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Responding to the "New Public": The arrival of strategic communications and managed participation in Alberta

Abstract: This article examines the rise of more strategic, professional and politically sensitive communications in the Government of Alberta and argues that citizen demands for transparency and participation are also reasons for the increased importance of strategic government communications. Accommodating these demands in the context of traditional representative democracy requires politically sensitive staff who can manage processes without jeopardizing the government's re-election or policy agenda. This article draws on analyses of government documents, interviews and the archives of premiers Getty and Klein.

Sommaire : Cet article examine l'essor de communications plus stratégiques, plus professionnelles et plus sensibles à la réalité politique au sein du gouvernement de l'Alberta et fait valoir que les exigences des citoyens en matière de transparence et de participation expliquent également l'importance accrue de la communication gouvernementale stratégique. Pour tenir compte de ces exigences dans le contexte de la démocratie représentative traditionnelle, le personnel doit être sensible aux questions politiques et être en mesure de gérer les processus sans nuire à la réélection du gouvernement ou à son programme politique. Cet article se fonde sur des analyses de documents du budget, des interviews et des archives des Premiers ministres Getty et Klein.

In 1992, Premier Klein made wide-ranging reforms to the government of Alberta's communications function. While most scholars and journalists have primarily examined this reform in terms of his government's capacity to influence public opinion, the following analysis highlights an under-examined explanation for why the Klein government made this change in the first place. In short, this article argues that the reforms were under discussion well before Klein became premier and were motivated primarily because of the public's demand for increased transparency and participation in politics and policy-making. Klein's government catered to this demand, but his reforms ensured that concessions in this field never

jeopardized his government's policy agenda or re-election. The result was a politics dominated by managed participation.

This article first puts forward a theoretical framework that criticizes the capacity of new forms of government communication to represent citizen preferences. Then it describes the structure of government communications in Alberta up to 1993, emphasizing the unique centralization of government communications combined with a commitment to a public service, as opposed to a political, mandate. Third, it identifies how demands for transparency and participation in decision-making became a salient political issue during the Getty government. Lastly, it brings forward documentary evidence to show how the Klein government nominally responded to those demands and required a reformed role and structure for government communications, turning its public service communications agency into a much more influential and politically sensitive government communications agency. While there were other forces at work in Alberta that led to these reforms, this article examines one under-examined causal path.

The importance of the Alberta case

The particular case of Alberta is important for three reasons. First, Alberta has served as a model for several other jurisdictions, in part because provincial governments envied the Progressive Conservatives' record of uninterrupted rule since 1971 (Bernier 2001). British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario have all examined Alberta's communications practices at different points in time and adopted various aspects (Weppler, Bannister, and Cohen 1982; BC Communications 1997; Peat Marwick Stevenson and Kellogg and Insight Public Relations, Inc. 1993). Understanding the political and social forces that led to changes in Alberta's practices, contributes to our understanding of the evolution of government communications in other provincial governments.

Second, this same electoral record has generated more scrutiny from scholars than other Canadian provincial and federal governments (Epp 1984; Taft 1997; Sampert 2005). However, this literature has some important limitations. For example, the budget of the Public Affairs Bureau (PAB) is regularly cited as evidence of its influence. Epp (1984) criticized the size of the PAB, noting its $8.4 million budget and 200 employees. Much later, Sampert noted that the budget had increased from $8.6 million (presumably in 1999 dollars) in 1998–1999 to $13 million in 2003 (presumably in 2003 dollars). Her implication is that with these increased resources, the Klein government was able to do a better job influencing media coverage and public opinion. However, the comprehensive record of the PAB budget under Premier Klein (see Figure 1) shows that Sampert's two years of comparison are misleading. Klein substantially reduced spending on the PAB in the first half of his premiership before it began to rise again. This

Figure 1. *The budget of the Public Affairs Bureau adjusted for inflation ($2006) during recent premierships*
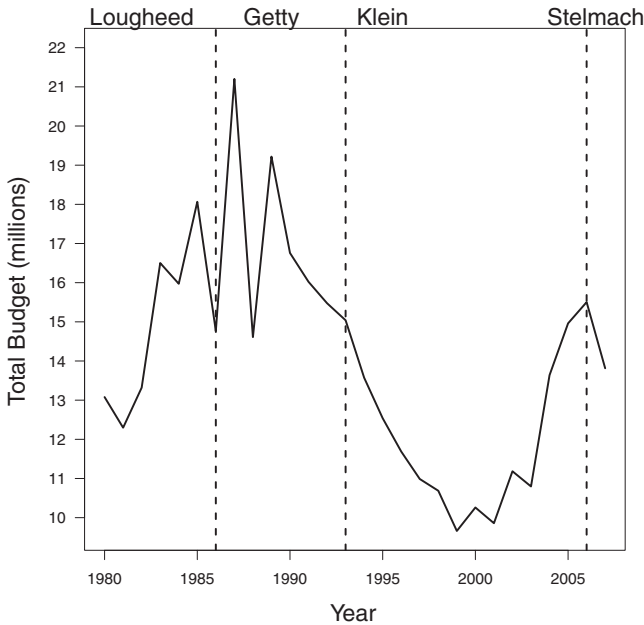
suggests it should have been far more influential under Lougheed than under Klein. But this means that much of the commentary regarding government communications under Premier Klein is misplaced or perhaps global financial budgets for communications organizations are poor indicators of efficacy.

