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Beyond COVID-19: five commentaries on expert knowledge, executive action, and accountability in governance and public administration

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Citation
Boin, A. R., Brock, K., Craft, J., Halligan, J., Hart, P. 't, Roy, J., … Turnbull, L. (2020). Beyond COVID-19: five commentaries on expert knowledge, executive action, and accountability in governance and public administration. *Canadian Public Administration*, *63*(3), 339-368. doi:10.1111/capa.12386

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	[Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3142332

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Beyond COVID-19: Five commentaries on expert knowledge, executive action, and accountability in governance and public administration

Abstract: Several Canadian and international scholars offer commentaries on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for governments and public service institutions, and fruitful directions for public administration research and practice. This first suite of commentaries focuses on the executive branch, variously considering: the challenge for governments to balance demands for accountability and learning while rethinking policy mixes as social solidarity and expert knowledge increasingly get challenged; how the policy-advisory systems of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and United Kingdom were structured and performed in response to the COVID-19 crisis; whether there are better ways to suspend the accountability repertoires of Parliamentary systems than the multiparty agreement struck by the minority Liberal government with several opposition parties; comparing the Canadian government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Global Financial Crisis and how each has brought the challenge of inequality to the fore; and whether the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated or disrupted digital government initiatives, reinforced traditional public administration values or more open government.

Sommaire : Plusieurs universitaires canadiens et internationaux ont offert des commentaires sur les implications de la pandémie du COVID-19 pour les gouvernements et les institutions de la fonction publique, ainsi que des orientations productives pour la recherche et la pratique en administration publique. Cette première série de commentaires se concentre sur le pouvoir exécutif, en considérant de diverses façons : le défi pour les gouvernements d'équilibrer les exigences de responsabilité et d'apprentissage tout en repensant les combinaisons de politiques

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CANADIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION / ADMINISTRATION PUBLIQUE DU CANADA
VOLUME 63, NO. 3 (SEPTEMBER/SEPTEMBRE 2020), PP. 339–368
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alors que la solidarité sociale et les connaissances d'experts sont de plus en plus remises en question; comment les systèmes de consultation en politique de l'Australie, du Canada, de la Nouvelle-Zélande et du Royaume-Uni ont été structurés et mis en œuvre en réponse à la crise du COVID-19; s'il existe de meilleures façons de suspendre les répertoires de responsabilité des systèmes parlementaires que l'accord multipartite conclu par le gouvernement libéral minoritaire avec plusieurs partis d'opposition; comparer la réponse du gouvernement canadien à la pandémie du COVID-19 et à la crise financière mondiale et comment chacune a mis le défi de l'inégalité au premier plan; et si la pandémie du COVID-19 a accéléré ou perturbé les initiatives du gouvernement numérique, renforcé les valeurs traditionnelles de l'administration publique ou un gouvernement plus transparent.

Shaping the long shadows of COVID-19: three challenges for governments

Arjen Boin and Paul 't Hart

Frantic mobilization efforts in the health sector, clear crisis communication and a remarkable degree of rule adherence have brought back a measure of government control – though of an inherently tenuous kind – over the course of events in the biggest crisis to hit the Netherlands since World War II. The infection curve, which began so badly, has been flattened. Yet still, at least six thousand Dutch citizens died of COVID-19 during the first three months of the outbreak, and many more have only barely survived after protracted and debilitating IC treatment. The economy has taken a serious hit, even though it is not yet clear how deep the damage will run (massive government outlays are still offsetting the worst of the financial impact on firms and households). The flow-on social devastation – including exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities – that may result from a prolonged recession is beginning to manifest itself.

But there are also grounds for satisfaction. We have seen an outpouring of social solidarity and self-help initiatives. The high level of compliance with the restrictions imposed surprised the experts. The general public has gained a new sense of appreciation for the front-line heroes in cure and care systems, but also in supermarkets, public transport and local government administrations. It is no surprise, then, that the national government and its leader, veteran Prime Minister Mark Rutte, concluded the "first wave" with high levels of public support.

As always, the question is how long this will last. The strong national consensus quickly proved tenuous. As soon as the crisis entered our rear-view mirror, the nibbling at its edges began. Poignant questions emerged. Parliamentarians found their voice again. Why did the spread of the virus come as a surprise? How did we miss the nursing homes where so many

elderly died? Why did we not stockpile critical medical supplies? Why have we allowed our health system to become so lean and efficient that we lacked the redundancies in IC capacity – essential for any large-scale disaster? Why did it take such a long time to ramp up testing capacity? Why were national leaders and experts so adamantly opposed to the general use of face masks? Were all those measures really necessary? Could the government not have relaxed measures a bit sooner? Last, but not least: who will foot the bill?

None of this should come as a surprise. This type of instant revisionism happens after pretty much every crisis or disaster. The "altruistic community" and the broad consensus to "take the politics out of this" that typically prevail during the early crisis stages are shattered and superseded by a grimmer climate of frustration, recrimination, politicization and legal maneuvering once the most urgent threat phase is over and the "recovery" is supposed to begin (Kaniasty and Norris 2004). As we leave COVID-19 behind us, few countries will manage to circumvent this iron law of crisis dynamics.

From solidarity and compliance to frustration and accountability

There undoubtedly will be local variations in how things turn ugly. Much will depend upon "the numbers." Countries like New Zealand, Australia, Japan and Thailand appear to have avoided mass casualties whereas Brazil, the US, Spain and France are among the ones that have seen staggering death tolls. Levels of disenchantment will also depend on the severity and duration of the economic recessions that countries experience. Some welfare states may eventually crumble under the weight of fiscal austerity measures taken to compensate for massive drops of tax revenues and to service ballooning government debts.

But victimization stats alone cannot predict the nature of the emotional cocktail that will emerge in the coming months and – quite possibly – years, and the forms in which it will find expression. Culturally contingent attitudes to risk, loss and institutional failure weigh into the narratives that will be told about this catastrophe – particularly stories about how and why it happened, who should be held responsible, and what sanctions and measures should be taken (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Bovens and 't Hart 1996; Green 1997). There is no telling if and how loss of trust in public and political institutions will translate into some degree of social "anomie" (non-compliance, resistance, violent unrest, crime, domestic violence). Especially countries that did not manage to crush the curve or will see a second wave – and not just localized "spikes" – may face a prolonged imbroglio (Frailing and Wood Harper 2017).

