

BOOK REVIEWS

Alex Marland. *Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-77483-203-8

Brand Command by Alex Marland was the 2016 winner of the Donner Prize for the best book on public policy by a Canadian, a prestigious, high-profile award accompanied by a significant cash prize. Reviewing a book identified by an eminent selection jury as the best in its category has its own particular rewards and challenges. You already know the book is of a very high quality and well worth the time and effort required to review it, but at the same time you must set aside this knowledge in order to make your own unbiased assessment.

After detailing the centralization of communications in government and politics, *Brand Command* introduces the concepts of political marketing and branding. Subsequent chapters deal with the ramifications of changes in communications technology, types of brands that exist in the public sector, the political marketing practices of political parties, and the communications functions of central agencies and communications actors within the government. The key chapters (as identified by Marland himself, who suggests that readers in a rush jump to “the juicy bits” in Chapter 9) deal with the politicization of the government of Canada through the fusion of political priorities and public administration. In the book’s final chapter, Marland defends branding in a response to its critics (the good), but then goes on to highlight its negative aspects for democracy (the bad and the ugly). He follows this with his own recommendations for change to protect parliamentary democracy from the

more negative, corrosive aspects of branding (including that all-time favourite of Canadian political scientists, Senate reform).

Brands, as defined by Marland, “are complex concepts comprised of a multifaceted combination of tangibles, such as a logo, and intangibles, such as emotional attachments” (36). Effectively communicating a brand requires that all words and visuals be interconnected and mutually reinforcing. *Branding* involves the repetition of the same message over and over again in a manner to favourably differentiate it from competing brands (37). *Brand Command* is first and foremost a book about message control in government, as its subtitle suggests. Marland has undertaken a thorough investigation, analysis, and assessment of the ways and means by which control over government communications has been centralized and subordinated to political consideration and calculation. Enormous effort is now expended on designing, screening, and vetting what government in all its guises “says” to the public, either through the professional filter of the mass media or directly (and increasingly) via social media. The focus of *Brand Command* is on how political and government information is communicated, how it is designed or packaged for consumption by a targeted audience, how the process of releasing information for popular consumption is managed, and last, but certainly not least, by whom. Who are the key actors and strategists who have taken control over the flow and content of government and political party communications?

The “how” part of all this refers primarily to the changing technological environment, in other words, to the medium of communication. Marland — following in the path blazed by the media and communications guru Marshall McLuhan — is concerned with the ways in which the “how” (the medium through which the message is delivered) shapes not only the “what” (the substance of the message), but also the “who” (the actors who control and manage the communication process). This is the essence of the meaning of McLuhan’s adage that “the medium is the message” and the core of his technological determinist point of view, a theoretical stance that exerts a strong influence over the approach adopted by Marland in *Brand Command*.

McLuhan, like Harold Innis before him, was concerned with changes in human culture writ large, global in scope and millennial in time frame. He conveyed his insights on changes in human communication using language and images that were very often abstract in the extreme and therefore unapproachable (if not unfathomable) for most people. As a political scientist interested in governance and electoral politics in the Canadian context, Marland needed to merge the technological determinism of abstract communication theory with the theoretical insights and empirical observations of those who study the changing character of governance and public policy. His findings confirm the pervasiveness within the upper reaches of government of the managerial philosophy and practices associated with New Public Management (NPM), such as the “whole of government” approach to policy implementation. More particularly, he identifies the influence of the New Political Governance (NPG) ideas of Peter Aucoin — who suggests that the emphasis in public administration is to ensure political control in all areas of government — and the studies of Donald Savoie, who has chronicled the politicization of the professional public service and the growing concentration of power at the centre of Canadian government.

Marland, in *Brand Command*, seeks to complement and extend the work of these aforementioned scholars, and to make his own contribution to theory-building. He does this by advancing our understanding of the internal workings of government where bureaucratized governance processes mesh with the partisan political considerations and imperatives of the government of the day: the often unattractive, theory-defying, sausage-making aspect of policy-making. This is the territory of David Easton’s famous “black box” in systems theory, the domain of “back office functions” and “backroom manipulation,” or what systems theory referred to as “withinputs” in the political process. Unlike the more readily observable “inputs” from the external political environment, withinputs are largely obscured from the view of political scientists and the general public alike, but important nonetheless in determining system “outputs,” whether in the form of public

policies or the “symbolic output” of government communications that are crucial to shaping public perceptions of the government of the day or, more broadly, to the latent function of maintaining system legitimacy.

Marland embeds his arguments in a rich empirical foundation created by an extensive research effort on his part and by generous access to insider sources such as the Thomas E. Flanagan Fonds, providing rare insight into the day-to-day activities, concerns, and decision-making of political elites. What emerges is evidence of two broad influences or factors that explain the growing influence and importance of “brand command” in politics during the recent period covered by Marland’s study. The first are long term and general in their application and effects, regardless of the party in power. These relate to changes to the media environment and communication technology, to the executive dominance bias within Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, and to the gradual evolution of governance and managerial techniques. The second major factor identified in *Brand Command* was tied to the influence of a particular set of political actors, motivated by an explicit ideological mission and partisan considerations. This was the Harper Conservative government, in power for nine years (2006–15) and the primary case study at the core of the book. This creates a certain theoretical tension that calls out for resolution: is the growing importance of brand inevitable and systemic, something that must be pursued henceforth by all governments and political parties, regardless of partisan stripe or ideological inclination? Or was it a feature specific to the Harper government, tied to personality, leadership style, and political ideology?

This question takes on particular relevance with the change in government in 2015 resulting in a dramatically different leadership style and personality occupying the Office of the Prime Minister. Marland’s answer is that Justin Trudeau and the Liberals are into brand command, too; that it is not just a Harper phenomenon. He writes that “centralization is fuelled by shrewd political actors interacting with the forces of communications technology,” and that “it is

inevitable that prime ministers will demand message consistency from their agents” (xv). Further, “All prime ministers, even those vowing change when they assume office, will surely introduce a variation of this pan-governmental coordination to ensure that departments are communicating only what is authorized by the centre and are managing the message” (295). This is determined not only by current media technologies, but also by institutional arrangements within the government of Canada, “which ensure that this approach to governing prevails no matter who the prime minister is, subject to some variation” (354). In his final paragraph, Marland opines that “Branding is an unstoppable force in politics and government,” one that “creates some serious problems for Canadian democracy” (379).

Alex Marland has written a tour de force on message control in government and party communications. Its comprehensiveness and attention to detail are impressive if rather daunting to the average reader. Perhaps recognizing this, Marland cautions readers to prioritize broad theory and institutional processes over personalities, events, and minutiae (25). Presenting a wealth of new data and supported by 110 pages of appendices, notes, and references, the depth and quality of academic scholarship are self-evident. Beyond this worthy contribution to his field of study, Marland also manages to interweave a synthesis of theoretical perspectives while offering his own original insights into modern government communications and political marketing. In all likelihood, *Brand Command* will become a standard reference work for those who study this increasingly important aspect of politics and public policy.

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