The Neurotic State

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Abstract

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There has been a drift toward a neurotic governance regime in Ottawa. The distrust of government by the citizenry has led to paranoia on the part of the state and to the rise of a distrust-paranoia vicious cycle. The governed have been devoiced, and their dissent rebuked not only by politicians but also by faceless middle-ranked bureaucrats defending their own particular version of what the interests of the government are. Using a framework proposed by Kets de Vries and Miller, the authors identify the dominant neurotic style of the Canadian state and illustrate the dynamics at work through an analysis of the debates around the Access to Information Act in the recent past.

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“The political community must be able to distinguish between disagreement with particular policies of the community and disloyalty to the community itself”

Stephen L. Carter

One of the perplexing features of Canada’s political scene over the last six or seven years is a dramatic if silent revolution in the functioning of the federal state. Program Review, Alternative Service Delivery and other such initiatives had a clear decentralization and privatization thrust, but they also had a good governance flavour (transparency, accountability, integrity). Yet the net effect of these initiatives was not only a phenomenal reconcentration of power in central agencies and in the Prime Minister’s Office, but also a shift toward a neurotic governance regime. The former phenomenon has been carefully documented and analyzed; we would like to examine the latter one.

A superficial examination of these issues has led some observers to suggest that the reconcentration of effective power at the center is the culprit, that it has generated the emergence of the new bunker mentality, and transformed the federal public service into an enterprise where dissent is being subtly suppressed, where disagreement has come to be regarded as a form of treason. But the causality also runs the other way. Mutual distrust between the citizenry and the government as well as fear of the political consequences of the disclosure of critical information about government activities contribute to a tightening of central controls. They breed organizational paranoia. One must look at the dynamics that have generated this emerging neurotic governance regime to explain the reconcentration of power and other dysfunctions that have been noted in the recent past.

At the root of this dynamic is the growing distrust of government by the citizenry. This distrust has produced added pressure for more transparency and hard accountability at a time when the turbulent environment and the accelerated pace of change would appear to require that the new governance regime be more flexible and more decentralized, i.e., calling for more discretion for the agents of the state, and softer forms of accountability.

While this growing public distrust is not a phenomenon unique to Canada, the response to public distrust has been significantly sharper in Canada because of the fact that the Office of the Prime Minister and some other central agencies have a much more formidable power base than similar agencies in any other advanced democracies. We live not in a parliamentary democracy in Canada but, in the words of Jeffrey Simpson, in a “Prime-Ministerial Government” regime where Parliament is ignored and Cabinet has become nothing but a “mini-sounding-board”.

One important element of this Canadian response has been a sharp decline in the willingness of governments and bureaucrats to disclose information about their operations, as it became evident that such disclosed information is often used to fuel attacks on the political and bureaucratic processes. This culture of secrecy in turn has led to greater distrust, and to more vehement requests for information, and so on. What has ensued is greater distrust on the part of the citizenry, and paranoia on the part of the state.
The main consequences of this vicious circle have been the rise of a new raison d’État, and the activation of a number of mechanisms that have corrupted public discourse and the governance regime. The culture of secrecy has hardened into a neurotic state, and the virus of paranoia has cascaded down the bureaucratic ladder.

Caught between the distrust of the citizens and the circling of the wagons by the Prime-Ministerial government, the federal public service has not only firmly sided with the government, but it has exacerbated the degree of paranoia. Middle-ranked civil servants used this chasm between the governors and the governed as a new source of power by claiming (as part of their refurbished burden of office) the responsibility for determining what is “contrary to the interests of government”. This has often been done as a corollary to their indefectible commitment to saving the minister from embarrassment at all costs, but it has also increasingly become a way to immunize themselves from the citizenry’s “attacks” and to leverage their action in pursuit of policy preferences, patronage, or punishment for “disloyalty”.

As a matter of consequence, the governed have become devoiced, their dissent generating retribution and rebuke, not only by politicians but also by faceless middle-ranked bureaucrats defending not so much the interests of “the government” as their own particular version of what “the interests of the government” are.

We would like, on the basis of a series of interviews with senior officials, and an examination of documents in the public domain, (1) to identify the symptoms of this silent revolution and track down the source of the neurosis, (2) to document some of the forms it has taken, (3) to look at this dynamic at work in the access-to-information files, and (4) to hint at the implications it appears to hold in store for the federal public service, and for democracy in Canada.

