ABSTRACT

This paper examines the recruitment, characteristics, motivation and functions of "political exempt staff" in Canadian government. These potentially influential individuals, free from the political restrictions on public servants, tend to operate in the shadows cast by senior elected office-holders. As a result, too little is known of their characteristics or activities, although they have been the subject of some research. An important aim of this paper is to determine whether political exempt staff, by working closely with prime ministers, premiers or cabinet ministers, have significant influence on public policy-making. Thus, researching the origins, attributes, motivations and roles of these unelected political acolytes may yield useful information concerning the operation of Canadian democracy.

Since public office, elected or otherwise, forms part of our social system, a large number of questions may be raised. What are the socio-economic and educational characteristics of exempt staff? How and from where are they recruited? What is it about political life which attracts their interest and helps to fulfill their aspirations? What motivates such individuals? How do such persons influence public policy?

In terms of the democratic process, what is the nature and relative importance of the function performed by political exempt staff? For example, how are their duties and responsibilities determined and delimited? To what extent are their activities partisan in orientation? Do they tend to have an appreciable influence on government policies and programs? Further, what degree of control do exempt staff exercise over access to elected officials? To what extent do they shape public office-holders' opinions and decisions? If they act as "gate-keepers" and confidants, do they constitute effective targets for professional lobbyists and others seeking to influence government action?
This paper seeks to address these and other questions through analysis of data derived from interviews with 33 former exempt staff who served as political assistants and advisers, primarily in the federal government. The purpose is to gain useful operational insights into a unique position in our governmental system. The findings of this study suggest that political exempt staff play an important role in sustaining a government's "political impulse", the policy momentum it gains from an election mandate. The exempt staff also constitute a valuable point of contact for persons or organizations seeking information, support or a favourable decision from government.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.0 OVERVIEW

This paper examines the recruitment, characteristics, motivation and function of "political exempt staff" in Canadian government. These potentially influential individuals, free from the restrictions on civil servants which limit political activity, tend to operate in the shadows cast by senior elected office-holders. As a result, too little is known of their characteristics or activities, despite some prior research. The aim of this paper is to analyze the nature and function of political exempt staff, people who by working closely with prime ministers, premiers or cabinet ministers may wield considerable power. By researching the origins, attributes, motivations and roles of these unelected political acolytes we obtain useful information concerning the operation of Canadian democracy.

Since public office, elected or otherwise, forms part of our social system, a number of questions may be raised. What are the socio-economic and educational characteristics of those who serve as exempt staff? How and from where are they recruited? What is it about political life which attracts their interest and helps to fulfill their aspirations? What forces motivate and direct such individuals?

In terms of the operation of the democratic process, it is useful to understand the nature and relative importance of the function performed by political exempt staff. For example, how are their duties and responsibilities determined and delimited? To what extent are their activities partisan in orientation? Do they tend to have an appreciable influence on government policies and programs? Further, what degree of control do exempt staff exercise over access to elected officials? To what extent do they shape public office-holders' opinions and decisions? If they act as "gate-keepers"
and confidants, do they constitute important targets for professional lobbyists and others seeking to affect the public policy-making process?

This paper seeks to address these questions through analysis of data derived from comprehensive personal interviews with 33 former exempt staff, who served at one time or another as political assistants and advisers at either the federal or provincial level. The purpose is to gain useful operational insights into a small cadre of people who appear to occupy a strategic position in our governmental system. I will argue that exempt staff both help sustain a government's "political impulse" and constitute a valuable point of access to power (influence) for business representatives and others.

This investigation into the whys and wherefores of exempt staff in Canadian cabinet government arises out of my long-standing fascination with the relationship between the governed and those who govern, which was heightened by two years' experience serving as a senior exempt staff adviser to the Attorney General of British Columbia. The purpose of this paper is to expand the base of knowledge concerning the political imperatives and administrative constraints at play in cabinet-style government (the Westminster model) which Canada has inherited from Great Britain. It is an attempt to enhance the understanding of persons who find it necessary to approach government for information, support or to influence a specific decision. This appears to be the first study in Canada to enquire into the recruitment, training and motivation of political exempt staff, as well as their experience while in office. The paper examines the decision-making behaviour of democratic government from a specialized perspective and offers insights into the relationship among senior civil servants, exempt staff and their elected political masters.

