

stantly-expressed view that still more coordinating mechanisms are needed; (4) the increasing involvement (in Canada especially) of sub-national levels of government in external affairs; (5) the lamentations of professional diplomats that their roles are being usurped by bureaucratic interlopers – lamentations supported by the fact that in the past ten years virtually all the diplomatic services of the Western world, including the Canadian, have experienced major, and sometimes unflattering, investigations of their functions; and (6) the experimentation of governments with managerial devices for bringing the process under a modicum of centralized control – “country-programming” procedures, for example, as well as decision-making by reference to long-range objectives, elaborate cost-benefit budgeting techniques, and the rest. The difficulties have been accompanied by an intensification of the traditional patterns of “in-house” politics. With each new organizational adjustment, senior officials naturally fear the erosion of their fiefdoms, while officers at a lower level hastily recalculate their long-range prospects for advancement.

Forced to adapt

Academics, too, have been forced to adapt. Formerly persuaded that all serious public “policy” was the product of the rational calculations of identifiable office-holders (an assumption central to the notion of “responsible government”), political scientists have come increasingly to believe that it results instead from an inertial process. With occasional, and sometimes dramatic, exceptions, its substance derives, it is said, from long trains of compromises reached in kaleidoscopic successions of conflicting committees. The change in the very vocabulary of policy analysis is itself worthy of note. “Decision” having already given way to “output”, the latter is now replaced by “outcome”, in what amounts to a continuing progress towards the final removal of identifiable agency. Who, then, is “responsible”? No one. The answer sounds Kafkaesque – but lacks even Kafka’s comforting presumption of conspiracy.

The central question, however, for the analysis of “responsible government” is the condition of the political leadership. At this level, the dilemma is clear. If the issues are excessively numerous; if their subject-matter is technically complex; if their implications are uncertain, and apply in the long run as well as the short; if they produce unpredictable side-effects in other fields at home and abroad; and if, in dealing with them, a daunting array of conflicting governmental and constituency interests must

be brought into reconciliation – if the issues have all these characteristics, how, then, can political leaders hope to comprehend, much less control, the behaviour of the governments they ostensibly lead? And how can Parliament, and ultimately the “public”, reasonably hold them responsible for what they (figuratively) “do”?

In the foreign-policy field, the most visible consequence of this general difficulty is that public discussion of concrete issues is gradually being driven out by empty sloganeering, one of the purposes of which is to convey an impression of control at the helm, which does not, in fact, exist. Perhaps the most spectacular Canadian example in recent years was the set of pamphlets that emerged from the foreign policy review, with its three basic national aims, its six policy themes, its hexagonal depiction of “systemic” interactions, and all the rest. But evidence of the phenomenon can be found as well in the “trialectics” of the “Third Option” paper on Canada-U.S. relations, in the somewhat obscurantist fanfare over the “contractual link” with the European Economic Community, and in much of Canada’s declaratory foreign policy elsewhere.

Its traces can be found, too, in the Prime Minister’s repeated declarations in the media of the need for a fundamental change in public attitudes as a prerequisite for coping with the new global crisis. These recurrent rhetorical displays can, of course, be viewed as no more than the idle reflections of a veteran inhabitant of the ivory tower on temporary secondment to government office. But, if taken more seriously, they can only leave the well-intentioned citizen wondering what he is supposed to do next. Members of the public service presumably experience, on occasion, a similar sense of perplexity.

To be fair to the political leaders, it should be conceded at once that in raising such questions they have received little genuine help from either the “think-tank” or university communities, which appear themselves to be suffering from a form of intellectual “overload”. The problem is reflected in their attempt to cope with the awesome complexity of current global issues by discussing them in biological, ecological, or other “systemic” terms. This may have some use as a means of gaining access to the problem-solving abilities of computers, but in the political world it can produce an empty rhetoric that intervenes between genuine policy choices and needs, on the one hand, and public understanding of the issues, on the other.

As long as the object under examination is the “external-functions” hexagon

Political leadership has received little help from thinkers