THE SYMPTOM: A NEW RAISON D’ÉTAT

It is difficult to determine a precise date for the emergence of this neurotic syndrome. One may note however that this new dynamic was already in place in 1995 when Treasury Board made explicit reference to the “public interest” as having to be defined in the light of the need for “fulfilling federal obligations and interests”. The French version was even more ominous “remplir les obligations du gouvernement fédéral et en protéger les intérêts”.3

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. There have in the past been a number of instances where action has been taken to devoice the government’s critics, but of late there has been a significant increase in the scale and importance of these efforts to suppress dissent, or to effect censorship by brandishing the phrase “contrary to the interests of the government”.4

This has been nothing short of an epistemological coup, through which the state declared that it had interests “of its own” and that they should prevail over others. But it was a change of kind more than degree. True, one had witnessed this sort of arrogance in the Trudeau era, but perhaps because of the very self-assured intellectual arrogance on which it was built, it had never translated into the high degree of intimidation, exclusion and censorship observed in the Chrétien era.
In recent years, the new arrogance has been accompanied by a sense of insecurity that has led to much double-talk, dissimulation, and deception. Autocratic intervention to suppress dissent has been routinely accompanied by sermons on openness, participation, citizen engagement, and the need to build a sensitive citizen-centred modus operandi. This mismatch between words and deeds has become a chronic feature of the new regime in many segments of the federal public service.

The pattern obviously does not apply to all agencies. Some departments and agencies have maintained a reasonable degree of effectiveness and integrity, and a good fit between words and deeds. Others have suffered from different styles of dysfunction as a result of history, circumstances, and personalities. But most federal departments and agencies have been permeated by a certain malaise, ascribable to the fact that key central agencies, which are “définitseurs de situation” and have a major impact on the modus operandi of the whole system, have been fundamentally affected by this new mindset.

Whatever form the neurosis took, the result has been the discouragement of critical thinking about any aspect of the federal apparatus, processes, and policies inside bureaucracy, and the emergence of a sort of self-censorship that prevented not only critical thinking, but as a matter of consequence, any meaningful social learning.

Canada has not become a police state, of course. All these interventions have been rather subtle: hypersensitivity, over concern with hidden motives, a sense of guarded and pervasive suspicion etc., all in response to the citizenry’s true sense of a loss of confidence. But this malaise has transformed government’s way of doing business.

It is easy to slip from this defensive stance to one in which the preservation of the operating system comes to be regarded as the central purpose of the governance regime (and its staunch defence, the dominant logic – la raison d’État ). Indeed, it has occurred.

THE DISTRUST-PARANOIA VICIOUS CYCLE

The idea of the raison d’État is that the state takes itself as its own end, and in so doing considers society as a mean to this end. It rationalizes the use and abuse of power, and the resort to exceptional measures as a way to maintain control over the governance process because it is a pursuit that is regarded as pre-eminently important.

Checks and balances are usually in place to ensure that each sphere of the state remains within its own field of competence, and that the state does not encroach on the legitimate realm of the individual, of civil society, etc. To monitor, control, redress and sanction such encroachment and corruption, the agencies responsible for checks and balances must have the legal authority to deal with encroachment and corruption.

In many democracies, there has been a phenomenal erosion of this delicate balance over the past few years. In Canada, this problem has been aggravated by a number of idiosyncratic systems failures: the collapse of the Conservative opposition, the trivialization of the controls of the
House of Commons, the Cabinet’s becoming a focus group rather than a decision-making body, and the effective re-centralization of power in the hands of the Prime Minister and his advisors. The crisis of confidence is hardly surprising.

This crisis of confidence is apparent on several fronts. Firstly, there has been a remarkable drop in support for politicians as a group both in Canada and elsewhere. A similar trend is observed in attitudes toward political parties. Canadians have also shown a declining level of trust in the executive and legislative branches of government as a whole. According to 1996 surveys, only 21% of Canadians trusted Parliament to represent them, a sharp decline of about 60% since the mid-1970s.

This decline of trust in political authorities should not be confused with apathy toward politics. Disengagement from traditional avenues of political participation, such as political parties, has led to the growth of alternative forms of political engagement, which tend to be more grassroots-based and confrontational, vis-à-vis state agencies. It translates into a greater demand for information. Recent comparative longitudinal studies of political attitudes in Western democracies have found a simultaneous decline in respect for government authority and a growth in support for democracy.

This erosion of trust has many sources: the lack of accuracy and comprehensiveness of information about what government does, the changes in the ways in which public institutions are evaluated, and the deterioration in the performance of public institutions (ascrivable either to declines in the capacity of political agents, or in the fidelity with which political agents defend citizens’ interests).

The difficulties of operating transparently in a political environment of distrust and criticism is further exacerbated when the media and opposition politicians use access-to-information provisions mainly as a tool to publicly embarrass the government. This has led to a number of paranoiac reactions.