The balance of this chapter identifies previous studies concerning this subject, and discusses the definition and evolution of political exempt staff, including the changes over time in related
salary budgets. Also, it raises the issue of the legitimacy of exempt staff and sets out the research questions involved in this study.

2.0 PREVIOUS STUDIES

There have been three previous studies of political exempt staff in the Canadian context: Tilley (1977), Williams (1980) and Savoie (1983). These articles, as well as another on this topic written by Lenoski (1977), are based in part on each author's firsthand experience as a ministerial assistant in Ottawa. Williams relies extensively on a survey conducted for the Library of Parliament, Research Branch (Brooke, 1978), as well as making considerable reference to the study by Tilley (1977). He appears to have conducted no new empirical research. The Tilley article is based on written responses to a questionnaire, submitted by 32 ministerial assistants then employed at the federal level, as well as personal interviews with a cabinet minister, a deputy minister and a former minister.

Savoie (1983) undertook significantly more research, including the distribution of two surveys and the conduct of 22 interviews with a variety of unidentified federal cabinet ministers, ministerial aides and assistants, and "senior" public servants. The initial survey went to all federal ministers' offices for the purpose of gaining an understanding of the broad responsibilities of each assistant, while the second was focused on 24 assistants, out of 206 then employed, with the intention of obtaining information on their educational background and work experience.

The Tilley and Savoie studies, with the exception of one personal interview by Tilley, each involved individuals who were then employed, in Ottawa, by a Liberal Government. By contrast, the current study is based on 33 personal interviews with former ministerial aides and assistants, one of whom had been both a cabinet minister and a deputy minister as well. These individuals had worked at either the federal or provincial level (primarily in B.C.), over a period of approximately
forty years, and for a Government of one or another of three political parties. The interview subjects
were, therefore, more representative than those chosen for the earlier studies and perhaps, not being
currently employed as a ministerial assistant, more candid in their responses.

The previous studies examined certain characteristics of exempt staff (i.e., their age,
education and work experience) as well as their function and potential for influence on decision-
makers in government. This study has a broader scope, in that it covers these same topics and, in
addition, enquires more deeply into both recruitment methods and individual motivations for
joining a minister's staff.

3.0 DEFINITION OF EXEMPT STAFF

"Political exempt staff" can be broadly defined as those individuals who are "employed in
the public sector, paid from the public purse, but who perform tasks largely for partisan purposes ... 
people who are hired specifically to assist elected officials primarily in their role as politician, as
opposed to policy-maker, legislator or administrator." (Williams, 1980, p.215). These persons are
"exempt" from both the restrictions on political activity which apply to civil servants and the
normal public service hiring procedures of the Public Service Commission. Exempt staff work for
individual members of Parliament or a legislature, caucus research bureaus, and federal or
provincial cabinet ministers, as well in either the Prime Minister's Office or the office of a
provincial premier. This study is limited to an examination of those persons who served cabinet
ministers, including the prime minister or a premier.

4.0 BUDGET FOR EXEMPT STAFF

The personal office staff to ministers of the Crown has evolved substantially over the past
four decades, especially at the federal level. When the Progressive Conservatives, under John
Diefenbaker, came to power in 1957, a cabinet minister was entitled to a "private secretary" (later to
be entitled, "executive assistant"), three clerk-stenographers, a confidential messenger and, in
certain instances only, a press officer. (Mallory, 1967, pp. 27-28). By the threshold of the first
Trudeau administration,

... the minister's private office has been inflated beyond recognition ... The public
treasury now supports an office establishment which includes special assistants and
administrative assistants, whose various duties include speech-writing, improving
the minister's contacts with the press gallery, and keeping the minister in the public
eye and sufficiently responsive to the politically importunate.
(Mallory, 1967, p. 27).