Second, much of the literature is long on polemics but short on evidence. For example, Taft (1997) makes several grandiose claims, including the following, referring to the premier's decision to make the PAB accountable to the premier's office. "With this stroke, he became head of a vast network that reached throughout the public service, but was parallel to it. This increases the ability of his office to control the government and influence the media and the public" (79). But there is no evidence to support any claims regarding the PAB. Elsewhere, Epp (1984) mistakenly quoted a report by the Government of Manitoba as describing the PAB as being "one of the strongest communications organizations in North America." In fact, the report only examined an internship program the PAB established which, in the eyes of the reports' authors, would – *in future* – make the organization one of the strongest in North America (Weppler, Bannister, and Cohen 1982: 85).

Third, Alberta is a crucial case in this relationship because it does have an institutional structure unique among Canadian provinces. Bernier noted that it was among the first to centralize all communications staff across departments in a central organization that then seconded staff to line departments (2001: 228).[1] Alberta's government communications have been a model for other provincial governments, governed by a unique institutional structure, and subjected to scholarly scrutiny with important limitations.

Theorizing the problem of strategic communications in Canada

Strategic, professional communications have become more and more integral to public administration in Canada (Marland, Giasson, and Lees-Marshment 2012). Governments routinely advertise, conduct public opinion polls, focus groups and integrate these activities into policy development, implementation and administration (Davis 2003). Some scholars emphasize changes in political economy to account for this, arguing that the more complicated and difficult politics of austerity and retrenchment require more aggressive intervention in the public space by governments to win support for unpopular policies (Greenberg 2004; Schmidt 2002; Cox 2001). Others emphasize social changes such as the changing relationship between political parties and their electorates (Panebianco 1988; Mancini 1999). Another explanation is the increasing importance of persuasion as another tool to bring about changes in citizen behaviour (Howlett 2009).

> *Thus, there are a variety of perspectives from which to study the evolution of government communications. Here it is argued that the rise of professional, strategic communications at the heart of Canadian governments is, in part, a response to demands by citizens for transparency and participation in policy-making*

Kozolanka (2006) examines the rise of strategic communications in Canada and emphasizes a mix of forces, including shifts in the policy-making environment, media systems and political culture. She argues that, as Canada's public service was successively stripped of its policy capacity, private sector and quasi-public sector organizations gained prominence, bringing the styles of private sector management, including heavy reliance on promotion, publicity and strategic communications. Moreover, as the news cycle has expanded to include 24-hour channels, the demand for sources has expanded, filled by staff with specific and professional media skills (347). Lastly, she argues that Canadian political culture has shifted

away from "brokerage" politics in Canada to ongoing pursuit of temporary strategic alignments, requiring a permanent campaign by governments (348).

Thus, there are a variety of perspectives from which to study the evolution of government communications. Here it is argued that the rise of professional, strategic communications at the heart of Canadian governments is, in part, a response to demands by citizens for transparency and participation in policy-making. Accommodating these demands creates tensions at the heart of representative government that must be managed by professionals. Paradoxically, this contributes to careful management of new forms of participation and transparency. To make this case, the following draws on theoretical insights on the rise of new of forms of political and government communications in the field of public administration. Leon Mayhew identifies the rise of the "New Public," a public space distinct from earlier, democratic visions of the public as a forum of informed citizens:

In the New Public, professional specialists dominate communications. The techniques employed by these specialists are rooted in commercial promotion, but beginning in the 1950s, rationalized techniques of persuasion born of advertising, market research, and public relations were systematically applied to political communication. As this movement took flight in the 1970s and exploded in the 1980s and 1990s, political consultants, media specialists, public opinion pollsters, professional grassroots organizers, specialized lobbyists, focus group organizers, specialists in issue research, and demographic researchers burgeoned in numbers and established increasingly specialized roles (Mayhew 1997: 1).[2]

Mayhew argues that attempts to democratize decision-making procedures paradoxically contribute to the rise of the unstable forum of the New Public. "The electoral reforms of the progressive movement, including the direct primary, were directed against the party bosses. Reforms were designed to promote democratic aims, but they helped undermine political parties and thus contributed to creating the vacuum that was ultimately filled by political consultants" (189).

This state of affairs is concerning for three reasons. First, it demonstrates how casual and common commitments by politicians to increase transparency and participation are often undermined by the increasing importance of politically sensitive strategic communications staff. Second, attempts to address political issues with consultation can replace legitimate political conflict between representatives and political parties. Underhill (1955) noted that the press and political parties are key institutions linking citizens and the state in Canada. There are important disadvantages to pushing political issues out of the realm of party politics and settling them by various forms of citizen participation and consultation. Citizens may actually have less control over groups representing them in consultative process than elected representatives. Moreover, they may be doomed to fail

because meaningful consultations often assume shared values and ends. But these are precisely what are contested in electoral politics.