This much is certain: all those governments that worked with utter dedication, at breakneck speed, and often with remarkable seamlessness across

jurisdictions and sectors to combat the spread of the virus and curb its socio-economic impacts, now face a very different set of critical challenges. For the purpose of brevity, we focus on three (cf. Boin et al. 2016):

- The challenge of *reassessment*: recalibrating the policy mix in light of the changing morphology of the crisis: making calls about which measures to retain, relax or discard. This creates a new challenge: how to motivate workers, citizens, and communities to respect the new regime.
- The challenge of *accountability*: opening up the books and initiating a national conversation about what was known and not known, done and not done, when, why and by whom, in relation to COVID-19.
- The challenge of *learning*: reconstructing, interrogating and reflecting upon one's own and other governments' responses with a view to drawing lessons designed to boost future pandemic (or more generic, mega-crisis) prevention, preparedness, response and resilience capacities.

Reassessing the policy mix: what role for expert knowledge?

COVID-19 has proved a deep challenge for nearly all policy sectors. The reigning policy paradigms, the institutionalized policy instruments, the way policies are made, the role of experts in their policy processes – the Search for the Exit Strategy put all these to the test. Without evidence-based insights and a quick way to secure these insights, policymakers had to come up with an approach that balanced economic considerations with public health concerns. How policymakers negotiated this conundrum should be an object of study for public administration research.

This will mean a renewed focus on the role of experts in supporting crisis managers (Rosenthal and 't Hart [1991] offer a foundational discussion). Much research has focused on the perennial gap between theory and policy, answering the question why policymakers systematically ignore solid research findings. Though most public administration researchers may lament it, the few months of "rehabilitation" of expert advice into governmental crisis decision-making are unlikely to be a game changer in the secular trend of increased challenges to or of expertise in policymaking processes.

The formulation of exit strategies everywhere has demonstrated the limits of expert-driven policymaking. There is no evidence-based knowledge to apply. We only have experts who know well that they really don't know how to formulate a policy on which so much is riding. Getting exits from lockdowns wrong may kill and it will be clear if it does. Rather than presenting this as a political challenge, policymakers are tempted to keep pushing experts to make those judgments for them. This is generating discomfort,

and may well compromise the viability of the newfound reliance on experts as a model to (re)introduce into "normal" policymaking.

Accountability in the face of deep uncertainty

Accountability is the hallmark of a democratic system. Knowing that an elected politician will have to explain why certain policy choices were made, imposes all sorts of conditions on the policymaking process. These conditions impose a burden on policymakers, the literature tells us. The biggest burden may well be the sacred rule that accountable politicians must be well informed. This rule has prompted all sorts of mechanisms and protocols that have come to define policymaking in democracies.

The COVID-19 experience has thrown up an insurmountable challenge for policymakers and politicians alike. They have been operating under conditions of deep uncertainty. Their efforts veer between a principled approach (decision-making based on principles rather than information) and more pragmatic approach (experimenting with limited feedback). It is not clear at all if existing accountability mechanisms can cope with these approaches. It is even less clear what the implications will be for the world of policy. If principles are allowed to rule, what do traditional accountability rules still mean for policymakers? If trial and error is the way to go, what are the accompanying accountability rules?

Learning: reflection versus politicization

Nobody is against learning, as Aaron Wildavsky reminded us a long time ago. It is still true today. Yet policy scholars have systematically documented how hard it is to learn and apply lessons to the policymaking process. Learning the right lessons from a crisis is particularly hard (Boin et al. 2008). At the same time, we know it must be done. COVID-19 has demonstrated the fragility of our complex and tightly coupled systems, which policymakers evidently cannot protect in the face of a pandemic. We know that this crisis may last for quite some time. We also know that a new pandemic is very possible. So how do we learn from the COVID-19 experience to strengthen societal and institutional resilience? What can policymakers do to facilitate an effective learning process? How will they know what lessons to adopt and implement?

Learning begins with evaluation: did we achieve what we intended to achieve? Unfortunately, this question takes on a whole different meaning in the context of accountability. Then the question becomes: why did politicians (or institutions) not achieve what they had to achieve? The threat of "exposure" and punishment inevitably undermines the process of evaluation. To explain is to blame, as the saying goes. If this lamentable condition

is not resolved, we risk ending up with no lessons learned, or worse, the wrong lessons learned.

If there is one lesson public administration researchers may take away from COVID-19, it is the need to learn in an unbiased and unimpeded way from crises and disasters. In a world that produces all sorts of upheavals – a changing climate, unstable financial systems, ongoing cyber threats – COVID-19 is but a reminder that we need to learn effectively and quickly. How can this be done without compromising democratic values, institutions and practices? Time for public administration scholarship to step up to the plate (see also Boin and Lodge 2016).

Executive governance and policy advisory systems in a time of crisis

Jonathan Craft and John Halligan

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a stark reminder of the need for high-quality policy advice in government and the uneven ability of the systems of advice around government to perform effectively, particularly during crises. Our analysis of the Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and United Kingdom (UK) responses focuses on how the policy problem was (mis)diagnosed, and divergent initial responses along with varying abilities to coordinate policy advice and adapt. Despite a shared administrative tradition rooted in Westminster principles, the comparisons are stark. Australia and New Zealand featured similarities in early milestones, but then diverged when New Zealand opted for decisive and emphatic action. Canada and the UK fared much worse with clear evidence of failings in their advisory systems detailed below. Here we reflect on how each countries' advisory system operated in this crisis and distil some lessons. This fast-moving and complex field cannot be properly analyzed in a brief review and so our focus is on a few notable comparisons.

Frequently compared, these countries share principles and practices of Westminster style government, some more defined than others, which guide how politicians, public servants, and others engage in advisory activity and exchanges. Responsible government is defined by the fusion of the executive and parliament along with primary features, including strong cabinet government, ministerial responsibility and a permanent bureaucracy that is neutral, non-partisan and professional. There are differences with structure – Canada and Australia feature federal systems while the UK and New Zealand are unitary systems – and with the countries' reform pathways (Craft and Halligan 2020).

Governments grappled with the challenges of making sense of fast-moving science-based public health advice, both domestic and international, and

advice from departments and agencies spanning health, economics and public safety. Under normal conditions, the policy advisory systems (PAS), defined as the assemblage of advisory units and practices that exist at a given time with which governments and other actors engage for policy purposes, are marked by tensions. Several were more acute during the crisis, notably the role of expert advisers and the public service vis-a-vis the democratic principles of responsible government, relationships with devolved governments and executive federalism, the mobilization of public services to overcome silos, and engagement with other organizations. The pandemic also pulled the curtain back, with public briefings, often daily, that revealed data (of varying quality) and expert advice governments had at their disposal. This transparency departs from the typically opaque nature of Westminster PAS (Craft and Halligan 2020).

Three strategies: the experience of four countries

Three general responses are evident. New Zealand adopted an elimination strategy, while Australia and Canada favoured a suppression approach, which the UK was forced to adopt after early championing of the high-risk "herd immunity" approach. Table 1 details variance in the number of cases and in deaths per country.