In 1968, each federal cabinet minister's office had an annual exempt staff salary budget of
$78,000 (or $375,000 in 1997 dollars). This amount rose to $130,000 ($407,500) by 1975 and four
years later it stood at $200,000 ($452,500). In other words, a 21% increase in real terms over ten
years. The actual number of exempt staff in a federal minister's office, however, remained
relatively constant over the same time period. On average, ministers employed six or seven exempt
staff, with another ten to twelve support staff. These personnel would sometimes be supplemented
by other employees seconded from the minister's department or by the issuance of personal service
contracts utilizing departmental funds. (Williams, 1980, pp. 218-220).

By 1983 the annual salary budget for a federal cabinet minister's exempt staff had reached
$230,000 ($358,800 in 1997 dollars) (Savoie, 1983, p. 510). One year later, the incoming Mulroney
administration dramatically increased the number of exempt staff available to ministers, with a
concomitant rise in the related salary budget. It has not been possible to obtain an accurate
estimate of the typical complement of exempt staff, nor the related salaries budget, for a federal
minister's office upon the advent of the Mulroney administration. However, guidelines published
in July, 1986 state,

... All Ministers, except the Prime Minister, are furnished with a prescribed
exempt staff budget ... The size [of which] is determined from time by the
Treasury Board. The current budget is $412,000 per annum ... Within the
limitation of the exempt staff budget, a Minister may appoint one Chief of Staff, one Executive Assistant and any number of Special Assistants, Private Secretaries and clerical/stenographic support staff. (Treasury Board, 1986).

This amount, $412,000 ($569,000 in 1997 dollars), represents a 59% increase in real terms over the exempt staff salary budget during the last year of the second Trudeau government (1983). One interviewee, who served as a special assistant and, later, as chief of staff to a minister during that period recalls that the exempt staff complement could range from eight to twenty people and the aggregate salary budget in the late 1980s was approximately $550,000 ($660,600 in 1997 dollars).

In 1993, the newly elected Liberals, under Prime Minister Chretien, ordered the number of ministerial exempt staff reduced to a total of five, with an annual salary budget capped at $360,000 ($381,400). An additional seven support staff were permitted. Since the Government was re-elected in June, 1997, ministers have been allowed to hire one further exempt staff member and the total annual salary allocation has been raised to $440,000 (Bryden, 1997, p. A3). Today, essentially the same number of exempt staff are employed in a federal cabinet minister's office as was the case in 1980. However, the salary budget for these individuals is 29% less in real terms than it was under Prime Minister Mulroney in 1986 and 3% less in real terms than it was almost twenty years ago during the last Trudeau administration.

By comparison, in British Columbia the exempt staff complement for a cabinet minister's office in the W.R. (Bill) Bennett administration, circa 1983, was three, with an annual salary budget of approximately $75,000 (or $117,000 in 1997 dollars). In addition, each minister could employ from two to five support staff. The same staffing levels remained in place throughout the VanderZalm (1986 to 1990) and Harcourt (1991 to 1996) governments (Morley, 1993, p. 201). The exempt staff salary budget for a minister's office at the outset of the Vander Zalm
administration, in 1986, was $115,000 ($158,800 in 1997 dollars), a 36% increase in real terms over the 1983 budget. Upon commencement of the Harcourt ministry, in 1991, it became $158,000 ($173,000), almost 50% more, in constant dollars, than the amount allocated eight years before. The current Government appears to restrict ministers to a maximum allotment of four exempt staff, although the majority of ministers' offices presently employ only three. The top aggregate salary budget for a B.C. minister's office today is approximately $226,000 (Government of B.C., 1997), almost double the exempt staff budget, in 1997 dollars, for a minister during the latter stages of the W.R. (Bill) Bennett administration, and a 31% increase, in real terms, since the N.D.P. came to power, under Mike Harcourt, in 1991.