Lastly, Mayhew argues that under the conditions of the New Public, there is an inflation of influence, leading to a serious social instability. He conceives of influence in a mass society as a medium, much like money. Political leaders in mass society use tokens of arguments – slogans and symbols – to persuade the public. For this persuasion to work, however, participants must be confident the tokens exchanged (the bits of rhetoric that make up the persuasion in the mass public) can be "cashed in" for something of real value (that is, substantive positions). But because the communications practices of the New Public – advertising, public opinion polling, focus groups – are by design *difficult* to cash in, the tokens become worth less and less. There is an inflation of influence, and the public can become less confident the bits of persuasion making up the political world are worth anything. The system becomes unstable and, ironically, harder for citizens to control. These concerns are reflected in the following analysis of Alberta's government communications and the reforms made by Premier Klein.

The Public Affairs Bureau in Alberta

Alberta is unique in that it centralized the communications function in a central body in 1973 (the Public Affairs Bureau, or PAB) to provide greater professionalism, efficiency and quality in government communications (Wood 1971, 1985). However, it has not always been popular within the government. Three distinct but related aspects have been particularly controversial, all of which Premier Klein tried to address in 1992: whether the PAB should play a public service or political role; its reporting structure; and the relationship between ministers, deputy ministers and departmental directors of communication.

In his biography of Peter Lougheed, David Wood, the first Managing Director of the PAB, emphasized the public service and administrative character was originally envisioned as follows:

The concept of the Bureau of Public Affairs was fairly simple: the best possible people would be hired (curtailed only by the salary schedules we could establish through the Public Service Commission), and these people would be assigned to the various departments. They would be responsible to the department for providing a satisfactory communication service and to the bureau for professional performance and development. The bureau would also centralize and rationalize printing and graphic services; would provide audio-visual controls, and try to prevent the proliferation of studios, duplicating machines, artists, cameras, projectors, and all such paraphernalia and people (Wood 1985: 85).

These two functions – a technical function dedicated to preventing inefficiencies and a human resources function for hiring, overseeing and seconding communications staff to individual departments – formed the

core of the PAB's work and were reflected in its structure.[3] Reflecting the initial public service character Lougheed and Wood endeavored to create, the PAB's budget until 1992 was overwhelmingly dedicated to the former function (see Figure 1).

The public service character of the early PAB is also indirectly evidenced by the acknowledgement of complaints within the government. A major report to Premier Getty, by Frank Calder, a Managing Director of the PAB and a former Lougheed aide, noted:

> For many Ministers, the Bureau has stood in the way of more political promotion, and more explicit selling of government programs. This confrontation, if you like, has not been a case of the Bureau vs. the political level, or the Bureau showing disrespect for the political level, even if some Ministers have seen it that way. Over the years, significant players at the political level have agreed with the premise that communications should be restrained and highly selective in selling the government (Calder 1986: 64).

Further, a party activist wrote to Premier Getty in the wake of the 1989 election disaster that, "Although the Bureau has, in the past, seen itself as 'non-political', I think it is time to re-examine its role in light of our current problems with the media" (memo, author unknown 1989).

The structure of government communications that Premier Klein inherited did not provide the political sensitivity or internal influence necessary to respond to citizen demands for participation and transparency in a way that increased his government's prospects for electoral success

Pressures to politicize the PAB are also reflected in the difficulty in finding a reporting structure that has been able to balance the competing demands for internal efficacy, capacity for creative work and insulation from political pressures. In the mid-1970s, there were concerns about politicizing government communications. To prevent this, the PAB became a division with the department of Government Services. However, staff rebelled against this arrangement because it constricted their capacity to work autonomously and creatively (Weppler, Bannister, and Cohen 1982: 85; Wood 1977: 2). Thus, the PAB was made its own agency, outside the hierarchy of Government Services, but reporting first to that minister then later to the deputy premier. While this accorded a degree of autonomy, it also meant that when Lougheed and the Managing Director of the day (a close associate) left government, the strong personal link between the PAB and the premier's office was severed and it lost influence (Bateman 1989: 5; Alberta Executive Council. Office of the Premier. 1991b: 1). At one point, the Minister of Public Works – a minister known for his ambition –

specifically requested that he be relieved of the portfolio in exchange for responsibility for gaming and casinos (Kowalski 1990).

Lastly, the most important innovation the PAB contributed – the hiring, supervising and seconding of staff to individual departments – was controversial since its inception. While the hiring arrangement for departmental communications staff allowed for uniform and high standards in hiring, it also annoyed deputy ministers, who resented having communications staff they could not control, as well as ministers, who felt communications staff were not responsive to their demands (Bateman 1989: 5; Calder 1986: 85).