THE NEUROSIS OF THE CANADIAN STATE

To study the emergence of this neurotic style in federal governance – as revealed by our interviews -- and the organizational dysfunctioning that it has generated, we used a simple framework proposed by Kets de Vries and Miller in 1985. They examine the patterns of symptoms and dysfunction that appear to combine into syndromes of pathology, and the mechanisms through which neurotic styles and organizational behaviors would interact and lend support to one another.

Different Styles of Neurosis

Neurosis is a sort of dysfunction that generates affective and emotional problems but without disrupting the functioning of the organization. There are different styles of neurosis: paranoid, compulsive, dramatic, depressive, schizoid. Each has its own characteristics, dominant motivating fantasy, and associated dangers. Table 1 borrowed from Kets de Vries and Miller provides a broad characterization of these different styles.
All individuals have mildly dysfunctional neurotic traits, but certain dominant patterns of these traits betray a dominant neurotic style. Organizations also display such traits that permeate or colour the functioning of the organization and its organizational culture. And while these organizational traits may emerge as a result of various environmental forces, or shared fantasies and myths developed through the history of the organization, they also depend to some extent on the personality and management style of the leader.

To psychoanalyze an organization, one must rely on interviews with members of the organization, and the impressions, anecdotes and such data that ethnographic studies unearth. The results of such an investigation of the organizational fabric of a large concern like the federal state do not necessarily reveal a single dominant neurotic style. Many segments may indeed be associated with different styles.

For instance, Statistics Canada may more readily be associated with a compulsive style, while this need not be the case for PCO. Some might associate Canadian Heritage with the dramatic style, Human Resources with the depressive style, Foreign Affairs and International Trade with the schizoid syndrome. Each of these hypotheses would require an extensive investigation to ascertain its validity.

Yet one may make the case that, over the past few years, as central agencies tightened their grip on the governance of the country, a particular neurotic style has permeated the whole system -- as a result of signals and pressures emanating from the Privy Council Office. The results of our interviews over the last year suggest that the whole federal state has been permeated by a paranoid style of neurosis.

The full verification or falsification of this hypothesis would require much more space than is afforded for this chapter. However, there is enough scope for us to sketch briefly, and in a general way, the main features of the syndrome, to illustrate how this dynamic works, and what consequences one may expect.

**Main features**
The paranoid organization usually emerges in the face of a dynamic environment that requires continuous scanning to detect threats and challenges.

A first characteristic of this type of organization is its managers’ focus on perpetual vigilance and preparedness for emergencies, and on controlling the internal operations to be able to make use of them. Indeed, the constant effort to “uncover” organizational problems leads to tension and to an excessive sensitivity to any exposure to risk. This fosters a perceived need for constant readiness to counter threats.

A second organizational characteristic is the propensity to centralize power in the hands of top executives and their consultants. Those who feel threatened demand control over their subordinates. As they become distrustful and fearful, the locus of power shifts upward. This dynamic has an impact on junior executives, as key decision makers tend to direct their distrust...
externally, and demand the same sort of distrust to be shared by their subordinates. Indeed, not sharing the distrust becomes itself a source of distrust if and when an insider questions it. This quickly leads to insecurity and disenchantment among lower-tier executives because of the atmosphere of distrust.

A third characteristic is a great conservatism. Top executives cope but they do not have a concerted and integrated strategy. Muddling through and fear lead to a risk minimization strategy by default.

**Dynamics at work**

The crucial element at the core of the paranoid organization is the pattern of confused interpersonal relationships generated by core hostility. In leadership, it is a most destructive attitude. The boss sees his subordinate as malingerers and incompetents, and either tries to exert intensive control and personal supervision or takes an overly aggressive style and destroys their career. This management pattern generates uncooperative behavior, and further mistrust, suspicion and vindictiveness.

The consequences for decision-making are important, as cognitive criteria are replaced by affective criteria in selecting alternatives. But they are most destructive for the organization as subordinates suffer from a constant double-entendre: they are asked to be frank and to express critical thinking, but are chastised as disloyal and treasonous when they do so.

This sort of neurosis and others mentioned in table 1 give rise to a number of common problems that Kets de Vries and Miller have identified: improper allocation of authority, out of line attitude to risk, inadequate organization structures, poor distribution of information, deficient calibre of executive talent.\(^\text{15}\)

The central challenge is working back from these symptoms to track down the source of these problems – and their underlying roots – in order to generate the requisite organizational therapy and find ways to implement it.

