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Preserving governmental adaptability in complex open societies

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Overview

- Aims of my research
- The concept of adaptability
- Four threats to adaptability in Canada
- What can we do?




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Aims of my research

See www.aroberts.us/books


- A “macro-level” approach to public administration
- Concept of state strategy (similar to grand strategy)
- Describing how strategy and state structure changes over time
- The follow-on question: what system features promote adaptability?
- A liberal realist approach to governance
 - Liberal: concerned for human rights
 - Realist: aware of challenges in design and implementation



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The authoritarian challenge

- The “China model” as an alternative approach for navigating in turbulent times
 - “The Western democratic system shows signs of ... systemic malfunction”: Xinhua News Agency comments on the Third Summit for Democracy, March 18, 2024
- From *The Adaptable Country*: “Our assignment in this century is to make the case for freedom: that is, to show how systems designed to respect diversity and human rights can also respond nimbly to existential threats.”



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Four requirements for adaptability

- An adaptable system should be adept at:
 - *Anticipation.* Look forward to identify long-term dangers.
 - *Invention.* Invent strategies for managing the complete set of anticipated dangers.
 - *Legitimation.* Build support among leaders and the public for a proposed strategy.
 - *Execution.* Execute the preferred strategy by renovating institutions and mobilizing resources.
- In a federal-liberal-democratic system, responsibility for these four tasks will be broadly distributed.

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The case of Canada

In the latter half of the 20th century, the Canadian system had features that promoted adaptability

- A political culture that emphasized fragility
- Investment in forward-thinking through devices like royal commissions and advisory councils
- Concern for the preservation of a healthy public sphere
- Effective executives

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How the Canadian system has changed

- The Canadian system of the late 20th century also had many defects
- One sign of adaptability was that the system changed to remedy these defects
- Notable changes over the last forty years:
 - Larger, more diverse population
 - Rights and awareness of rights
 - Devolution to provinces and Indigenous peoples
 - Shift from government to market
 - Restructuring of central institutions
 - Digital shock to the public sphere

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Today's predicament

- Reforms over four decades have produced a more prosperous and just society
- But also a more *decentralized, complex, and accelerated* society
- Have these changes compromised the capacity of the system to perform the four tasks essential to adaptability?
- How does a complex open society reach agreement on long-term priorities and plans?
- The book suggests four threats to adaptability within the Canadian system today

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1. Short-term politics

Changes in political practices and culture that have jeopardized long-term planning

- Overwhelmed decisionmakers
- Electoral instability and short-termism
- Shift to “platform governance”
 - And parties that cannot meet their new policy-making responsibilities
- Abandonment of counterbalancing institutions
 - Royal commissions and advisory councils

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2. The missing dialogue

Decline in the capacity of national leaders to define a shared agenda and agree on national strategy

- De-institutionalization of first ministers’ meetings
- Institutionalization of summitry in other contexts
 - International summitry
 - Provincial leaders
 - Other federations
- The arguments for summitry
 - Deal-making is just one goal of summitry
 - Also: showing solidarity, modelling discourse, shaping agenda
- Summitry ought to include Indigenous leaders

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3. The decaying public sphere

Decline in the capacity of the Canadian public to have an informed conversation about long-term challenges and national strategy

- The public sphere requires
 - A stable agenda that is set by Canadians
 - Capacity for informed and civil discourse
- The health of the public sphere is threatened by
 - Impact of digital technologies on journalism, discourse
 - Low levels of civic and historical knowledge
 - Confused, inadequate governmental responses

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4. The web of rules

Decline in the capacity of the federal public service to implement strategy well

- Concerns about “risk-aversion” within the federal public service
- An understandable response to a half-century accretion of rules and watchdog organizations
- A new system of “monitory democracy” that is reinforced by political dynamics
- Inattention to the cumulative effect of this process
- No substantial independent review in 45 years

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What can be done?

- In sum:
 - Less creative thinking about the long-term
 - Diminished capacity for consensus-building among leaders and citizens
 - Weakened capacity to execute
- Some possible reforms
 - A digital-era Macdonald Commission
 - Party political foundations
 - Revival of robust domestic summitry
 - A coherent, populist approach to the public sphere
 - Independent review of public and political services