Australia had an elaborate apparatus in place for processing international and national data and for national communication among Australia's governments. The machinery for handling a pandemic was triggered by the rapidly changing position in China. The Communicable Disease Network advocated a national health response. The National Incident Room (Department of Health) was activated and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) supported border controls for Wuhan flights (January 20). The first Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus specified an escalating series of responses, from self-isolation of suspected cases to people working from home. Government activated the plan and declared that the coronavirus would become a global pandemic

Table 1. *COVID-19 Infections and Mortality Rates (As of August 10, 2020)*

Country	*Infections*	*Deaths*	*Case-fatality*	*Deaths/100K pop.*
Australia	21,397	313	1.5%	1.25
Canada	121,367	9,028	7.4%	24.36
United Kingdom	312,574	46,659	14.9%	70.18
New Zealand	1,569	22	1.4%	0.45

Source: Johns Hopkins University (2020).

(February 27, while the WHO did not do so until 12 March). Border closures were extended to cover high-risk countries from late February. Overseas arrivals were required to self-isolate for 14 days from mid-March then borders were closed for non-citizens and residents (the hotel quarantine included Australians from March 29).

Canada's response was incremental but failed to adequately seize early opportunities to get ahead of the pandemic. The early focus was on repatriation of Canadians abroad and dealing with cruise ships and not quickly imposing rigorous containment and suppression tactics. For example, *mandatory* quarantining for those returning to Canada, or showing symptoms, was only invoked on April 14th. Poor data collection also hampered effective reporting and modelling, and capacity issues led to slow testing, tracing, and tracking. The best available advice missed the mark, advising government that there was a low risk for within-country transmission until early March, only to recommend widespread societal and economic shutdowns two weeks later in response to community transmission and increased infection and death rates (Tasker 2020a). The public service and Public Health Agency of Canada's advice recommended management rather than early suppression via comprehensive mandatory screening and early tracking and tracing. The full authority of the *Quarantine Act* was not invoked in part due to advice that suggested compliance would be problematic and that self-isolation measures would ensure "less pressure on public health resources" (Tasker 2020a). This early response proved costly.

The New Zealand response to a rapidly mounting number of cases was the adoption of pandemic eradication, which mean eliminating community transmission. This was based on the government accepting the recommendations of public health advisers. On March 19, it closed its borders to foreign travelers and made people coming home quarantine for 14 days. Then several days later as the number of cases soared, the government first introduced level 3 restrictions followed by level 4, *eliminate*, which entailed full lockdown measures that were strict by international standards (see Table 2). The prime minister was able to claim in June that the virus had been eradicated (although cases have since surfaced). New Zealand has the advantages of being a small island-based state with low population density and a centralized and integrated government. The extensive testing was high in international terms and tracing was facilitated by the lockdown. The mortality rate has been similar to Australia (Table 1), but debates have occurred about the economic costs of the respective approaches.

The UK response was mired by multiple errors and missteps. It first adopted a controversial strategy favouring widespread infection to develop "herd immunity." It was compelled to adopt a more mainstream suppression approach including lockdowns and travel screening after climbing death and infection rates. The reliance on exhortations to the public to do the

Table 2. *Early Milestones in Country Responses*

	First confirmed case reported	*International travel ban*	*Mandatory quarantine imposed on (returning) travellers*	*Widespread closures and domestic restrictions*
Australia	January 25	March 19	March 13 (19)	March 13-20
Canada	January 25	March 16	April 14	March 12-22*
United Kingdom	January 29	n/a	June 8	March 23
New Zealand	February 28	March 19	April 10	March 25

*Provincial and municipal governments adopted varying degrees of restrictions in this period.

right thing also extended to travel, border restrictions being delayed until early June. The vociferousness of the debates, the pervasiveness of the blame game and the division among experts and observers derive from a range of arguments bandied about. These include the poor condition of the National Health Service following a period of austerity; the handling of aged care; the fragmentation of the relevant machinery; and the composition of expert committees. The government has changed central decision-making bodies, crisis machinery and science advisory forums. The Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) on COVID-19 included ministers from the three devolved nations but was criticized for lacking prime ministerial leadership as it was chaired by a minister until March. The COBR played a coordination and decision-making role but was superseded in May (IfG 2020). The advisory structure was there but failed to work well and was abused by the political executive. Unwilling to learn from the experience of others, the UK has been derided in the media for the attachment to British exceptionalism. The prime minister has been depicted as the wrong leader for this type of crisis. The death total is the fifth highest in the world and the death rate is the third highest (ignoring two micro-states).

New Zealand was able to use unitary arrangements to its advantage but had to overcome its siloed public service to ensure a coherent response and the government used a highly centralized approach to securing co-ordination across the system, along with heavy reliance on and deference to expertise, and earlier and more comprehensive public restrictions. The situation was more complicated with the devolved systems whereby national governments have greater financial wherewithal but the main delivery responsibilities rest with subnational units. In Canada, collaborative executive federalism was essential but hampered by problems of poor quality and inconsistent data, spotty availability of personal protective equipment, and poor provincial responses to select outbreaks in seniors' care facilities and pockets of seasonal workers. Australia's response has been more effective with formal and structured approaches to collaborative federalism and policy coordination. National Cabinet comprising the prime minister, state premiers and territory chief ministers became a key inter-party decision maker for many purposes from mid-March, with regular meetings to review progress with COVIDSafe Australia. National Cabinet was determined to be a more effective body for national decision-making than the Council of Australian Governments, which was replaced by a National Federation Reform Council centred on National Cabinet. The need to achieve a united front nationally on core issues is important in larger and more complex systems. In devolved systems, the challenge is to balance national strategies with discretion for nations, provinces and states so that they can respond to local needs.

Implications of structuring advice

Governments made important choices in how to structure advice and key advisory processes. The UK's reliance on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) has been singled out for the fragmented and faulty response. Early criticisms were levelled at politicization given high profile No 10 special advisor Dominic Cummings had attended meetings, but it was more roundly criticized for its lack of transparency and an inappropriate mix of expertise. It has been argued that, "If independent public health experts had not been excluded from the core committee, which is dominated by modellers, virologists, clinical academics and behavioural scientists, the influenza-driven 'herd immunity' strategy might not have materialised" (Costello 2020). Jeremy Hunt, a recent health minister and chair of the health select committee in charge of reviewing the UK handling of COVID-19, observes that "the failure to look at what [Asian] countries were doing at the outset will rank as one of the biggest failures of scientific advice to Ministers in our lifetimes" (Hunt 2020).