A recent U.S. study on present day staffing patterns in Congress provides an interesting comparison to the Canadian experience:

In all, the number of legislative staff employed by Congress has increased substantially over time; from 1960 to 1995 staff employment increased from 3,000 to 7,500 in the Senate and from 4,000 to 10,000 in the House [of Representatives]. Currently, the size of personal offices in the House ranges from 12 to 18 staff, with an average of 15 people. In the Senate, personal offices range from 30 to 50 staff, with an average of 34 people. Full committees can range from 20 to over 100 staff in either body. (Romzek et al, 1997, p. 1256).

Exempt staff levels in Canada are extremely low, by U.S. standards, especially given the enormous administrative burdens borne by cabinet ministers, in addition to their legislative duties and partisan political responsibilities.5

5.0 LEGITIMACY OF EXEMPT STAFF

Questions of legitimacy have threatened the existence of exempt staff since their inception. In an article written thirty years ago, at a time when the existence of political exempt staff in Canada was a relatively recent phenomenon, one commentator discussed the nature and role of "an intermediate class of persons in the minister's office, who are political rather than bureaucratic in
their functions, appointed rather than elected and who operate in an area which strict constitutional theory does not recognize as existing." (Mallory, 1967, p.25).

This article appeared shortly after the release of the report of an inquiry by Quebec Chief Justice Frederic Dorion into the conduct of certain staff members of two federal cabinet ministers in relation to a notorious criminal, Lucien Rivard. Mallory (1967, p. 26) claims that, "The enduring interest of the Dorion Report is that it illuminates certain facets of government which have hitherto escaped the attention of scholars. For the tide of civil service reform in Canada has left undisturbed, by a curious oversight, the personal office staffs of ministers of the Crown."

Mallory is no fan of political exempt staff. Rather, he believes that "the minister's private office ... should be a part of the process of government, of the neutral, impersonal machinery of the State." (Mallory, 1967, p. 34). He states a clear preference for the traditional British practice (itself since changed), in which the minister's office is staffed by young and promising members of the administrative class. He includes a description of the ideal person:

The post is occupied by a picked young man on his way to fill posts of higher rank in the Department. He has continuous relationships with the Minister, he has a duty to protect the Minister against unnecessary engagements or strain, and prevent papers reaching his desk with which it is not really necessary to bother him. Ideally, he should be intelligent, efficient, a good organizer, not temperamental or excitable (nor should he be dreary) and able to be long-suffering if he has to live with a temperamental or excitable Minister, with some way to his own whereby equanimity will be restored as quickly as possible. Sometimes that takes the form of the Private Secretary in the midst of a storm becoming studiously quiet, combined with a very slightly subdued and pained look which will convey to the Minister a distinct and respectful consciousness of shock, sorrow and surprise. (Mallory, 1967, p. 32).

One can't help but conjure up a vision of poor Bernard, Principal Private Secretary to the Rt. Hon. James Hacker, P.C., M.P. in the Yes, Minister television series. Mallory (1967, p. 29) reveals his disdain for the existence of political exempt staff when he states, "... the most important revelation of the Dorion inquiry is the way in which ministers' private
office staffs - who are not civil servants - deal as a matter of course with difficult policy questions which require a degree of judgment, experience and non-partisanship which they are unlikely to possess."

He concludes that,

"It is clearly undesirable that a considerable number of persons not a part of the civil service should be interposed between a minister and his department. They lack the training, professional standards and career motives of the civil service ... Not only do these functionairies wield great power because they control access to the minister and can speak in his name, but they may wield this power with ludicrous ineptitude and in ways which are clearly tainted with political motives. (Mallory, 1967, p. 32).

Given the relative size, power and intrusiveness of the modern State, it is important to know who these shadowy people are, how they interact with elected officials and civil servants, as well as what influence they may have on the governmental decision-making process.

6.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The categories of research questions contained in this study of exempt staff include: manner of recruitment to position; individual background (political, educational, work-related); personal motivation(s) for seeking or accepting offer of a position; role and experiences while in position; and, perhaps most importantly, potential for influence on elected decision-makers, as gate-keepers, opinion-shapers or otherwise (see Appendix "B", Interview Questions).