The structure of government communications that Premier Klein inherited did not provide the political sensitivity or internal influence necessary to respond to citizen demands for participation and transparency in a way that increased his government's prospects for electoral success. When Klein took office in 1992, he transformed the relationship between communications staff, ministers, departments and the Premier's Office, making the Public Affairs Bureau much more influential inside government by making it accountable to the premier for the first time in its history.

Demands for participation and transparency in Alberta

The spread of education and affluence is the usual explanation for the increase in demands for participation in decision-making (Dalton 2008). Citizens that have a greater capacity to navigate complex political issues and the resources to do so, demand just that. While these processes have doubtlessly contributed to the same demands in Alberta – the province's population is among the most affluent and educated in Canada – the political context is equally important. This section considers three contextual factors that contributed to widespread demands for transparency and participation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which led the Klein government to consider reforming its communications practices.

The first contextual factor was the deteriorating economy. When Don Getty became premier in 1985, the Progressive Conservatives had been in power 14 years with virtually no legislative opposition. When global oil prices collapsed in 1986, the provincial government was left with high levels of public expenditures and large deficits and the Progressive Conservatives were left practicing the politics of retrenchment: opposition parties gained strength (see Table 1), and public opinion turned against a government first elected in 1971.

Second, the decline of the oil and gas industries was followed by a series of spectacular business failures including a locally owned bank and a cell phone manufacturing company (Novatel) supported with a provincial loan

Table 1. *Election Results (Seats) in Alberta General Elections 1986–1993*

Year	Liberals	New Democratic Party	Progressive Conservatives	Other
1982	0	2	75	2
1986	4	16	61	2
1989	8	16	59	–
1993	32	0	51	–

Source: Alberta. Chief Electoral Officer 2012.

guarantee. When Novatel went bankrupt in 1991, taxpayers were left with more than $500 million in liabilities. The net effect of these business failures was to contribute to demands by the public and the media for freedom of information legislation. One newspaper columnist made the link to government secrecy as follows: "NovaTel could yet bring one benefit: it might finally kill the absurd government secrecy that leads to so many disasters in Alberta" (Braid 1992).

Lastly, Getty's government faced the challenge of trying to address the downturn in economic activity as public concerns about protecting the environment increased. Alberta's environmental legislation was forged in the 1970s, and the process for approving major industrial developments was poorly suited to handle the new and complex environmental politics. More so than distributional politics, environmentalism brings demands for citizen participation in decision-making, partly because many in environmental movements often see hierarchy and bureaucracy as the source of environmental problems. Moreover, the questions at stake in environmental debates cannot simply be solved with science and technocrats, but often require deference to citizen values (see Eckersley 1992).

The demands for participation were central to environmental controversies over large-scale forestry projects. In 1988, the government wanted to approve a pulp and paper mill proposed by Alberta-Pacific (ALPAC) in Northern Alberta. Local First Nations and environmental groups organized substantial opposition. According to Pratt and Urquhart, the public opposition signaled new concerns about industrialization and economic diversification and crystallized public concerns for participation in decision-making. "The experience of ALPAC forced a reluctant provincial government to change the regulatory framework for natural resource projects in order to avert further controversies. ALPAC changed Alberta's politics" (1994: 104). The increasing demands for participation and transparency in Alberta can be seen in a parallel increase in anti-party sentiment in Alberta through the 1980s, evident in Figure 3.

The highest levels of the Getty and Klein governments were aware of these trends and took these factors into consideration when they

deliberated about reforming government communications. As early as 1989, the Public Affairs Bureau noted the increasingly "cynical" public in a proposal for a communications campaign on the environment (Kowalski 1989: 2). In 1991, an internal communications paper called on the government to "read the populist mood" (memo, author unknown 1991: 10). In November 1991, the cabinet was presented with the results of an omnibus public opinion survey showing how vulnerable the government was on this issue. One question asked respondents whether the government should dedicate more, less or the same emphasis to a series of issues. "Consulting with Albertans" received the greatest proportion of "more emphasis" responses at 84% (Heffring and Adams 1991a: 14). Similarly, 87% of respondents agreed with the statement that "ordinary people should be more involved in decision-making" (16). In the summary, ministers were advised that "consultation, protection and diversification were the key issues that Albertans need more emphasis by government: consultation means more 'real listening' [sic] and more representation of the 'ordinary' [sic] person's viewpoint" (Heffring and Adams 1991b: 1).

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In response, Getty set up four cabinet committees, one directly focused on government communications, participation and transparency. It was supposed to examine government communications as a whole and "develop more effective communications policies and mechanisms in line with the findings of the omnibus survey [referenced earlier], review the Public Affairs Bureau, polling, technology, ACCESS and CKUA, issue management, plebiscites and referenda" (Mellon 1991). By including the government's communications agency, public opinion research as well as plebiscites and referenda, the committee's mandate reveals how the Getty government linked strategic communications and citizen participation.