Poor responsiveness and slow-moving machinery were apparent. Public Health England (PHE), the executive agency established to provide advice on public health issues has been critiqued for a slow response. PHE had the responsibility for testing: "the decision to abandon widespread tracking of the virus as it began to spread is regarded by most scientists as the key mistake in Britain's handling of the pandemic, which has led to the country recording the highest number of deaths in Europe." Its slow responses, "forced the government to take over some of its functions and set up new bodies… the test and trace service had to be taken out of PHE's hands, while the Joint Biosecurity Centre, which determines the COVID alert level, had been set up specifically to do a job PHE should have been doing" (Rayner 2020). Failures to adapt and modify responses in light of the fast-changing consensus and evidence on COVID-19 was a major catalyst for the poor UK and early Canadian performances.

For at-risk groups, lack of responsiveness was also apparent. In Australia, two neglected communities have been variously depicted as a "missed opportunity," "blind spots" and the subject of "ad hoc" engagement. The first involves high-risk groups like migrant communities with suggestions that pandemic messages were not registering, particularly where English was a second language. A May report was discussed with the AHPPC, the key decision-making body for health emergencies, but did not register in the system. A second report argues that most Indigenous Australians reside in urban areas, but the focus has been on remote communities and the needs and risks of urban communities have been overlooked. Canada, as already noted, also failed to target responses for at-risk communities including migrant workers and long-term care seniors' facilities. Adequately responding

to constituencies and sectors that are vulnerable or at-risk will continue to challenge all four countries as they implement economic responses and grapple with potential second waves of the virus.

Doing better: balanced input, transparency, agility

Governments need to recognize the limits of public service and expert advice in a crisis. It may not be stress-tested and may be contradictory. Executives have to be careful with using non-public service advice (e.g., health units, experts on committees) that they are not accustomed to and take care organizing and balancing various forms of advice. The preparedness to act early and boldly in moving between levels of internal lockdown was vital in suppressing coronavirus. It is well-established that the timing of interventions is critical for flattening the infections curve. This also applies to where reversals occur when quick and decisive action is needed to resurrect some form of lockdown. The risks of relying on non-mandatory, incremental interventions are high.

The closed and opaque nature of PAS can be problematic in crises when confronted with the need to educate and engage society as part of a coordinated response. New Zealand, with a tradition of Cabinet transparency, meant that citizens and the press could access cabinet minutes and papers on COVID-19 related matters. The Australian National Cabinet is also notable for providing details of meeting decisions and key advisory documents. In contrast, the UK was highly secretive, with the activities of the Sage committee drawing particularly stinging criticisms that ultimately led to the publication of meeting minutes. The Canadian response featured frequent public briefings by public health officials and politicians, but little public access to the policy advice provided to federal Cabinet.

Finally, governments that were able to pivot quickly did better. Adaptability in the short-term is not necessarily a strong suit of PAS in Anglophone countries, but they do have the ability to change and a reputation for responding well under emergencies. Governments that can tap the exigencies of a crisis to galvanize agencies, sectors and jurisdictions to act and collaborate are more successful.

Balancing accountability and action during COVID-19: how the *Emergencies Act* provided a model for an empowered Parliament

Kathy Brock and Lori Turnbull

Westminster parliamentary systems work by striking a well-calibrated balance between a powerful executive branch that can take decisions and

actions effectively and a functional legislative branch that holds the government to account. In times of emergency, the balance between decisiveness and accountability tends to lean more heavily towards an even more powerful, effective executive. However, even in exceptional times, the actions of the executive have been subject to the review of Parliament, sometimes retroactively. Once an emergency or exceptional circumstances pass, the equilibrium between the branches should be restored to normal levels of accountability, lest we lose the healthy and vital system of counterweights in a parliamentary democracy.

During the extraordinary conditions created during the COVID-19 crisis, the Liberal minority government made deals with the New Democratic, Bloc Québecois, and Green parties which reduced the ability of Parliament to hold the executive to account by eliminating key levers of power at the opposition's disposal and by limiting the frequency of House of Commons sittings. This was neither necessary nor desirable given that the parties could have opted for an alternate model retaining the full powers of Parliament to scrutinize the executive while enabling the executive to act swiftly to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. This episode raises serious questions about the nature and scope of multiparty agreements, the relationship of the executive to the legislative branch, and the role of Parliament in crises – all of which merit further investigation and research in the future.

Government interventions under pressure

In the early days of the pandemic, the federal government amended the *Financial Administration Act* to permit using special warrants to make payments to Canadians without Parliament sitting (Bill C-12). Parliament passed the amendments quickly and under pressure just before adjourning to allow members of parliament to return home and social distance. Within two weeks, a reconvened Parliament passed an $82 billion federal aid package called the *COVID-19 Emergency Response Act* (Bill C-13). This sweeping statute made several amendments to existing legislation to extend deadlines for tax filing and payment, increase Canada Child Benefit payments, introduce new Emergency Care and Emergency Support Benefits as well as an Indigenous Community Support fund. It also allowed the Ministry of Finance to borrow without authorization of the Governor in Council and extended budget and debt reporting requirements. This bill also was passed under pressure with scrutiny mainly limited to a special House committee and some House members and Senators passing it without full scrutiny or knowledge of its contents. Two further bills (C-14 and C-15) provided subsidies to small business employees and students and extended reporting deadlines for other Finance matters. Further emergency measures were introduced under the *Quarantine Act*, the *Aeronautics Act*, and other federal

legislation and regulations. Orders in council have been used to implement many important aspects of the federal response to COVID-19, including the Canada-US border closure, efforts to manage food and drug shortages, and *Income Tax Act* amendments. In contrast, the UK and Australian COVID-19 Response Acts and other legislation were debated and amended in both of those parliaments which operated to allow opposition questioning of government actions on COVID-related and other matters.

Throughout the COVID-19 lockdown period, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced relief programs for individuals and businesses, travel restrictions, physical distancing rules, and border closures that posed unprecedented economic, social, and health related consequences. These announcements were made from his Rideau Cottage residence as opposed to the House of Commons, which meant that the immediate reaction to these announcements came from journalists rather than Members of Parliament. As a result, the response of the opposition to the announcements was often delayed or received little coverage in the media.

Sidelining the legislative branch

Under a multiparty agreement struck by the Liberals, NDP and Bloc Québecois, the House met in plenary one day per week with most members attending through remote technology. A Special COVID-19 Committee of all House members met virtually two days per week to raise any matters related to the COVID-19 crisis. Votes were suspended in the House owing to technical complications. Standing committees continued virtual meetings. The Senate decided to adjourn to June 2 unless required to meet to pass legislation relating to COVID-19, although its committees could continue any COVID-related business through virtual meetings. This meant that the ability of both houses to consider government measures was limited. Another multiparty agreement (between the Liberals, the NDP and the Greens) commenced in late May, removing the possibility of opposition days, private members bills, and order paper questions for the remainder of the spring sitting (Canadian Press 2020). All of these mechanisms are integral to opposition parties' ability to affect the parliamentary agenda, initiate confidence votes, give voice to their priorities, and obtain meaningful answers to their questions on government actions and policies. It was easy to forget that this was, in fact, a minority government, whose command of the confidence of the House could not be tested or assured in such an environment.

