

A Fragile State: Federal Public Administration in the Twentieth Century

Chapter Summary

The Canadian government's role in the state has evolved over the past century. Influenced by a variety of economic, financial, social and cultural matters, the role of the federal government in Canada has been significantly altered. The development of the role was challenged by jurisdictional control, local conditions, and political and economic sovereignty.

The development and evolution of the federal state is examined in four time periods in this chapter. The first time period, identified as the railway state, examined the aspect of territorial consolidation from 1900 to 1928. In this time period, Canada completed its national railway and water transportation services and also initiated the federal public service, which expanded to meet the needs of the growing number of immigrants coming to Canada. The second era of crisis and drift, from 1929 to 1945, encompassed the Great Depression and World War II. During this time, the Canadian government did not expand but instead leveraged financial payments to the provinces to support relief projects. The third stage, building the new social order from 1946 to 1973 heralded in a new time of prosperity and a larger role for the federal government. Due to economic success during the war, a new role for government was seen as an obvious response to the demand for social and economic programs.

The fourth time period, from 1974 to 1999, is identified as one of instability and retrenchment, that represented declining support of the federal government's role in the Canadian economy. As the author notes, this stage represented the beginning of the federal government selling off or privatizing many formerly owned companies, such as Air Canada in 1989 and the Canadian National Railway in 1995. With the new century, the federal government began to move away from this period of retrenchment. The federal government is now moving into what the author advocates and also borrows from Porter (1990, 1991) to suggest that this era represents a new

concept of competitiveness within the international trading system for Canada. This new paradigm for government encourages lowering trade barriers, promoting overseas trade, and improving the capacity of workers and firms to innovate and adapt to the demands of the global marketplace.

Annotated Weblinks

- 1) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/federalism/>

The term “federalism” as defined by Stanford’s encyclopedia of philosophy offers some philosophical and theoretical context to the term federalism, which relates to Canada’s federal public administration.

- 2) <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/railway-history/>

The “railway state” in Canada is explored through its importance to the development of Canada and the economic impact it had on Canada’s economy and nationalism.

- 3) <https://bdp.parl.ca/content/lop/ResearchPublications/prb0545-e.html>

This report by the Library of Parliament on federal commercialization in Canada outlines the benefits and risks of privatization. It also provides an appendix of federal government privatization initiatives from 1985 to 2004.