The government accepted three of the committee's recommendations. First, the committee reconsidered the relationship between directors of communication and ministers a thorny issue since the PAB's inception. The task force recommended maintaining that practice, augmenting it by instituting "a two-tiered manager system (Director and Assistant Director) in departments. The directors' responsibilities would be broadened to provide a more responsive role to ministers' needs. Assistant directors

would be dedicated to the management of departmental communications" (Alberta Executive Council. Office of the Premier. 1991b: 3). Second, it recommended shedding the PAB's regulatory, administrative and technical duties, transforming it into more of a strategic organization capable of "strategic communications planning and the creative delivery of Government's message to the people of Alberta" (Alberta Executive Council. Office of the Premier. 1991b: 1). The PAB was not renamed, but its mandate was modified to emphasize strategic communications support at the expense of technical and administrative support (see Figure 2). Lastly, the report recommended increasing the amount of public opinion research undertaken by central agencies, which the government adopted.

   This committee laid the groundwork for Premier Klein's reforms. Many members would play key roles in his government. Klein was on the committee as were Jim Dinning (his subsequent Treasurer), Peter Elzinga (his Minister of Economic Development, Deputy Premier, Chief of Staff and Executive Director of the Progressive Conservative Party), and one of Getty's press secretaries (later the director of Klein's Calgary office). When Premier Klein took office, the changes he made to Alberta's government communications had been circulating at the highest levels of political staff, public service and the cabinet since 1989, and these crystallized into a formal set of recommendations before Premier Getty resigned in September 1992. At each stage of internal discussion about reforming

Figure 2. *This shows the increasing importance given strategic, political communications (Communications Planning) within the PAB compared to administrative, technical communications support (Communications Services), 1980–2006*
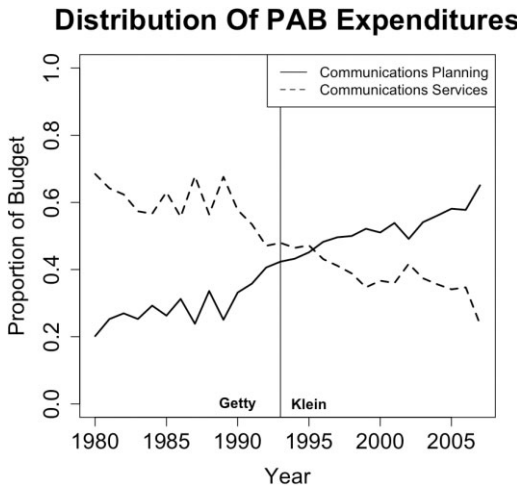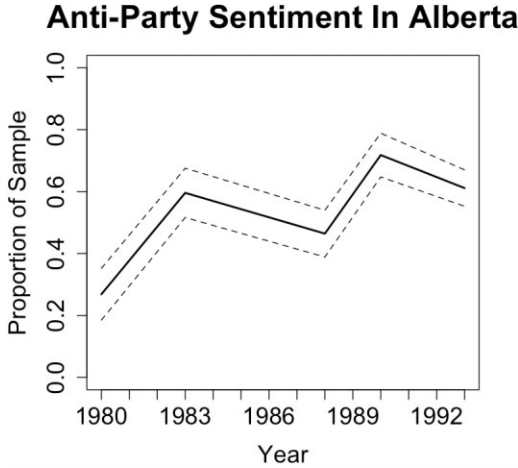

Distribution Of PAB Expenditures

Figure 3. *The percentage of respondents disagreeing with the statement that "Over the years, political parties have generally tried to look after the best interests of all Canadians, not just the interests of those who voted for them," (Clarke and Kornberg 1994)*

Anti-Party Sentiment In Alberta

the government's communications practices, discussions were punctuated with observations of and concerns about citizen alienation from the decision-making process, mistrust of political parties, and demands for participation and transparency.

Strategic communications under Premier Ralph Klein

The Klein reforms increased centralized public opinion research and linked it more closely with policy development, made public consultation processes more important in the policy-making process, made politicians and bureaucrats more available to the news media, and finally, introduced freedom of information legislation. This section considers how the Klein government managed and used the strategic communications function flowing from the reforms.

Public opinion research

Although the Getty government commissioned large amounts of public opinion research (one internal government report estimated the annual expenditures at approximately $1 million), these reports were the property of individual departments, not the Public Affairs Bureau and not the Office of the Premier (Alberta Executive Council. Office of the Premier. 1991a: 1).

Under the Klein government, public opinion research was centralized and linked with policy-making. A former communications official with the BC government who studied Klein's government said, "we found a much higher integration of polling, message development and policy development from a communications perspective than we had historically done in BC. They were constantly doing in-depth polling about a whole set of issues and trying to anticipate issues."