There was one shining moment that demonstrated the indispensable role that the opposition plays in holding the government to account and validated the importance of Parliament. Though all federal parties supported the aid package (Bill C-13), the Conservative Party pushed back on a government proposal to tax, spend, and borrow broadly without parliamentary

approval until December 2021. The Liberals acquiesced to a revised deadline of September 30th. But things went downhill from there. The NDP and Greens' deal with the Liberals, who were looking to break for the summer, significantly undermined Parliament's ability to do its job. In exchange for a promise from the prime minister to talk to the provinces about pursuing universal sick leave, the two opposition parties gave away almost every tool in the opposition's toolkit. The multiparty agreement effectively neutralized the opposition at a time when the government was exercising tremendous power.

The government and opposition parties were acting in a compressed time period in an exceptional time when pressures to respond to the COVID-19 crisis were escalating daily. Members of Parliament wanted to meet the needs of Canadians in the crisis and to model the need for social distancing. These considerations affected their decision to have a truncated Parliament in operation. It is understandable but, as mentioned, the UK and Australian parliaments were able to continue operations with virtual voting. In Canada, the government and opposition parties did not use but had available to them a model of how Parliament could operate with full powers to scrutinize government without limiting the ability of the executive to respond decisively and powerfully to the crisis. That model can be found in the provisions of the *Emergencies Act*.

Multiparty agreements vs. the *Emergencies Act*

In March 2020, the federal government contemplated invoking *Emergencies Act* (R.S.C. 1988, c.29) to empower it to deal with coronavirus related matters. The Act was written "to ensure safety and security" during emergencies by authorizing the Canadian government "to take special temporary measures that may not be appropriate in normal times" (Preamble). Instead, the government decided not to invoke the Act, viewing it as "a measure of last resort" in the words of Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland (Tasker 2020b). Under the terms of the Act, it could only be invoked if the federal government proclaimed that the COVID-19 situation constituted a "public welfare emergency" after consultations with the provinces had yielded intergovernmental agreement that the situation exceeded "the capacity or authority of a province to deal with it" (Ss. 3, 3.a, 5.b).

Using the legislative and other policy instruments mentioned above, the federal government was able to adopt the necessary measures that complemented the actions being taken by the provinces and territories to deal with the crisis. Although <u>not</u> invoked in the initial phases of the crisis, the *Emergencies Act* provides a model for ensuring executive accountability

to Parliament during a crisis that the parties could have adopted for the COVID-19 crisis rather than the one secured by the multiparty agreements.

First, and foremost, the *Emergencies Act* locates responsibility and powers for dealing with a declared emergency to the executive consistent with the Westminster model of parliamentary government in two ways. The responsibility for assessing the situation and declaring that it constitutes an emergency consistent with the defined terms in the Act rests with Cabinet (S. 3). The legislation also confers on Cabinet broad and sweeping powers to make temporary orders and regulations that it constitutes are necessary for dealing with the emergency but that might not be appropriate in normal circumstances (Ss. 8, Preamble). To this extent, the actions that the Liberal government took during the COVID-19 crisis (to the time of writing), were consistent with the Act's vision of strong, decisive executive action.

Second, the terms of the *Emergencies Act* depart from the multiparty agreement and what transpired during the COVID-19 crisis. The Act renders the executive fully accountable for the decisions and actions that government takes in an emergency both during the emergency and afterwards. Unlike the preceding *War Measures Act*, which allowed Cabinet to govern by order-in-council and bypass the House of Commons and Senate (Smith 2020), the *Emergencies Act* stipulates that Cabinet exercises its temporary emergency powers "subject to the supervision of Parliament," the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and other rights legislation, and the federal division of powers in the *Constitution Act 1867* (Preamble). Judicial review of government actions is likely to be limited "as courts would defer to Cabinet's interpretation of the Act, its assessment of the situation and its determination of which particular measures are necessary" (Block and Goldenberg 2020; cf. West and Forcese 2020 as quoted in Balakrishnan 2020). Thus, the more powerful and immediate oversight power resides with Parliament.

Parliament exercises its powers of review in three ways according to the *Emergencies Act*: reviewing the declaration of an emergency; reviewing every order or regulation made by Cabinet during the emergency; and a post-emergency review. Under the Act, Parliament has the power to review Cabinet's emergency declaration, reasons for the declaration, and the report prepared by the government on its own consultations with the provinces within seven sitting days of the declaration (Ss. 58.1, 58.5). Parliament may revoke the emergency declaration (S. 58.7) or a continuation or amendment of an emergency declaration (S. 60). Given that a declaration of emergency is likely to be taken with much forethought as the previous comments by Freeland indicates, this power is important but not where a government is likely to stumble. For our purposes here, it is significant that in contrast to the multiparty agreement, in this model Parliament is fully operational with enhanced opportunities to examine the decisions and reasoning of the government.

More pertinent to the COVID-19 situation are the provisions in the Act concerning orders and regulations. Cabinet must submit every order or regulation to Parliament for review. Both Houses, not just one, would need to agree if an order or regulation were to be revoked (S. 61). This allows for transparency and review of government actions but sets a high bar for those actions to be quashed. If an order or regulation is confidential, then it would be reviewed in private by a parliamentary review committee comprising members from both Houses and accepted or rejected (Ss. 61, 62). This review would bolster public confidence that all government actions are not taken surreptitiously or arbitrarily. Under the multiparty agreement, the opposition parties relinquished this important power of review and veto.

The most important power of review lies in the post-emergency phase. The *Emergencies Act* requires Cabinet to strike an inquiry into its declaration of an emergency and the actions it took during the emergency with a report to Parliament within a year of the end of the emergency (S. 63). This allows Parliament to consider the government's action in a more reasonable time and to make recommendations for future situations. This step is not covered by the agreement and yet is critical to good governance.

In contrast to the multiparty agreements, the *Emergencies Act* provides a model of a fully operational Parliament that can ensure executive accountability and is much closer to the model that operated in Britain. If the parties had agreed to adopt a similar model using remote technology, then Parliament would have continued to play a vital role in responding to the COVID-19 crisis and would have been able to ensure that the regular business of government would have continued to be subject to debate and scrutiny. Among other things, special unsupervised spending warrants would not have been justified, the government could have been rigorously questioned in the House on its spending announcements, and the delay in closing the border or any orders under other acts could have been investigated and perhaps revoked in Parliament if over-reaching or not justified.[1] Parliament would have remained and been seen to be a vital institution in responding to emergencies and crises rather than as a shadow in the wings.