The central point about the neurotic state is that it is both difficult to reconstruct and almost certainly the result in good part of the unintended consequences of bad habits. This point has been forcefully made by Dietrich Dörner, whose analysis of “the logic of failure” reveals that in a dynamic system, crises do not emerge from the action of one major culprit, but from the cumulative effect of “complexity, intransparence, and incomplete or incorrect understanding of the system”: small mistakes, bad habits and certain mechanisms that catalyze that cumulative process.\(^\text{16}\)

These mechanisms are studied by political psychology but since may often work in contrary directions -- as in the bandwagon effect and the underdog effect on voters. So they cannot be universally “applied to predict and control social events but … embod(y) a causal chain that is sufficiently general and precise to enable us to locate it in widely different settings ».\(^\text{17}\)
ACCESS TO INFORMATION POLICY AND THE CULTURE OF PARANOIA

Recent debates about the rules regarding citizens’ right to access to government information offer an interesting window on the dynamics at play within the federal bureaucracy, and illustrate the culture of paranoia in official Ottawa.

Over the past few years, the relationships between the federal government (politicians and bureaucrats) and the Information Commissioner have deteriorated. The implementation, interpretation and reform of access-to-information legislation have been bitterly debated by the government and its critics. These developments conform in important ways to what one might expect from a paranoid organization.

The federal Access to Information Act was adopted in 1983 after decades of hesitation and debates. Since the adoption of an access to information law by the United States in 1966, there had been active proponents of similar measures in Canada. Gerald Baldwin (the Conservative Member of Parliament), an early crusader of transparency in government, first introduced a private member’s bill on access to information in 1969 and reintroduced it in subsequent sessions until 1974. It was almost to no avail, though the Trudeau government adopted limited official guidelines on information disclosure in 1973.

Canadians had to wait for the 1979 minority government of Joe Clark to see the government table an access to information bill in Parliament. The Progressive Conservatives had promised an access to information law during the election campaign, and, upon taking power, introduced a bill that would have established a broad right of access to government records, a system to allow some exemptions and a review process to ensure they were appropriately used. Following the fall of the Clark government, the new Trudeau government reintroduced a modified version of the bill that became the Access to Information Act a few years later.

The Act grants Canadians the right to access government records in any form, with some exceptions. Firstly, some classes of information, such as cabinet records, are excluded from the ambit of the legislation. The Act also allows for some exemptions. For example, section 14 provides for the discretionary withholding of documents regarding federal-provincial affairs when disclosure would run counter to public interest.

Importantly, the Act also gives citizens the right to appeal to the Office of the Information Commissioner when they are not satisfied with the response given to their request. The Information Commissioner, an independent officer reporting to Parliament, can use extensive investigative powers to ensure that there has been appropriate compliance with the Act. In cases where the use of exemptions is questioned, the Commissioner can review the requested document to determine whether they were legitimately exempted. However, while he/she can make recommendations, the Commissioner does not have the legal authority to force the disclosure of any records.

Over the years, the access to information legislation has been much criticized. On the one hand, Members of Parliament, journalists, Information Commissioners, and citizens have all complained that the government is adopting an excessively broad interpretation of the rules for
exemptions, and that delays in responding to access requests are unreasonable. On the other hand, the government and the public servants have complained that the demands are excessive, both extending to parts of the government’s decision-making process that should remain confidential and imposing an excessive burden on resources for compliance. Moreover, since for quite a while the Act simply served as a conduit for access to information that would “make the government squirm”, the government and its public servants have become suspicious of requests, and have come to fear the consequences of information disclosure and transparency.

The symptoms

One of the most serious effects of the ensuing climate of distrust is the resulting change in the way that many civil servants work. In the interviews conducted for this project, several public servants have told us that they are increasingly reluctant to write down anything that could be construed as remotely controversial, since it might well make its way to the public domain through the access-to-information rules. One experienced manager with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans told us that, in the units where he worked, the unspoken rule had become, “you don’t write down anything important about issues that could become controversial”. Another interviewee spoke of someone who confided in her that she now worried about forgetting important things about her work because she was reluctant to take comprehensive notes during meetings.

This attitude appears to be fairly prevalent within the Public Service. The Information Commissioner has recently noted that the attitude toward information management in the Public Service had truly become: “Why write it, when you can speak it? Why speak it when you can nod? Why nod, when you can wink?”. Many high-level committees in government, his office has found, have ceased the practices of “creating agendas, keeping minutes and tabling briefing notes and papers to assist discussion”. In the words of Roberts, it has come to a point where one may speak of a “shadow government”. This severe aversion to the risks of information disclosure has also led senior management and central agencies to tighten internal decision-making processes regarding disclosure. One such attempt to accentuate its control from the centre is the recent decision from the Privy Council Office to rescind an agreement with the Information Commissioner’s Office about the refusal to disclose sensitive material. This protocol, which had been in place since 1984, allowed the Commissioner to ask the Clerk of the Privy Council to provide a certificate attesting that certain records -- claimed to be cabinet confidences -- which were consequently being kept secret despite an access-to-information request, were indeed confidences. The Privy Council Office now claims that the issuance of such certificates is not necessary.

The Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) has also recently decided to contest the right of the Information Commissioner to review its records to determine whether it has ground for refusing their disclosure. It claims that the PMO falls outside the purview of the access-to-information law and it is now engaged in a series of fifteen lawsuits with the Commissioner’s Office to deny it the right to examine some requested documents concerning the Prime Minister’s agenda.

There is clear evidence of the senior bureaucracy’s desire to increase their control over internal processes in order to limit their exposure to risk also comes from experiences at Transport Canada. In response to the perceived risk created by compliance with access to information
requests, the department has installed a centralised approval system to provide more control to senior management. According to data from the Information Commissioner’s Office, more than 40% of access requests are now personally reviewed and approved by the deputy minister.\textsuperscript{22}

In the wake of the “grants and contributions scandal” at Human Resources Development Canada, the government has also responded by tightening central controls over the disclosure of information. In two memoranda issued in February 2000, the Treasury Board Secretariat asked all departments to file with TBS copies of all access requests received for internal audits, a copy of all audit reports to be released, a copy of all audit reports that have not been requested under the access law, as well as any departmental plan of action for dealing with the informal or formal (i.e. in response to access requests) release of audits. The Secretariat eventually withdrew its request for copies of all access requests but continued to demand all other material.\textsuperscript{23}

There is also evidence that middle-ranking civil servants are directly affected by the attitudes from the centre. One experienced civil servant interviewed for this project was clearly of the view that his work as an internal auditor had become more difficult over the recent years as a result of the new climate of distrust and paranoia about the consequences of information disclosure. He complained of receiving frequent phone calls from his Minister’s office asking for advanced notice of what his audit reports would contain, and of being regularly reminded of the potential political consequences of his findings.

Finally, another example of the desire of the government to keep a tight control over information disclosure issues is its reaction to the amendment of the \textit{Access to Information Act} adopted in 1998. The amendment, which took the form of a private member’s bill, added a subsection to the law that prohibits the destruction, concealment or falsification of records for the purpose of avoiding disclosure. In 1999, the Treasury Board Secretariat published a new directive to departments, forbidding them to notify the Information Commissioner’s Office about allegations of such violations of the access law. Instead, such matters were to be handled by deputy ministers themselves, who, following their own internal investigation, would decide whether to notify independent law enforcement agencies.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{The Information Commissioner’s Campaign}

As could be expected, the Information Commissioner has responded sharply to the government’s poor compliance with the letter and spirit of the access law. However, in doing so, he has adopted a confrontational approach that seems to be comforting the government’s and the civil servants’ view that they are the object of sustained unreasonable attacks, and that they are generally considered as ‘enemies’ by the Commissioner and parts of the citizenry.

The confrontational approach of the Commissioner is well captured in his last report to Parliament. The first section of the report, entitled “Access – A Right Under Siege”, began with the following statement:

“Last year, [...], the government was put on notice: There would be a “zero-tolerance” policy for late responses to access requests; a new, pro-openness approach to the administration of the Access Law would be expected and, most
important, the full weight of the Commissioner’s investigative powers would be
brought to bear to achieve these goals.”

These are uncharacteristically tough words for an officer of Parliament, whose authority to “put
the government on notice” seems questionable at best. But the tone is indicative of the aggressive
and uncompromising character of recent exchanges between the Commissioner’s Office and the
Public Service. If the Information Commissioner has publicly complained that civil servants
were “circling the wagons” as a result of his inquiries, he himself has clearly gone to war.

A Manichean language, pitting citizens against government, outsiders against insiders, is
common in the documents penned by the Information Commissioner’s Office. “For too long, the
whiners and complainers inside the system have had their causes taken up by TBS; it is the turn
of the citizens on the outside and the access law to have the designated minister become their
champion”, the Commissioner wrote in his last report.