Public engagement

The Klein government linked this participation with decision-making. It substantially increased the frequency and scale of public consultations, in keeping with Klein's rhetorical commitments to participation. For example, prior to the landmark 1994 budget, in its drive to reduce public expenditures by 20%, the provincial government convened a day-long summit of civil society representatives to discuss options. Following the 1997 provincial election and with the deficit eliminated, the Klein government replicated the process with a "Growth Summit", convening representatives to chart a way for the government to spend the imminent budget surpluses. Other examples included a Gambling Summit, a Children's Summit and a Health Summit. Moreover, in preparation for the 1996, 1998 and 2000 budgets, the provincial government distributed household surveys, asking voters to send their priorities for spending budget surpluses, be they debt reduction, program spending or tax reduction (Alberta Treasury 2001).

Increased access

The government also made its ministers more accessible to the news media, reversing trends in the Getty government where access had been restricted, including constructing a physical wall around the Premier's Office. One print journalist familiar with the Getty and Klein governments noted, "It was much easier under Klein, at all levels, to talk to people." While access increased for all journalists, perhaps the signature reform was Klein's practice of holding daily press conferences following Question Period. Finally the new government acquiesced to long-standing opposition demands and the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* took effect in 1995.

Managing new challenges

In adopting these practices, the provincial government faced two major problems. First, it lacked a mechanism within the bureaucracy that could successfully implement these practices and exert influence. The Public Affairs Bureau historically reported to a secondary minister and was isolated from the two influential core cabinet committees of the Getty

government. The Managing Director of the PAB had warned about this situation in 1989 and again in 1991 (Bateman 1989; Alberta Executive Council. Office of the Premier. 1991b). Second, the government could not let these practices jeopardize its policy agenda or its re-election chances because many of the new practices they adopted carried substantial political risk. Introducing freedom of information legislation can result in embarrassing facts becoming public, making politicians more accessible to the media increases the likelihood of a mistake and controversy; in public consultations participants may make recommendations contrary to party, caucus or cabinet policy.

> *The public service communications function was essentially "politicized" by reducing the space that existed between the political staff and the professional public service*

The response was to transform the Public Affairs Bureau, making it more influential and attentive to political and strategic concerns. Making it accountable to the premier in 1994 gave it more internal clout. A BC government official who studied Alberta's model noted: "We found a highly centralized system where each communications professional at the head of the ministry communications reported directly to a central communications office that was under the control of the Premier's Office." Bernier has described this system as the most centralized and politicized system of government communication in Canada (Bernier 2001: 228). Moreover, the Klein government adopted two recommendations made by the 1991 cabinet task force on communications and participation. First, it gradually shed the administrative and technical aspects of the PAB's duties, strongly emphasizing strategic and policy tasks, (see Figure 2). This meant the PAB outsourced the purchasing of advertising space, ceased organizing trade show exhibits and closed its film and photography library (Alberta Public Affairs Bureau 1994–2006). Second, the Klein government transformed the role of departmental director of communications to be more attuned to strategic, rather than administrative, functions of government communications. One communications official described this shift as follows:

"They were looking more for strategic communications thinking rather than just implementation of standard communications practices, so rather than just expecting the communications group to do annual reports and news releases and pamphlets and brochures. They were expected to think strategically and give strategic advice in terms of not just communications directions, but policy directions not only for individual departments but for the government as a whole."

As a result, relations between directors of communications and ministers became much closer. The same official noted: "Because communications had such an integral role in the operation of departments in government, [directors of communications] developed a very close relationship with ministers just because there was more day-to-day contact. Often, there would be more day-to-day contact between the director and the minister then there would be between the minister and the deputy minister." The public service communications function was essentially "politicized" by reducing the space that existed between the political staff and the professional public service (Savoie 2003).

Table 2 corroborates this finding by tabulating the number of times in the Getty and Klein governments when a departmental director of communication moved departments with his or her minister ("ministerial moves") and the number of times a director of communication shifted departments without the minister ("departmental moves"). The greater frequency of ministers and departmental directors of communication shifting portfolios together strongly suggests that these civil servants and cabinet ministers had developed close working relationships. The combined effect of these internal structural changes was to give the Public Affairs Bureau much greater heft within the government and more sensitivity to the day-to-day political and even electoral concerns of the provincial government.

The changed role of the departmental directors of communication led to careful management of the new fora for participation and transparency. Rather than providing a mechanism to ascertain citizen preferences, which could then simply and naïvely inform government policy, these processes allowed the government to claim that the messy business of political decision-making had been avoided by a "dialogue" with Albertans, designed and managed by its new, influential, politically-sensitive communications agency. One observer described the 1994 budget summit as follows: "It [the budget roundtable] looked like an attempt to take the politics out of a basic political task – the allocation of public resources. If you follow through the logic of the round table you end up with a classic Alberta solution – a virtual one-party state; a belief in a broad Alberta consensus with little attention paid to understanding or accommodating different values and haphazard political engagement" (Lisac 1995: 89).

Table 2. *Relations Between Directors of Communication and Ministers 1986–2006*

	Getty	Klein
Departmental moves	18	12
Ministerial moves	0	18

Source: Alberta Public Affairs Bureau (1986–2006).