Conclusion: an agenda for research

These events raise important questions about the role of Parliament and whether multiparty agreements ought to be used as a vehicle through which to cede critical levers of power at its disposal. Further areas for research include: the nature and scope of multiparty agreements; the possibility of amending House rules and procedures to provide for a model of Parliament to operate during crises like COVID-19 similar to the model in the *Emergencies Act*; whether any fundamental changes to the operation of the House of Commons should require all-party agreement under the rules

and procedures of the House; updates to the *Emergency Act* given recent changes in the Senate; other means of ensuring executive accountability to Parliament during crises and exceptional circumstances if an emergency is not declared; and, a comparison of how parliaments within Canada and internationally fared in holding the executive to account during the global pandemic.

Lessons from the Great Financial Crisis (GFC) to COVID-19: budgetary responses and future challenges

Geneviève Tellier

There is no doubt that the current pandemic is exceptional. All over the world, governments implemented drastic measures to limit the propagation of COVID-19. Economically, these measures were unprecedented: borders were shut down, businesses closed, workers forced to work from home, etc. In Canada, it is reported that the GDP has plummeted by 12% while the unemployment rate rose to 13% during the first two months of the pandemic (Statistics Canada 2020). The federal government now forecasts that its deficit will total 343.2 billion dollars for 2020–2021 (Department of Finance 2020). This figure will in all probability increase.

How do we deal with a crisis of this magnitude? To find some answers to this question, what follows first turns our attention to the past, and then identifies some promising lines of research for public budgeting and public administration scholars.

From the GFC to COVID-19: lessons learned and unfinished business

Only a decade ago, we witnessed another major event, the 2009 financial crisis, viewed then as the biggest economic recession in modern times: business activities plunged to record low, unemployment rose, and investments stalled. All around the globe, governments were asked to bail out major private companies and help workers who had lost their job. Although not identical, the current pandemic and the 2009 GFC share many similarities. Among these, they both required massive public financial interventions. Therefore, it seems natural to examine what lessons were learned from the GFC and analyze if they can help us manage the present crisis as well as its aftermath.

The GFC taught us two important things about public budgeting. The first was that strong government interventions are needed to prompt economic recovery. This new course of action came after years of austerity measures,

balanced budget initiatives, tax cuts, etc. In other words, Keynesian ideas were rediscovered[2]. The second important lesson was that national public policies are vulnerable to external events. Nowadays, globalization not only entails the circulation of goods, services and financial resources. It is also about national public policies that have been impacted by decisions occurring elsewhere. Governments must be prepared to work collaboratively with other governments (international, national, and subnational) and various other stakeholders in an uncertain environment.[3]

Have governments learned from these lessons? Were they better prepared to face a severe crisis? Looking at the response of the federal Canadian government to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the answer is yes, up to a point. The federal government adopted and implemented relief measures that targeted millions of Canadians and businesses in only a few weeks. This was impressive considering how long it usually takes to set up new programs. In addition to considerable political will, the administrative apparatus was flexible enough to quickly initiate a response.

The federal government was also able to secure the support of parliamentarians to use special warrants, within days. Without these warrants, it would not have been able to use public funds, while parliament is adjourned. Partisanship was put aside during this major national crisis, even though the government was in a minority position. This contrast sharply with the GFC when the minority conservative government was under attack from opposition parties for its weak recovery strategy. In addition, the Department of Finance and the Bank of Canada made sure enough liquidity was available for businesses and Canadian governments, again within days. This decision allowed Canadian governments to direct their attention to recovery initiatives. They will deal with the issues of high deficits and debt repayments latter.

Finally, the Canadian government was in constant communication with other countries and with international organizations to coordinate the response to the pandemic. Overall, the Canadian government reacted swiftly to address the COVID-19 pandemic, a sharp contrast with Canada's initial response to the GFC.[4]

However, I want to suggest that the Canadian response to the GFC and COVID-19 remains an unfinished business. GFC was not just about the collapse of the US housing market that spread to economic sectors all over the globe. It also brought to light the issue of economic inequalities, revealing growing disparities between the few most affluent in our society and the rest of the population, the precarious working conditions, the increasing costs of living, etc. The rise of various popular protests here and abroad (Yellow Jackets, Brexit, Occupy Wall Street, *Printemps Érable*, to name a few) and the election of populist leaders (Trump, Bolsonaro, Kurz, etc.) all point in the same direction: there is a growing disaffection about the use of public

financial resources. The problem concerns equally how governments fund public services as well as how they collect revenues. Furthermore, there is not a strong consensus on the solution to be adopted. For some, public expenditures and taxes are too high, while others find them too low.

The events that have triggered the pandemic crisis and the GFC are entirely different. However, they required similar government actions and focused attention on inequalities prevalent in our society. Indeed, the current pandemic offers an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on these issues and make progress.

Three promising areas for budgeting research

Setting up a universal basic income (UBI) program. The purpose of a UBI is to provide an unconditional income to all Canadians, regardless of their work status. By doing so, a UBI would replace existing social programs that provide conditional financial support to specific groups (such as the unemployed, the elderly, students, people with disabilities, etc.). It is therefore seen as a new way to deliver public services that values simplicity and flexibility. However, many observers fear that the costs associated with a UBI would make it prohibitive, while others believe that it will create disincentives to work. This explains why so few governments have ventured into seriously considering it.[5] However, the implementation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) that targeted almost all Canadians has automatically revived the idea. The federal government has also implicitly suggested that a Canadian UBI should be set at $24,000 per year (the CERB provides $2,000 per month). Whether it will be deemed a success or not, we are in the midst of an exceptional natural experiment, which will provide a unique set of reliable data to explore the feasibility and implementation of a national UBI in Canada.

Do major crises generate more consensual public policies? As research has demonstrated over the years, government ideologies do shape public policies.[6] Moreover, the gap between right-wing and left-wing ideologies has recently widened, leading to a more polarized political landscape. However, the various measures adopted to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic may signal a realignment. Federal and provincial Canadian governments of all stripes have swiftly implemented attenuating measures to counter the negative effects of the pandemic. On closer examination, we notice some variations: some governments seem more inclined to offer direct monetary assistance to individuals and businesses (in British Columbia, Québec, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador and at the federal level), while others seem more supportive of tax relief measures (Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario).[7] How can these differences be explained? Are they meaningful? Will they last? Furthermore, the pandemic may force some political parties to rethink their

political propositions, especially right-wing parties. Can it still be possible to advocate spending cuts, tax cuts, or both, while promising improved public services? If so, how? Overall, research should investigate if the pandemic will influence the ideological stance of political parties.

