

# At the pleasure of the crown: The politics of bureaucratic appointments

**Christopher Cooper**

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“A pink slip and running shoes,” is what Brian Mulroney had to offer to bureaucrats who got in his way. Prime Ministers, in Canada and in many (Westminster) countries, are keen on their prerogative to hire and fire civil servants. Even in countries where the PM does not have such powers, the urge for reform or to bend the civil service to their liking is always around the corner. In the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn portended that, if he would be elected prime minister, he would outsource the government's bureaucracy to private consultants.

This urge is unpacked by Christopher Cooper in “At the pleasure of the crown: The politics of bureaucratic appointments.” Empirically set in Canada's provincial government, this book provides a theoretical contribution to the topic of political appointments in the civil service's apex, supported by quantitative and qualitative data.

Bureaucratic appointments are traditionally seen as a means of control for political officeholders. By giving the top job to loyal people, they have a lever to control government organizations. This view is known as “the quest for control”—as coined by Peters and Pierre (2004). Cooper contends that the quest for control is not a sufficient explanation for the politics of bureaucratic appointments and proposes a “fuller” alternative (p. 9). His study suggests that the influence of politics on administrative turnover is aimed at the “professional qualities that governments try to cultivate among these senior officials” (p. 8). So, the politics of bureaucratic appointments do not refer to “how much control” politicians have, but to the “type of behaviour that governments are seeking to control” in that specific time and policy window (p. 8). This need for civil servants who “get things done” and “think like us” and will successfully implement a desired policy agenda could be dubbed “the quest for competence.”

The first chapter is a primer on current explanations of bureaucratic turnover. It presents the “quest for control” perspective, introduces some of the underlying theoretical debates such as principal-agent theory, and nudges the reader to some of the explanatory variables in the following chapters. In contrast, chapter 2 draws on the public service bargains framework by Hood and Lodge (2006) and outlines three *modi vivendi* of politicians and public servants: the spoils bargain (until 1940s), the Schafferian bargain (1940–1980), and the managerial bargain (from 1980 on). The following chapters each provide cumulative empirical testing of the book's argument. First using descriptive statistics (ch. 3) which show a big increase in administrative turnover, and increasingly with regression models testing alternative explanations such as the election of a new premier and change in party (ch. 4). The causal mechanism between politician's desire for competence, rather than loyalty, and bureaucratic appointments is corroborated in chapter 5, by means of qualitative secondary data.

This book is demonstrably based on extensive and impressive data. The quantitative data include all provincial deputy minister appointments, the highest ranking official in Canadian provincial government ( $n = 16,511$ ) over almost a century (1920–2013). This unique approach has considerable merit, displaying the structural patterns in

administrative turnover over time, across provinces, and relative to a number of contextual factors such as elections and labor market developments. The effective use of visuals makes the statistical evidence compelling for readers unfamiliar with regression tables.

While praise is in order, this reader was left with three sets of questions. First, despite turning from tradition, the core argument only slightly contrasts with traditional explanations for administrative turnover. While the quest for competence seems reasonable, it is hard to distinguish this argument from the quest for control. As the state grew more complex, competence gained importance, but was it ever not important? Commitment to the policy agenda—“think like we do”—(p. 59), rather than partisan or personal loyalty is still remarkably similar to loyalty. Is controlling “the type of behavior” not also a way of demanding loyalty? Or is the quest for competence an add-on to the traditional view? Do heads of government now expect loyalty and competence?

Second, the most recent bargain in the historical review originated in the late 1970s and came of age in the 1980s. At the time, “tenets of the Schafferian bargain formerly esteemed as necessary for good governance were now cast as plaguing modern government” (p. 44). Governments have been changing ever since. The coming of age of populism in government and opposition, the spread of internet and social media, technological advancements, discussion about diversity and inclusion, and the complexity of public policy, to mention a few developments of these turbulent Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous times. Save a few words on pages 104–105, these developments are absent in *At the Pleasure of the Crown*. While his book argues that politicians seek to influence the bureaucracy's capacity to cope with the demands of their time, Cooper offers few insights into recent developments from 1980 on that warrant new civil service competence. Though appointments apparently still the fit “managerial” model, what has changed in administrative turnover in the last decades? And what are its politics?

Finally, the voice of premiers and particularly deputy ministers is underrepresented in this book (but see secondary references in chapter 5 which fortunately include voices from times past too). The analysis is about them, without them—at least, the presented data stop short of conveying the lived realities and dilemmas of “the politics of bureaucratic appointments” as the subtitle suggests. Instead, the independent variables in the various models relate to electoral, institutional, economic, and regional factors. Thus, the *politicking* of these appointments remains relatively undiscovered. If premiers decide on deputy minister appointments, do (prospective or current) deputy ministers simply sit and await their fate? Are they active agents, shaping their own careers? What other actors play a role? Does the premier's reach in the department extend beyond deputy ministers?

This book is an evidence-based contribution to debates on administrative appointments that travels well beyond Canada's provincial government. The data are credible but paint a narrow picture of the “politics of bureaucratic appointments” and developments in recent decades. Its convincing display of politicians' hold on bureaucratic appointments—consider Mulroney's pink slip or Fortuyn's government of consultants—is a stark reminder for those who cherish a merit bureaucracy.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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