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## Parliamentary Book Shelf

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***Just Trust Us: The Erosion of Accountability in Canada*, by J. Patrick Boyer, Breakout Educational Network in Association with Dundurn Press, Toronto, 2003.**

Former Members of Parliament have a unique perspective on the study of parliamentary government. Their experience is hands on, rather than theoretical. Unlike career civil servants they bear the scars of electoral battle and understand the role of partisan politics. Even those who have tasted defeat remain less cynical than the average journalist or tv commentator.

Patrick Boyer is a former Progressive Conservative MP having sat in the House of Commons from 1984 to 1992 and served as a committee chairman and parliamentary secretary. Before his election to the House he was a prolific writer, mainly on electoral law. Since returning to private life he has continued to reflect upon public policy as a consultant, professor and author.

This book stems from some work he did for the "underground royal commission", a self appointed group of concerned citizens, who have produced sixteen books and several hours of television documentary on what they consider the key issues facing Canada at the start of the new century.

If responsible government is the essence of parliamentary government, accountability is the glue that holds the system together. "Accountability is an ethical quest and social imperative before it is a politi-

cal doctrine" (p. 151). This book is intended to cause reflection and stimulate rethinking of "how our venerable institutions and practices meant to achieve accountability first atrophied into irrelevance then descended into irresponsibility" (p. 25)

The symptoms of our contemporary malaise are well known and include the decline in voter turnout, the burgeoning underground economy, the feeling of powerlessness among the Canadian public, and of course the disillusionment of many elected Members who find themselves little more than voting machines for the party.

"It was fitting, I thought that an entire constituency of citizens would send to Ottawa as their stand in and spokesperson someone who would confront the same feelings of powerlessness and ineffectiveness they did. Perhaps this is what it really means when we say we have representative democracy!" (p. 29)

But Mr. Boyer goes beyond the usual litany of complaints to identify both institutional and cultural factors that explain why consent among the governed has withered away, and Parliament has abdicated its primary role of calling to account those who wield power.

The first institutional problem is the way our traditional constitutional division of powers has been overtaken by the demands of modern society. With no single government solely responsible for healthcare, the environment, agriculture, education, infrastructure, etc and with so many intergovern-

mental mechanisms it has become increasingly difficult to hold anyone to account and not surprisingly many have given up trying.

Another institutional fact, much smaller but still significant, was a change in the procedures of the House of Commons made in 1969. It removed the requirement that Parliament approve the government's spending estimates. Instead they are deemed adopted in June even if Parliament has not looked at them. Originally this seemed like a good idea since other mechanisms were added to make up for the loss of scrutiny. But there is now a consensus emerging among even the strongest proponents of these changes that it effectively made the role of parliamentary approval a sham. The government's wish not to have its payroll held up by Parliament, as happened in the 1960s, and members desire not to spend the summer in Ottawa debating estimates is understandable. But "nobody seems to have thought about simply changing the government's fiscal year so that Parliament could thoroughly debate spending during the long, dark winter rather than during one of the few hot weather months of the year." (p. 64).

Non institutional factors responsible for a decline in accountability include Keynesian economics which justifies overspending in times of economic downturn. If we remove the psychological discipline imposed by a belief that government, like people, must ultimately live within their means, then there is little reason to worry about bal-

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anced budgets and accountability is diminished.

The use of "delegated arrangements" to set up organisations having discretionary authority to redistribute public money is also detrimental to the concept of accountability. Governments have become adept at creative book keeping which undermine the trust upon which accountability reside. Indeed the public accounts and estimates which in the 1940s and 50s were understandable to any person capable of reading a household budget are today often incomprehensible even to expert chartered accountants. (p. 65).

The increasing influence of lobbyists is also identified as a factor in the decline of accountability. Who would willingly agree to subject themselves to account if others are able to escape being held to account?

This is a very thoughtful and troubling analysis of the state of Canadian government at this moment in time. Perhaps the easiest criticism to make is that it is a thinly veiled Conservative attack on the Liberal Government of Jean Chrétien. But that would not be fair. Although Mr. Boyer is critical of many policies of the Liberal government, his critique extends back 50 years and includes both Liberal and Conservative administrations.

One is left a bit frustrated that the author steps back from the logical consequences of his analysis. For example having shown how intergovernmental overlap can undermine accountability does it not follow that we have to question federalism itself? How much longer do we maintain, as an article of faith, our 19th century constitution with institutions developed in a much different era.

Mr. Boyer does call for more powers for the provinces and that is certainly one option. But another option, if the goal is more accountability, could be a state with a single level of government. That would certainly resolve the jurisdiction blur he identifies so eloquently. Or perhaps we should be looking at a simplified system with only national and city governments, or confederal arrangements as proposed by Quebec governments from time to time.

Mr. Boyer passes too lightly over globalisation as a possible factor for the loss of accountability. If voter turnout is declining, if young people are turned off politics, if tax evasion is on the rise, if the image of politicians is at an all time low perhaps some of this reflects a belief that decisions affecting our life are no longer made by the governments or parliamentarians we control.

Questions of continental integration and interdependence have to be addressed if we are trying to explain the decline in accountability. Mr. Boyer does question what he calls "false interdependence" which he defines as subsidies to inefficient industries or open ended subsidies to compensate fishermen. He makes a convincing argument about the harm these programs do to the concept of accountability. But there is no sign he is willing to rethink our commitment to free trade and integration, which like federalism has been raised to the level of dogma.

If we are going to continue down the path to continental economic integration surely we need political institutions in which some level of accountability can be exercised. If that is impossible perhaps we should start thinking of promoting

self sufficiency rather than integration as a goal of public policy (keeping in mind that complete self sufficiency like complete integration is neither possible nor desirable).

*Just Trust Us* is not the end of Mr. Boyer's reflections on public policy and hopefully some of these larger questions will be examined in subsequent works.

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#### Other Books Received

*Protecting Canadian Democracy: The Senate You Never Knew* by Senator Serge Joyal, Canadian Centre for Management Development, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2003, 371p.

*The Canadian Senate in Bicameral Perspective*, David E. Smith, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2003, 263 p.

*La Procédure Parlementaire, 2nd Edition*, under the direction of Francois Côté, National Assembly of Quebec, Quebec, 2003, 715p.

*Still Counting: Women in Politics Across Canada*, by Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott, Broadview Press, Peterborough, 2003, 210p.

*Western Visions, Western Future* by Roger Gibbins and Loleen Berdahl, Broadview Press, Peterborough, 2003, 226p.

*New Trends in Canadian Federalism, Second Edition*, by François Rocher and Miriam Smith, Broadview Press, Toronto, 2003, 399p.