The reports’ practice of issuing annual “report cards” to rate the performance of departments in
responding to access to information requests in a timely fashion is also illustrative of the hard-
nosed, confrontational approach of the Information Commissioner’s Office. Under its grading
scheme, any department failing to answer within the statutory deadline to 20% or more of the
access requests that they receive is assigned an “F”. In the 1998-1999 annual report, the six
departments reviewed were ascribed the failing grade. In the 1999-2000 report, five of the eight
departments featured also received an “F”. While the Commissioner acknowledges that the Privy
Council Office deserved to be praised for moving from an “F” to an “A” in just one year (by
cutting the percentage of requests it answered outside the statutory deadline by 90%), it
nevertheless severely condemns it for leading an “attack upon the very foundation of the
Commissioner’s role.”

The tone and nature of these exchanges are obviously affecting the attitudes of some senior civil
servants. Frustrated by a perceived lack of collaboration from senior bureaucrats, the
Commissioner has resorted to issuing subpoenas to force deputy ministers to explain, on the
record and under oath, the reasons for departmental delays in answering access to information
requests. This aggressive use of investigative powers is only comforting the senior bureaucracy
in their view that the Commissioner’s office is “out to get them”. In memory of these encounters,
one deputy minister, we were told by one interviewee, has had his subpoena framed and has
installed it on the wall of his office.

The Review Process and the Bryden Committee

However, for the past few months, the Information Commissioner has not been alone in his
battle with the Liberal government and the Public Service on the issue of access to information.
In June of 2001, a group of backbench Members of Parliament, led by Liberal member John
Bryden, took the highly unusual step of creating an unofficial ad hoc committee to study the
reform of the access to information legislation. The creation of the committee, which is
composed of Members of Parliament from most parties, and is holding meetings within the
parliamentary precinct, but which has not been mandated or created by Parliament, came about
in direct response to the government’s handling of the Act’s official review process.
In 2000, the Liberal government finally decided that the time had come to make changes to the access to information rules. To study options and recommend specific changes, the President of the Treasury Board appointed a taskforce composed only of civil servants. While the taskforce created an advisory committee composed of outsiders, it nevertheless drew heavy criticism for being too close to the government and to the viewpoint of the Public Service. Some Members of Parliament, including John Bryden, were especially displeased by the limited role elected officials, who frequently use the access law, would get to play in the review process. Moreover, the taskforce, which received submissions and briefs from some stakeholders, was also condemned for not sufficiently consulting Canadians. The government, it was claimed by critics, was making sure that the review process would serve to curtail the scope of the legislation.

The Bryden committee was meant to be a response to this process. Unlike the taskforce, the committee would consult more widely and work more independently from the government. However, as could be expected, the government failed to collaborate with the independent-minded Members, and it actively impaired its ability to conduct a full review by forbidding civil servants to appear before it. The government’s official position was that, since the committee was not an official creation of Parliament, civil servants could be held liable for comments that they might make before it. The government House Leader argued, confusion might arise, which would be detrimental to the official review process, if civil servants’ testimony was taken out of context, especially by the media.

While Bryden repeatedly tried to gain the collaboration of the Government House Leader and the Clerk of the Privy Council in this regard, he was thoroughly unsuccessful. Moreover, after having agreed to appear before the committee, officials from Crown corporations, such as NavCan and Canada Post, decided to backtrack after seeing the government boycott the Committee’s work. As a result, the committee heard from advocacy groups and experts but was forced to table its report without the benefit of having talked to government officials. According to Bryden, some information experts also decided to abstain from participating in the committee’s work for fear of reprisals and loss of government contracts. As a result, the committee’s witness list was reduced by two-thirds, and two Liberal backbenchers decided to leave the committee.

The government’s position and tactics only fuelled the fire of criticism by those who believed that it simply sought to control the scope of the Act. Mike Gordon, chairman of Open Government Canada, a coalition of groups concerned about access to information, described the government’s response in this way:

“This is an extremely hostile act by the cabinet and they are essentially putting the leash back on MPs. The [government] is saying that we, the cabinet, do not want to allow any public review; we want to control the Access Act and our little closed task force will be adequate to that effect.”

Some Liberal Members of Parliament associated with the committee also used some unusually harsh language about the government. For example, Reg Alcock, a Liberal backbencher, said that the Chrétien government had become blinkered and elitist over its years in power and displayed, like its bureaucrats, a natural desire to conceal information that might be
embarrassing. Less surprisingly, the Opposition also used the opportunity to send a similar message. Grant McNally, a Democratic Representative Caucus member, said: "There's a clear message there that the Prime Minister likes the culture of secrecy around the Access to Information Act. That should be a concern to all Canadians."

