



We need more backbenchers

By John Robson
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Just how excited are you that Julian Fantino is now secretary of state for seniors while Diane Ablonczy traded that prune for the obscurity of secretary of state for the Americas from which Peter Kent vaulted to minister of the environment? What? Didn't you see all the stories we wrote?

See, this mini-shuffle means Prime Minister Stephen Harper may or may not be keen on a spring election while his government's position on the environment may become more evasive -- unless it already was. Surely that's worth putting on the front page and quoting opposition and government politicians saying exactly what they would say anyway about this very minor shuffle.

The only remotely pertinent comment I detected was NDP deputy leader Thomas Mulcair saying that "Mr. Kent will be there to deliver the lines that are prepared for him by the Prime Minister's Office," and "The arrival of the fifth environment minister in five years augurs nothing well for future generations."

The first part is a standard opposition jibe about Peter Kent's alleged empty smoothness as a former TV news anchor. And I know I used to get a lot of vacuous press releases from his office saying "Minister of State Kent Welcomes Government of Nicaragua Declaration Nicaragua Is Free of Anti-Personnel Mines" (June 18, 2010) or "Minister of State Kent Congratulates People of Ecuador on Bicentennial of First Call for Independence" (August 10, 2009) when Kent clearly did not know when the first call for Ecuadorean independence occurred nor would he have cared if he did know.

Of course you're liable to retort that he didn't write that bumf himself; it was generated by the bureaucracy which will doubtless saddle Ablonczy with more of the same. You are right, and moreover I congratulate you for saying something of genuine importance.

Whatever his merits as a human being, a politician or a policy-maker, Peter Kent is simply not going to make environmental policy in Canada. Nor, really, will he even make excuses for it, though he will utter them. He will be given policy positions settled by senior public servants and senior cabinet ministers obsessed with avoiding controversy. But it's not, as I think Mulcair was implying, because the PM is a cynical, environment-hating control freak. It's because of the problematic fusion of the inner cabinet with the

senior bureaucracy into a fourth branch of government unforeseen in our Constitution and incompatible with it.

It's bad enough that the people allegedly responsible for policy are not really making it and, given the massively overextended, unwieldy nature of modern governments, probably couldn't. But it gets worse. Given that ministers, other than a handful of the most senior ones, have so little influence, why do we have so many? Canada now has 38 cabinet positions plus 25 parliamentary secretaries to

various ministers, so fully 63 members of the 143-member Tory Commons caucus (plus the government leader in the Senate) are in cabinet or its penumbra. (The U.S. number is 22.) Scary, huh?

If we consider the ruling party's parliamentary caucus merely an embarrassing extension of "the government" used, dangerously inaccurately, to mean the executive branch, all these fancy titles might just sound like jobs for the boys and girls. But if we understand the role of the legislature is to hold the executive to account, the absorption of much of the government caucus into the executive branch with prestige, pseudo-importance and money, is a serious matter. (Parliamentary secretaries are not members of the Privy Council but do get an extra \$15,600 a year ... a nice reward for loyal backbenchers and tempting bait for mavericks).

Considering how much of the real work of generating policy and public relations falls to the bureaucracy, the gains from this extensive system of fake jobs (seriously, what political philosophy justifies keeping a Minister of State for Sport on the payroll?) are clearly outweighed by the drawbacks. If Julian Fantino were not Secretary of State for Seniors, and if Diane Ablonczy had not been, what aspect of Canada's looming demographic crisis would be more serious or in any detectable way different?

What we need isn't more cabinet members. It's more backbenchers, as in Britain, where the 650-member Commons contains hundreds of MPs who cannot aspire to climb the greasy pole and whose job satisfaction and ego gratification depend on annoying the executive as effective committee members. If you agree with James Madison (in "Federalist #51") that for the sake of good government and liberty "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition," our system is clearly pernicious as well as petty.

Instead of pondering the electoral significance of our new Secretary of State for Seniors, we should be complaining about having one at all.

John Robson's column appears on Fridays.

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