Embracing fiscal sociology. Fiscal sociology investigates the relationship between the state, society and taxation. It tries to understand why we consent collectively to pay taxes, by paying close attention to the influences of institutions, the redistribution of wealth, and the use of various tax policy instruments. After some promising debuts (initiated by the work of de Tocqueville and Pareto, and subsequently by Goldstein, Schumpeter, Mann), this field of research went largely unnoticed. It has been, however, recently rediscovered in the US and in Europe.[8] Fiscal sociology would be particularly useful for analyzing economic inequalities and examining how taxation can alleviate these inequalities. Furthermore, its contribution would also be valuable to study the intergenerational redistribution of public debts (which will be substantial in the coming years).

Concluding remarks: looking towards the big picture

The research topics identified above have a common element: each explicitly acknowledges that politics matters when budgetary issues are being discussed, analyzed, and policies are developed and implemented as a result. My hope is that, among the usual focus on managing deficits, debt, and fiscal policy, these suggestions will contribute to developing this field of research.

Some researchers have recently expressed concerns about how research in public administration is often missing the big picture: the discipline should not just focus on the study of administrative reform (the meso-level of government). Where public budgeting is concerned, future research should also pay attention to the overall direction and performance of government (the macro-level) and acknowledge the presence and influences of political values (Botterill and Fenna 2019; Roberts 2020).

Traditionalism or transformation? Canada's COVID-19 response and the future of digital government

Jeffrey Roy

COVID-19 is both an accelerator and disruptor of digital government. Acceleration stems from concerted efforts to devise data-driven analysis and surveillance systems aimed at lessening the spread of infection, and digital service channels have evolved from an option for delivering

government services to essential "digital by default" platforms in support of an unprecedented expansion of individual and commercial support programs. With at least the temporary closure of most physical service centres, and an enormous strain on telephony channels, online platforms are certain to play an expanded and central role in the service delivery apparatus of the public sector going forward. Yet across these health and service realms – and more widely across the public sector – disruption also stems from the accelerated pace of digitization (inside and outside of government) as well as pre-coronavirus digital agendas now potentially stymied or recast in light of shifting policy and political priorities. How such tensions are dealt with will shape the future of digital government and, by extension, the evolution of public sector governance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

It helps to provide some parameters around the fluid term "digital government." This term has evolved since some scholars distinguish between earlier notions of "e-government" as a more basic and linear extension of the public sector into the Internet era (Roy 2006; Pablo et al. 2007; Gasco 2014; OECD 2015; Clarke et al. 2017). By contrast, "digital government" offers a more transformative and dynamic prism also deemed "Public Administration 2.0" (Lips 2012; Reddick and Aikins 2012; Roy 2013, 2017, and 2019; Clarke et al. 2017; Clarke 2019), which has been adopted by the Canadian government (Government of Canada 2017).

As Lips and many others have argued, we must consider if and how digital government disrupts traditional public administration (TPA), competing theories such as new public management (NPM), public value management (PVM) and new public governance (NPG). Furthermore, we must add digital era governance (DEG), a template that Lindquist and Huse suggest is less distinct and more encompassing of shifting elements of the others (Dunleavy et al. 2006; Dunleavy 2010; Lindquist and Huse 2017). Arguably the most thorough review of these varying though often inter-related perspectives is Clarke's detailed examination of the Government of Canada's digital efforts (Clarke 2019). Importantly, for our purposes, Clarke contrasts traditional public administration – presenting it as closed government, with more outward and transformational perspectives of digital government: "…whether by challenging the silos and hierarchies that have long underpinned a closed bureaucrat-bureaucrat relationship, or by calling for the uptake of new agile and open policy making and service delivery approaches, the dominant theories of digital government offered to date argue that closed government is entirely incompatible with the demands of governing in the digital age" (Clarke 2019: 11). As the personal computer era evolves into the mobile device era, such a contrast becomes evermore relevant to the inherent tensions facing the public sector (Roy 2013 and 2017). The creation of public value, in turn, becomes more networked, more open, and more

participative (Stoker 2006; O'Flynn 2007; Clarke et al. 2017; Fountain 2017; Margetts 2017; Pederson 2020).

Millard provides a thoughtful and encompassing perspectives of open governance and the recasting of public sector organization and action (Millard 2015). He articulates broad directions for systemic openness as an underlying paradigm for transformational digital government (Millard 2015). Such an orientation is at least partially reflected in more contemporary forms of open government – as well as the Open Government Partnership (OGP) internationally (Francoli 2014 and 2015; Francoli and Clarke 2014). Millard's directions are also closely aligned with many prescriptive suggestions put forth by Clarke in her (pre-COVID-19) undertaking. For example, she seeks "digital era open government" and calls for Ministerial commitments to be more horizontal and networked accountability and a more outward public service that "must go to platforms and forums where stakeholders and citizens are already congregating and where nongovernmental actors are the dominant players setting the terms of the conversation" (Clarke 2019: 206). Yet, a key and over-arching lesson from her investigation is that inertia rooted in TPA acts as a major constraint on systemic reform (ibid.).

Pandemic response and digital government since COVID-19

At the time of writing, two intertwined impacts of COVID-19 stand out for consideration with respect to digitization and its impacts on public sector: i) pandemic support-assistance and digital-service channels; and ii) health-related surveillance and pandemic-tracking mobile phone apps designed for such a purpose.[9]

With respect to pandemic supports for individuals and companies, a case can be made that the federal government's immediate efforts with digital delivery channels have thus far been a qualified success. Faced with the emergence of digital-by-default by necessity, unparalleled user demand, and a tremendous sense of urgent need, billions of dollars of assistance were fast-tracked and provided via online channels with minimal delays. Such performance contrasts with many federal government digital and technological system mishaps in recent years (including concerns conveyed by the Auditor General about the readiness of digital service channels) as well as the March 2020 technical struggles of the US federal government in their support for small businesses. Invariably, this Canadian "success" is tempered by numerous instances of individuals facing delays or processing challenges, and the over-burdening of call centre operations as a result (widely reported upon by media sources through March and April).

Two broad implications of such efforts stand out: first, concerns around the absence of sufficient oversight in terms of both digital-service performance

and overarching policy and financing decisions (a key facet of Parliamentary debate in recent months); and second, a potential reversion to centralized digital service design at the expense of service innovation predicated on user engagement and collaborative design. Other observers highlight the related risk of rushed delivery solutions rather than more thoughtful investments in underlying digital architectures (Miller 2020). Key questions going forward stem from such tensions, as well as the degree to which digital-by-default becomes a more accepted and utilized form of service interaction with the public sector across wider segments of society.