Later, when commenting on the household questionnaires distributed by the government, without regard for thorny issues such as self-selection bias, a document painted the results as unmediated expressions of public opinion: "Albertans are of one mind in assessing the options for a debt-free Alberta. Across the province, the results were remarkably uniform" (Alberta Treasury 2001).

Similarly, the government ensured that increased access to the news media did not result in negative coverage. By making the premier available on a daily basis when the Legislative Assembly was sitting, the government provided journalists with regular stories, easing their work by providing an "information subsidy" (Gandy 1982). One journalist recalled: "It meant that we had lots of copy, but it also meant that we didn't have lots of time to go looking under rocks." In addition to making the premier accessible, the government strategically leaked information to influence news coverage. By selectively leaking information to journalists, they simultaneously generated positive news stories and used the threat of withdrawing leaks as discipline. One journalist recalled: "They [the Premier's Office] would keep a close watch on what you were doing. You would get good leaks if things were going well and you wouldn't if they weren't."

The introduction of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* had a similar paradoxical impact. It strengthened the demand within government for political managers who could keep a close eye on the process of managing requests for information. For example, in June 2004 a journalist with the *Edmonton Journal* filed a request to see two years' worth of flight logs for the provincial government's fleet of aircraft. After an initial dispute over the required fees and after it became apparent that a provincial election was imminent, the journalist paid the fees, setting the statutory deadline on the release of the documents for the middle of the election campaign. But the documents were released three days after the general election, resulting in several news stories about the government's use of flights, including the fact that close party supporters were common passengers (Kleiss and Rusnell 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d).

These requests filed under freedom of information legislation were politically managed by officials in the government. First, there was political pressure from the senior ranks of Alberta Infrastructure to delay the release of the records as long as possible. On October 8th, 2004, an official responsible for the request within the relevant department wrote to her colleagues, insisting that the records should be released without delay. "We can't extend any further because the [Information] Commissioner knows that the records are ready, so resist any suggestion from the third floor that we do so."[4] Second, the department had instituted a policy requiring the

approval of the departmental director of communications and the Minister's Office, among others, before releasing information even though formal authority to do so had only been delegated to the deputy minister and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy coordinator (Alberta. Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner 2007: 16). Thus the minister's office and the departmental director of communications had a quasi-veto over the release of information under the legislation, without this having been properly mandated by regulation under the statute. Third, the department somehow released two versions of the same e-mail message while the request was processed. One version suggested that the department could only release the records *after* November 25th (three days after the general election); the other said the department was obligated to release the records *before* November 25th.[5] This episode illustrates the close relationship between politically sensitive communications staff within the government exerting influence over the freedom of information processes, introduced by the Klein government itself ostensibly to make the government more transparent and responsive.

Premier Klein's government wanted to address politically salient issues of transparency and citizen participation via a series of practices and policies: freedom of information legislation, increased public opinion research, public consultations and a more open media presence. Each measure required that the government reform its communications bureaucracy to be more politically sensitive and influential to manage the inherent contradictions that arise when representative governments increase citizen participation and transparency, which generate the potential for embarrassments, bad news and policies that clash with politicians' own desired courses of action. The result, however, was managed participation and political discourse heavily dominated by professional communications staff.

Klein's reforms and policy-making in Alberta

Under both Lougheed and Getty, Treasury Board and an agenda and priorities committee dominated decision-making. This worked under Lougheed in part because of a combination of happy financial circumstances, an engaged, strong premier and an external enemy in the form of the federal government which allowed the provincial government to paper over domestic cleavages. Those procedures began to break down in the 1980s because these conditions changed, including increasing demands for participation and transparency.

The changes brought about by Premier Klein to make government more transparent and responsive were not restricted to government communi-

cations, but part of a complete overhaul of internal decision-making. His government maintained only one cabinet committee and instead implemented a series of policy committees that combined both cabinet ministers and members of the government caucus. However, in the same way that the drive to use new forms of communications to make government more responsive can have the perverse and opposite effect, these administrative changes also reinforced the power of the inner cabinet of the agenda and priorities committee, because all other cabinet committees with any influence had been dissolved (Brownsey 2005: 223). One senior civil servant with the Getty government said the consequence of these changes was to "politicize the bureaucracy and bureaucratize the politicians."

> *However, the long debates and warnings raised inside the public service and the party about problems plaguing government communications suggest that Klein's reforms are not strictly attributable to his own initiative. There were discussions of problems and solutions in this field at the highest levels of the Alberta government, well before Klein became Premier. He and Love capitalized on them.*

The new, politicized, "post-institutionalized" decision-making processes fit Klein's personal style and that of his influential chief of staff, Rod Love. However, the long debates and warnings raised inside the public service and the party about problems plaguing government communications suggest that Klein's reforms are not strictly attributable to his own initiative. There were discussions of problems and solutions in this field at the highest levels of the Alberta government, well before Klein became Premier. He and Love capitalized on them.