Government and bureaucrats have also used all opportunities to extend their power to take files out of reach of the Access to Information Act. The anti-terrorism bill introduced in Parliament in October 2001 suggests that when the bill becomes law the Minister of Justice will have authority to issue a certificate prohibiting the disclosure of information for the purpose of protecting international relations, national defence or security. This decision will leave the Information Commissioner with no authority to inspect records to determine whether the new power is reasonably applied, the Federal Court will have no authority to review the decision of the Minister, and the citizenry will not even have access to the certificate itself. This has been sharply criticized by the Information Commissioner and other observers as unjustified.

Overall, recent debates about access to information suggest that a vicious dynamic is at play: the distrust of government leads citizens to aggressively seek disclosure, and to see in delays and exemptions clear signs authoritarianism; in turn, as citizens, members of parliament, and the Information Commissioner publicly attack the government and the Public Service for failure to comply with the Act. Mutual distrust and paranoia become natural reactions.

CONSEQUENCES

The recent debates on access to information are symptomatic of a general organizational paranoia that has crystallized in some parts of the Public Service. One may reasonably ask what likely consequences can be expected from such a development?

There are at least three areas where there is cause for concern.

The first has to do with the capacity of the Public Service of truly becoming a learning organization and to contribute actively to social learning in Canada. For an organization to learn, information sharing, the tolerance of risks in seeking new ways of doing things, and the ability to openly discuss performance and past failures are essential. To the extent that an organizational culture of paranoia leads to a tightening of central controls over experimentation, as well as restrictions on the disclosure of information about considered options and past failures, organizational learning is stunted.

Secondly, in the new knowledge-based society, information is not only a public good, it is also a public resource. Some analysts have even talked about an “informational commons”. While in earlier periods information might reasonably have been rationed on a need-to-know basis without much consequence, in the new information society, access to information is a basic necessity. In this context, a culture of secrecy and adverse attitudes about information disclosure are tantamount to self-imposed restrictions on the availability to citizens of some of our most valuable resources. This can only dramatically weaken the capacity for citizen engagement.
Most importantly, perhaps, the culture of paranoia, fuelled by the adversarial dynamics surrounding access to government information, is threatening the health of our democracy. Democratic governments have to accept some responsibility for ensuring that their citizenry has access to the information required for their full, informed participation in governance processes. This is all the more important since the state is the largest repository of information in society, and often the only source of some unique data of great relevance for understanding our contemporary social and natural environment, and therefore needed for meaningful political participation by the citizenry.

However, there is no indication that things are about to change. As the Information Commissioner himself pointed out recently, “Securing compliance with the Access to Information Act will be a highly adversarial struggle for some time to come”. Moreover, while clearly identifying the adverse reaction to his aggressive campaign against the Public Service, the Information Commissioner does not appear to realize that his approach may be part of the problem. In his last annual report, the Commissioner notes that a side effect of recent battles around access to information rules has led many civil servants to stop adequately documenting their daily work and decisions. But, interestingly enough, this observation leads him to advocate further stringent regulation about information management, going so far as to advocate a new law requiring civil servants to make and produce records in the course of their work. The vicious cycle is at work.

CONCLUSION

The fast-paced nature of socio-economic changes that create the need for continual adaptation by public and private actors, the increase in relevant uncertainty, and a more critical citizenry that is distrustful of traditional political institutions and more skilful at opposition and challenge have combined to create major challenges for the effective governance of contemporary societies.

In looking for a response to these challenges, national states are tempted to turn inward and to attempt to regain greater control, and shield themselves from opposition and criticism, by depriving the citizenry of information about its internal decision-making and operations.

Such a course of action has been characteristic of the Canadian response, but, given the phenomenal power of the state apparatus in Canada, the reaction has been stronger than elsewhere. It has generated a neurotic regime.

This disquisition is only meant to wet the reader’s appetite and to suggest the heuristic power of an approach to organizational effectiveness that is based on neurotic styles. In this short paper, we have used a simple classification scheme to examine the dynamics that has led to this neurotic state. The neurosis has probably taken different forms in different segments of the Canadian state. But behind these diverse styles, one may detect a dominant flavour of neurosis – paranoia.

We have documented the tensions surrounding the interactions between stakeholders around the operations of the Access to Information Act. In this context, maximum openness is a sensible
goal, provided that it is offset by operational principles seeking to ensure that the fundamental
inghts and basic interests of citizens are protected, and that the state preserves the ability to act
effectively in the public interest. We have shown how paranoia has prevented the materialization
of a workable set of arrangements.

While the Access to Information case is illustrative of this drift toward the neurotic state, it is not
an oddity. The neurotic state hypothesis wishes to underpin a research program that attempts to
make sense of a variety of instances that may otherwise be regarded as insignificant anomalies.
In many other segments of the Canadian state, we have found other forms of neurosis that are not
documented here. They have generated the same cumulative causation process leading to more
secretiveness, decline in public trust, centralization, conservatism, lack of critical thinking, and
failure for government to operate as a learning organization.