Mobile phone apps have played key roles in the more successful efforts of numerous countries to further pandemic tracking and tracing efforts, including early adopters such as Singapore and South Korea. The former's decision to release the underlying open source code for the app allowed other jurisdictions to follow suit, as Alberta (the first and only Canadian jurisdiction as of June 2020). In June 2020, Prime Minister Trudeau seemingly committed to a forthcoming pan-Canadian under development. Around that time, Apple and Alphabet (Google) collaborated in an unprecedented manner to design an app compatible with Apple and Android devices. Fuelled by privacy protection concerns and actors such as Privacy International, the German Government was even persuaded to abandon its own model. As one German official observed: "We need to have a discussion on how Silicon Valley is increasingly taking over the job of a nation state.… But we don't need to have it amid a pandemic" (Scott et al. 2020). This has heightened concerns about the implications of COVID-19 tracking and data-gathering capacities for citizens and fears that "digital surveillance tools will become permanent" (Momani 2020).

As Canadian governments decide whether and how to proceed with a pan-Canadian model of app-based tracing, the underlying constraints of traditional federalism present an additional variable. A central question is whether the pandemic crisis will spur more innovative and collaborative governance arrangements across federal, provincial and territorial levels – or whether traditional politics and administrative structures of Canadian federalism will impede such an effort. Although federalism can spur flexibility and variation (as it has across provinces and territories in many aspects of data-driven efforts in response to COVID-19), here it bears noting that the Liberal government has committed to a national model which arguably suggests a leading role on the part of the federal government.

An agenda for digital government and governance research in the pandemic era

The over-arching lesson from the preceding, preliminary review of the digital contours of the Government of Canada's COVID-19 response is a

familiar tension between traditionalism and transformation (Roy 2006 and 2008; Clarke 2019). Despite pressures for greater systemic openness and societal mobilization generally, and stemming from pandemic reactions and responses, COVID-19 may strengthen many aspects of the core functioning of Westminster democratic governance and traditional public administration, rather than spark more systemic openness and governance innovation, especially in the near term. Such a viewpoint is reinforced by the emerging fiscal realities across all governments in Canada that suggest austerity measures ahead. Such reinforcing of traditionalism does not negate the important digital efforts of recent years and, indeed, potential opportunities lie ahead, especially as governments have increasingly embraced more transformational principles pertaining to digital government and given the accelerated digital transformation of society at large in light of the pandemic (particularly the explosion of online commerce and remote working arrangements).

On the latter point, much depends on mobilizing civil society and academic and professional research communities and their ideas and resulting influences on governmental action and priorities. For example, calls for a National Data Architecture by the University of Waterloo's Centre for International Governance Innovation seem especially prescient at the moment, whereas the formation of the Canadian COVID-19 Accountability Group to publicly advocate for openness and oversight of pandemic response spending further reflects new elements of our collective pandemic governance systems that could emerge. This special journal issue devoted to COVID-19 is a further example of the potential importance of such contributions.

Four areas are especially ripe for investigation as part of a renewed research agenda linking public administration, the coronavirus pandemic, and digitalization. The thematic areas are:

1. the evolving and presumably shifting service delivery apparatus of the public sector, the extent to which digital channels grow in predominance relative to other channels, and the impacts of such a shift on service design and execution;
2. the emergence and effectiveness of more horizontal, networked and collaborative governance arrangements across governments (both within and across jurisdictions);
3. the changing contours of open government and whether systemic openness tied to the three dimensions of past federal Open Government Action Plans (information, data and dialogue) can be levers for better oversight and accountability of governmental actions and enablers of public-sector and societal innovation in responding to new pandemic challenges; and
4. understanding and critically assessing the expansion of data security and cyber-security challenges tied to the pandemic and their interplay with

a potentially fluid national security agenda (a theme excluded from this short article).

Running within and across these inter-related research themes is the emerging hypothesis from our discussion here: whether or not the pandemic will create conditions for a reversion to more traditional forms of public administration (more centralized, controlling and less open), posited as the most likely trajectory for what lies ahead; or, instead, whether new forms of more shared and networked governance models predicated on systemic openness can be forged. With respect to the latter, there is fertile intellectual groundwork from prior to the pandemic which envisioned digitally and openness-minded reforms (Clarke et al. 2017; Lindquist and Huse 2017; Roy 2019; Clarke 2019). One specific area meriting further attention is whether a reshaped public-sector ethos emerges from the pandemic (yes, this commentary suggests systemic constraints to such emergence), and whether more horizontal, outward and networked governance formations emerge (and, if indeed they do emerge, what sort of accountability mechanisms are formed and deployed to balance openness-laden innovation with inward pressures for control).

Conclusion

This article began by stating that COVID-19 is both an accelerator and potential disruptor of digital government. As the federal government faces rapidly growing program spending pressures and invariably the limits of its own actions, and as demands for digital infrastructure and digital literacy heighten across society at large, it is arguably imperative that the Government of Canada become more agile and innovative both internally and in concert with other government levels, other sectors and with the public at large. Yet given the propensity of crises to reinforce centralized leadership and governance control within the Westminster governance system, embracing this reorientation will be no small task and much will depend upon the evolution of political leadership and public expectations as the scope and impacts of COVID-19 become more fully apparent.

Notes

1 In contrast to the federal legislation, the BC emergency legislation does not provide for legislative scrutiny of the temporary suspension, override or replacement of existing statutes in an emergency which the BC Ombudsperson found contrary to the principles of good administration including transparency and accountability (2020: 35)

2 This does not mean that all countries implemented similar stimulus packages, nor that all agreed with Keynesian principles. For a detailed account of various national fiscal responses to the GFC see Wanna et al. (2015). On how neoliberal thinkers replied to the resurgence of Keynesianism, see Blyth (2013).

3 According to Doern et al. (2013), we now live in an age of perpetual budget crisis.
4 For a detailed account of the Canadian response to the GFC, see Good and Lindquist (2015).
5 Ontario Premier Wynne launched a three-year pilot project to study the feasibility of a UBI program, which was cancelled abruptly by the Ford government.
6 See Tellier (2005) as well as several studies published in the annual publication *How Ottawa Spends*.
7 An excellent comparative analysis is provided by the Chaire en fiscalité et finances publiques, Université de Sherbrooke, available here (in French): https://cffp.recherche.usherbrooke.ca/outils-ressources/outil-de-comparaison-mesures-covid19/.
8 See, for instance, the work of Martin et al. (2009), Leroy (2011) and Mumford (2019). In Canada, fiscal sociology has started to be investigated by historians (see Heaman 2017; Tillotson 2017).
9 A third set of factors is also addressed in an expanded version of this article currently under review, namely a widened set of digitally-rooted national security threats at least partially intertwined with the pandemic.

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