Book Review


Reviewed by Robert Bence, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

The Carleton University School of Public Policy and Administration has produced this 30th edition of How Ottawa Spends, a compendium of 11 articles by seventeen scholars analyzing current Canadian government fiscal policies. This valuable, diverse collection provides perspectives that enhance our understanding of the political/economic contexts, budgetary processes and impact of the minority Harper Conservative government policies. Editor Allan Maslove sets the tone in his introduction, observing that the Harper regime has demonstrated a dysfunctional approach to pursuing politized economic priorities in a macro environment of high economic uncertainty. Maslove characterized Harper’s first Throne Speech in 2006 as one that contained no sense of urgency, and his government continues to be unable to create a clear rational strategy for taxing and spending.

Relying on previous editions of this publication, Bruce Doern (“Evolving Budgetary Policies and Experiments: 1980-2010”) leads off this work by offering an insightful history of Ottawa budgeting from 1980 to 2010. He notes the demise of Trudeau Keynesian era, replaced by the movement to monetarism as concerns about Canadian inflation and debt rose. Rational budgeting and effective program review have not been a hallmark of either Liberal or Conservative governments. Much of the march to irrationality, according to Doern, can be explained by the reduction in the dominance of the Department of Finance and Bank of Canada, as more politicized sources of analysis and forecasting compete for prominence in the budget process. While both Liberals and Conservatives increased spending, their overall goals diverged. Liberals saw spending as a method of centralizing and unifying Canada, while Harper has pursued a more open federalism to build regional political support in failed attempts to secure a House of Commons majority.

Many of the contributors focus on how the Harper government, and often his Liberal predecessors have sacrificed sound public administration practices in pursuit of political objectives. For example, in their examination of the Conservative’s reengineering of the welfare state to the strategic state, Ruth Hubbard and Gilles Paquet (“Design Challenges for the Strategic State: Bricolage and Sabotage”) illustrate how the Atomic Energy Control Board has passively sabotaged nuclear safety, and the Conservative PMO has actively undermined the programs of Service Canada. This theme is also supported by Malcolm Bird’s case study of the decline in service and ridership on the Crown Corporation VIA rail. The author maintains that VIA was handicapped from the beginning (1978) by lack of a clear mandate, and continues to suffer
from deliberate action and inaction by the government. VIA’s operation and goals are poorly defined and compromised by inadequate funding, a victim of hostility from both its public management and competing private transportation industries, especially Canadian National.

Canadian foreign policy does not escape the critical eye of this publication. Chris Brown and Edward Jackson (“Could the Senate Be Right? Should CIDA Be Abolished?”) explore the question of whether the Canadian International Development Agency should be eliminated, or at least radically refocus its approach. While Liberal and Conservative governments tout Canada’s international humanitarian role, the authors point out that in actuality Canada, in comparison to other donors, makes relatively small contributions to development efforts. Brown and Jackson write that Canadian governments, somewhat frozen in time, have failed to adjust their aid policies to the new realities of the world system of developmental aid policies. Nations such as India are no longer aid recipients, but providers, and 80% of development aid comes from multi-lateral NGO’s. Brown and Jackson conclude that Canada needs to rethink and reformulate its development aid strategies.

Almost all authors in this edition observe how political goals of Canadian governments, especially Harper’s, lead to budgeting and administrative practices that: (1) promote dysfunctional economic structures (2) lead to more unequal distribution of resources; (3) discriminate against particular segments of society; and/or (4) undermine democratic government. Robert Hilton and Christopher Stoney (“Federal Gas Tax Transfers: Politics and Perverse Policy”) criticize Harper for making the Federal Gas Tax Transfer to municipalities permanent. Initially begun by the Chretien government as a way to “show the flag”, and lobbied for by mayors, the authors see this institutionalization of Ottawa-to-city transfers as undermining provincial responsibilities and promoting long-term structural weaknesses in local economies. Hilton and Stoney advocate Parliament allowing cities to reinstitute local income taxes.

Recently Canadian governments have branded their governments and policies as uniquely humane and fair, using such vague umbrella concepts as the Liberal Party mantra, “The Canadian Way.” Actual policy implementation, especially under the Conservatives, contrast dramatically with party rhetoric. In their study of how Canadians save, Jennifer Robson, Richard Shillington, and Peter Nares (“How Ottawa Spends and How Canadians Save: ‘Asset-Based’ Approaches in Uncertain Times”) powerfully illustrate how Canadian policies designed to produce wealth accumulation through housing and retirement incentives essentially favor the rich. The authors advocate for new models such as the Canada Learning Bond which could help bridge the wealth gap.

Possibly the most scathing analysis of the Harper gap between rhetoric and reality is offered by Pauline Rankin and Melissa Haussman (“Framing the Harper Government: ‘Gender-Neutral’ Electoral Appeals While Being Gender-Negative in
Caucus”) in their assessment of Conservative words and actions regarding gender policies. Their primary assertion is, that while Harper told the Conservative Party Convention in 2005 that Canadians need not fear the destruction of previous government social policy commitments, this pronouncement rings hollow when held up to light of policy and personnel decisions. The authors argue that Harper has continually sought to appeal to his conservative base, especially in the areas of abortion and gender equity. The Parliament Pro-Life caucus, operating much like its U.S. Congressional counterpart, has sought to implement a “conscience clause” for medical establishment and establish Pro-Life Crisis Pregnancy Centres. While pretending to be progressive on women’s issues, Harper has pursued “gender neutral” policies, cut the budget for Status of Women Committee, eliminated the key word “equality” from various government documents, and appointed less than committed gender equality advocates to various agencies. The result appears to be a carefully constructed reversal of course from previous government commitments to women’s issues.

Kirsten Kozalanka (“Communication by Stealth: The New Common Sense in Government Communication”) offers a penetrating analysis of the Harper attempts to manage and hide the work of the Conservative government from the national press. Like the Liberals, Harper has publically merged policies and party. The most visible aspect of this permanent hegemonic campaign public relations strategy has been to limit access of the Parliamentary Press Corps, bypassing national media to incrementally favor local, regional and international media. Kozalanka sees these media managing efforts diminishing the ability of Canadians to fully comprehend Conservative party policies.

Like most multiple subject and author collections, How Ottawa Spends can at first reading appear to be a disparately assembled work, with little attempt to coherently link all the individual works. But those interested in recent Canadian public policies will easily find common threads running through many of the articles, and will definitely find descriptions, analyses and proscriptions in individual articles that can serve a variety of scholarly purposes.