and his literary bent made him utterly different compared to Macdonald. Indeed, there is precious little these two had in common except for a romantic vision of the British Empire. Tassé mentions Disraeli's concern for the working class but does not

mention Macdonald's signal legislation that legalized trade unions in 1872 (Gladstone had done the same in 1871). The young journalist was more successful in drawing parallels between the two men on physical likeness and the charm of their respective wives (both men had been widowers at one time, something Tassé does not mention).

Macdonald must have liked the booklet. Though re-elected in 1882, Tassé was defeated in 1887 and appointed to the Senate by Macdonald in 1891. Tassé served until his death in 1895; he was only 46.

The pamphlet was only available in French until 11 years later, literally a few days after Macdonald passed away, when Penny published it in English translation. The Macdonald reputation-building machine had already stepped up its activities and this publication heralded a wave of books that would appear in the following two years.

**Patrice Dutil**

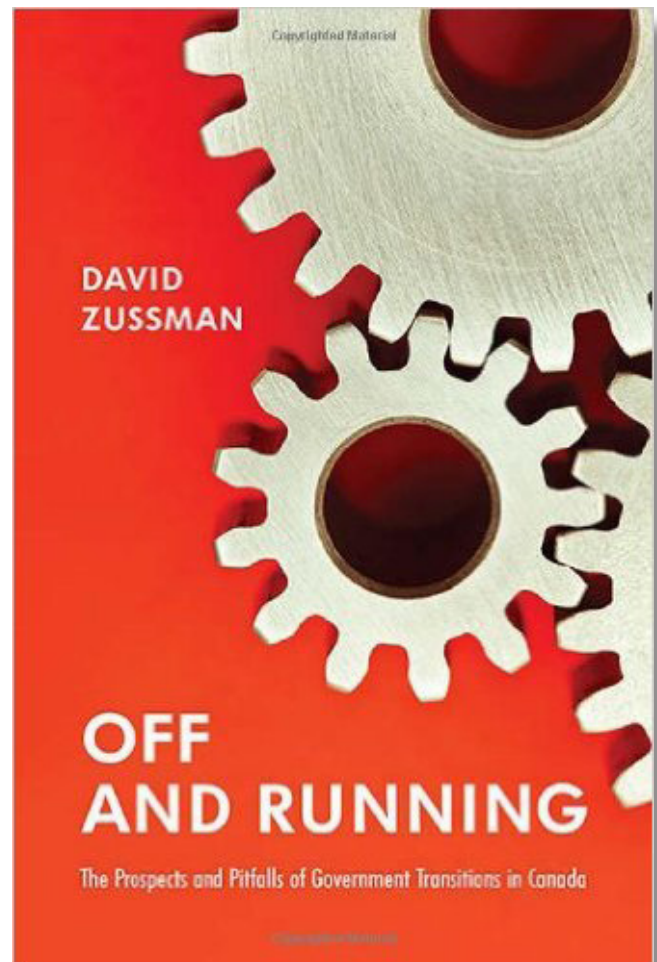
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**Off and Running: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Government Transitions in Canada, David Zussman, University of Toronto Press, 2013, 299 p.**

This autumn, 338 writs of election were issued and Canada's national political parties competed to form our next federal government. Author David Zussman advises major federal parties to commission a transition team 18 months in advance of an election, so preparations should have been well underway for some time. If you are a public servant whose work may be affected by a government transition, I advise that you start preparing by reading this book.

Perhaps no one is better placed than Zussman to have written what has already become the definitive work on government transitions in Canada. Zussman, who twice led federal transition teams, is Jarislowsky Chair at the University of Ottawa and a former president of the Public Policy Forum. In short, his networks are strong, his intelligence is deep, and his experience is unparalleled. This book reflects well on all three attributes.

More fundamentally, this book reminds us how government transitions fit into the broader machinery of Canadian government: when writs of election are issued, legislatures are dissolved, but governments continue to serve at the pleasure of the Crown until such time, perhaps, as a new group of representatives



command the confidence of the people's assembly and are appointed to govern. When that happens, a transition takes place.

Peaceful government transitions are fundamental to democracy. In less stable democracies, electoral losers may not consent to hand over power or heads of state may prove unwilling to confer power upon a new governing authority. In the most extreme of cases, the pitfalls of transition can be violence or civil war. In Canada, the more likely pitfalls include negative media coverage, disgruntled party members, a disoriented public service, and insufficient policy implementation.

Zussman emphasizes the importance of sequencing and timing in transition planning by structuring his book into four election-related phases: pre-writ, campaign period, post-election, and consolidation. Although the lessons derived from each of these periods are too numerous to summarize, I will offer a prime example. Zussman writes that "...it is unwise to monopolize the post-election period of a newly appointed minister. It is important to remember that

there are many experts and others outside the portfolio who may be helpful in providing a new minister with important information” (123).

The breadth of the author’s knowledge enables him to offer wisdom on a wide range of subjects, including the length of briefing notes, the influence of spouses, appropriate media exposure, cabinet-making, and leadership dynamics. In that sense, the practical advice proffered by Zussman is invaluable. Moreover, the wise insights that line this book are not just emanating from Zussman himself, but also from interview subjects such as Richard Dicerni, Jim Mitchell, and Mel Cappe – all who served as distinguished senior federal public servants.

It is this unparalleled level of access and honesty that makes this book a timely and also timeless work. Zussman is a trusted source in part because of his bona fides in federal departments as well as the partisan trenches; his insights are revelatory and illuminating. The best vignettes are excerpted into boxed text, but this only serves to enhance the flow of the narrative. Consider a story told by Ian Brodie, former Chief of Staff to Stephen Harper: “Everyone on staff called him ‘Stephen’ before and during the election. Then, the day after the election, I insisted everybody call him ‘Mr. Harper.’ Once he was sworn in, everyone, including myself, called him Prime Minister....His head would jolt back because it was contrary to our everyday process of calling him Stephen. People didn’t seem to appreciate the magnitude of the change that was taking place. For us, the world was changing big time” (133). The political nature of such remarks makes them no less valuable for bureaucrats. Employees of the permanent public service may have the same job, or

at least the same level of responsibility, in the weeks before and after a general election; however, they would do well to realize just how dramatically life may have just changed for a new minister, his or her family and close friends.

When done well, very few people are involved in transitions. One person who is central to the transition process and understands fully the magnitude of the act is the head of the public service. Zussman is careful to emphasize the importance of establishing and building trust between new ministers and deputy heads. Initial perceptions of trust between the government and the public service will emanate from one single event: the first meeting between the clerk and the prime minister-designate. “This is the moment,” writes Zussman, “when the notions of fearless advice and the independence of the public service are most severely tested” (141). As if the point needs underscoring, “[Nicolas] D’Ombrain advises that clerks should be pensionable” (142).

The only other major sources on government transitions in Canada are an edition of collected essays from 1993 and a more recent award-winning book on Ontario politics. Although the focus of Zussman’s book is federal, much will resonate with those involved in transitions in larger provinces. Legislative libraries in all Canadian jurisdictions should stock multiple copies of *Off and Running*.

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