Nothing short of a cultural revolution can reverse the tendencies that underpin these different
forms of neurosis. Democratic accountability and social learning will be best served by a widely
shared culture of openness and transparency in government and the Public Service, and by the
creation of a reasoned dialogue among public servants, politicians, and citizens. Such a culture of
openness and reasoned dialogue will not emerge unless we can restore greater trust in
government.

NOTES
1 Donald Savoie, Governing from the Centre (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Jeffrey
2 Luc Juillet, Gilles Paquet and Francesca Scala, ‘Gouvernance collaborative, imputabilités douces et
3 Treasury Board Secretariat, Framework for Alternative Program Delivery (Ottawa: 1995); for an
analysis of this evolution, see Gilles Paquet, ‘Alternative Service Delivery: Transforming the
Practices of Governance’, in Richard Ford and David R. Zussman, eds., Alternative Service Delivery:
Sharing Governance in Canada (Toronto: KPMG/IPAC 1997), 31-58.
4 It is not the place to record a comprehensive list of such abuses. In our interviews, they have been
presented as ranging from subtle forms of rebuke of dissent, to chronic discouragement of any sort of
critical attitude vis-à-vis any aspect (even the most trivial) of government policies, to explicit
exclusion of any dissonant voice in publicly-sponsored forums, to the outright banning or sanitizing
of public discourse on sensitive issues. Very often, at first, these abuses pertained to minor issues, but
they helped establish a climate of suspicion and self-censorship that has become over the years a sort
of new mindset that often persisted after the departure or retirement from an institution or agency of
those persons who had been instrumental in injecting it into the daily life of the agency.
7 Susan Pharr and Robert D. Putnam, eds., Disaffected Democracies (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 2000).
8 R. C. Carty, William Cross and Lisa Young, Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics (Vancouver: UBC
Press, 2000).
(Toronto: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1995), xxx; Harold D. Clarke et al., Absent Mandate (Toronto:
Gage, 1995).


Public discourse has been sanitized, suspicion has come to prevail in a general way, and a garrison mentality has emerged in various segments of the federal public household. This has led to various whimsical knee-jerk reactions when any critical discussion of any initiative of the government has materialized: a decision by the Canadian Centre for Centre Development’s authorities not to publish a series of studies on the general restructuring of government in the mid 1990s that CCMD had funded and had been peer-reviewed and assessed as excellent even though not uncritical of government, the explicit control of the pulpit at CCMD by the top authorities and the development of an informal black list of persons not to be invited to lecture there, the sanitization of the content of courses to ensure that they are purged of any critical content and focus entirely on machinery of government issues, explicit censorship of Optimum – The Journal of Public Management -- by officials of Consulting and Audit Canada because of articles suggesting that the ill-fated Universal Classification System implementation process might be gender-biased, etc. – but it has most importantly translated into various forms of self-censorship and subservient behaviours, and a culture of courtesanship and deception in higher places.


Dietrich Dörner, *The Logic of Failure* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 37

Jon Elster, *Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5. Without describing the array of all such mechanisms that may be of use in our discussion, some may easily be used to illustrate our argument: tendency under pressure to apply overdose of established measures, group think, reacting intuitively rather than analytically, tendency to ascribe to the other party the responsibility, symbolic and tactical reforms inflaming the opposition, cognitive dissonance, self reinforcement, etc.


Ibid., 17.

Ibid., 24.

Ibid., 9.

Ibid., 14.

Ibid., 9.


Ibid., 22.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Paranoid</th>
<th>Compulsive</th>
<th>Dramatic</th>
<th>Depressive</th>
<th>Schizoid</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mistrust</td>
<td>perfectionism</td>
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<td>hypersensitivity</td>
<td>focus on trivia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perceived threats</td>
<td>dogmatism</td>
<td>exploitativeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>I cannot really trust anybody</td>
<td>I don’t want to be at the mercy</td>
<td>I want to get attention from</td>
<td>It is hopeless to change the course</td>
<td>The world of reality does not offer any satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I had better be of events; I must control all things</td>
<td>and impress people</td>
<td>life…I am not good enough</td>
<td>so safer to remain distant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangers</td>
<td>distorsion of reality, defensive attitudes</td>
<td>fear of making mistakes excessive reliance on rules</td>
<td>overreaction to minor events superficiality action based on</td>
<td>inhibition of action overly pessimistic</td>
<td>bewilderment and aggressiveness emotional isolation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Adapted from Kets de Vries & Miller (1985), 24-25.