Recent reforms by Premier Allison Redford, elected in 2012, suggest that many of the relationships identified persist and lend credence to the interpretation put forward here. Just months after winning a majority government – after a campaign in which she, like Premier Klein, made increased transparency a central plank – it was announced that new "press secretary" positions would be added to ministers' offices, to perform explicitly political tasks of responding to media reports, opposition allegations and advising ministers. They are to supplement the departmental directors of communication. The motivation for the change was to relieve the departmental staff of the awkward position they had been put in by the Klein government reforms, that is, of being public service staff but assigned to work in a political environment, close to each minister. "We found the (directors) are in a no-win situation. Their job isn't to be the spinmeister for

the minister, and yet when you're in elected office, it's all about politics"
(Liepert, quoted in Kleiss 2012).

In one sense, this reflects a return to a vision of government commu-
nications that would have found a home in the Lougheed government,
where there were distinct spaces for government and political communi-
cations. However, these recent reforms may continue the pattern of
managed participation identified above. These partisan staff are to be the
first point of contact for journalists for information. Moreover, many of the
staff press secretaries are drawn from the ranks of the public service, with
no provisions preventing their return to the public service. Lastly, the
premier's director of communication has recently adopted the practice of
the federal government, selecting which journalists will ask questions in
news conferences and in which order. Thus, on first glance, it appears that
Premier Redford's reforms reflect previous patterns: commitments to
increased openness and transparency ironically bring about greater adop-
tion of more professional and strategic forms of communication, limiting
the consequences of those commitments.

Conclusion

The role of strategic, professional communications has increased in con-
temporary public administration. In Alberta, the adoption of a politicized
and centralized communications structure was a response to demands by
the public for increased transparency and participation and decision-
making resulting in a type of managed participation. It was an exemplar
for other jurisdictions and a harbinger of a new era of strategic commu-
nications and managed participation. These developments raise questions
about the capacity for political marketing to reinvigorate contemporary
citizenship, as some claim it can (Lees-Marshment 2001).

Although the bulk of political communication research has dealt with
campaigns and elections, the question of government communications in
Canada is not going away as this activity lies at the interface of citizens
and the state; public administration and politics. Here it has been dem-
onstrated that this kind of sophisticated, strategic communications in
Canadian bureaucracies can exist as a perverse response to – and under-
mine – citizen demands for participation and transparency. Mayhew was
concerned that this situation would be ultimately unstable because of the
"inflation of influence." Because persuasion depends on the communica-
tor being seen as credible, the more governments resort to strategic
communications, the less credible they are seen, and the harder they have
to try to persuade citizens to go along some course of action. This is not
to say that citizen demands for participation and transparency are ille-
gitimate, but only to say that they are hard to achieve in a Westminster-
style representative democracy which gives such strong authority to the

executive. Since Klein's attempts to address these demands, turnout has plummeted monotonically from 60% in 1993 to 40% in 2008. It is fair to question whether the quality of citizen participation by government consultation, supervised by the Public Affairs Bureau, is superior to participation in elections.

The instability of the New Public is partially seen in the increase in turnout in 2012 in the wake of massive disaffection with the Progressive Conservatives, a formation of a brand new party, the Wildrose Alliance and a competitive election. However, one of the Wildrose Alliance's central promises threatens to repeat the inflation of influence, including a promise to: "throw open the doors of government and operate within a culture of accountability, not a culture of entitlement" (2012: 43).

There are important empirical questions that future research should try to address. Although the historical nature of this study allows for a detailed description of the causal effects of different mechanisms work, comparisons across space will generate more understanding of the causes, nature and consequences of changes to government communications in Canada. Glenn's (2014) article in this issue is an excellent example of this endeavor. The next generation of comparative studies, however, will require more precise specification of concepts and their measurements to inform more systematic analysis of this increasingly critical and central function in Canadian government.

Notes

1 The BC Government had a Public Affairs Bureau which was founded in the 1980s. However, it was only ever responsible for things such as tourism marketing. The NDP government created a politicized communications unit in the Department of Finance. However, in 2001 the Campbell government emulated the Alberta government, turning the PAB into a much more political organization, stripping every communications position out of the purview of the public service and making them political staff, appointed by Order-in-Council and making the PAB accountable to the premier (see Harnett 2002).

2 The concept of the "new public" attempts to capture new evolutions in the nature of the public sphere. Is completely distinct from "new public management" referring to new forms of implementing and administering public policies.

3 This division in two distinct internal units is reported in most annual reports (Alberta Public Affairs Bureau 1994–2006) and in the annual estimates approved where three appropriations have been requested: internal administration, communications planning and communications services

4 The "third floor" referred to the offices of the deputy minister and the director of communications.

5 While the matter was referred to Alberta Justice and a special prosecutor and was never conclusively settled, it is hard to escape the conclusion that someone in the department released a modified version of an e-mail to create the impression that the accountable officials within the department believed it was not authorized to release information before November 25th, when in fact those officials had been insisting on precisely the opposite.

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