The questions have been influenced by the previous studies of political exempt staff. But I have tried to expand the list of issues to be explored by enquiring into methods of recruitment, details of previous political involvement, and specifics of personal motivation, as well as by seeking opinions from the 33 interviewees concerning the relative influence which exempt staff may exert over elected officials.

The next chapter reviews the literature respecting the development of political exempt staff in Canada. Chapter 3 comments upon the methodology involved in the conduct of this enquiry. In
Chapters 4 through 6 I present the findings of this study, compare and contrast these findings to the previously available material and draw some conclusions respecting a unique public office and those who temporarily occupy it.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature related to this study is focused on two subjects: partisan political activists in general and political exempt staff in particular. While most of this review was conducted in anticipation of the field work, so as to provide a context for the research, a further canvass was undertaken in response to the findings. The literature contains certain generalizations concerning both the recruitment and motivation of partisan activists, as well as the relative influence of exempt staff in the public policy decision-making process. Further, and in particular, the three earlier studies of exempt staff raise questions about these individuals' level of education, amount and type of previous work experience, and tenure in ministerial offices. The data obtained in this study address all of these matters and others.

There is a relative dearth of scholarly writing on the specific topic of political exempt staff. However, the few pieces which do exist each offer some useful insights into the nature and function of these individuals.

1.0 PARTISAN POLITICAL ACTIVISTS

The available literature on partisan political activists in general is somewhat more plentiful. A fairly recent study (Abramowitz et al, 1986) concerning activists in U.S. presidential politics is particularly germane and includes findings which offer some interesting comparisons and contrasts to the present work. Party activists from both Democratic and Republican presidential nomination campaigns in each of eleven states were studied. The specific states were chosen so as to provide considerable variety in size, regional location, economic development and partisan orientation.

Abramowitz et al (1986, p. 61) state, "research on party activists has consistently demonstrated that they tend to be recruited from the ranks of higher socio-economic status, with
high levels of education", and that, "there is broad consensus among students of American political parties that material rewards and Party loyalty have been declining in importance as incentives for activism while candidates and issues have become increasingly important as motivations for participation in Party affairs." These so-called "purposive motivations", being idealistic in nature, have been said to be unlikely to sustain long-term involvement by partisan activists.

Interestingly, the study concluded that there "was a positive correlation between partisan and purposive motivations, with both strengthening as a function of the length and regularity of participation in Party affairs." (Abramowitz et al, 1986, p. 69). Personal motivations for activism, such as social contacts, possibilities for career advancement, or the excitement of a political campaign, were found to be

... most prevalent among the very youngest activists, suggesting that these motivations may stimulate a person's initial involvement in Party politics but do not play an important role in sustaining long-term commitment ... Partisanship itself seems to be the most important factor in maintaining a high level of involvement in Party affairs over a long period of time." (Abramowitz et al, 1986, p. 70).

In one of the few detailed studies into political activists in Canada, the authors state,

Although a party's many activists are rarely engaged in high politics it would be an error to ignore them or their activities. They have three vital roles to play. First, it is the ordinary party members who constitute the working body of any electoral organization ... Party activists' second major contribution is to define the organization as a community of believers. No matter how fuzzy and ill-defined, or how ideologically sharp a party's stance may be, it requires a body of activists to carry its ideas, its traditions, and its commitments ... Finally, the third thing activists do is to decide and to choose. At local meetings and in provincial [or national] conventions activists vote on questions of party organization and policy, they nominate candidates for office and they select party leaders. (Blake et al, 1991, p. 17).

In an article dealing with party leadership conventions and their impact on the development of a national political community in Canada (Courtenay, 1986, p. 102) the author comments that,
one consequence of the substantial increase over the past few years in the number of delegates attending national conventions has been to bring into the selection process of both the Liberal and Conservative parties large numbers of relatively young party activists who, for the most part, have had little or no prior experience in politics." This observation bears directly on the recruitment of political exempt staff in recent times, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

2.0 JOURNALIST'S VIEWS


Some of the journalistic analysis has relevance to this paper. Reflecting on the Conservative Party's sixteen straight years in Opposition at the federal level prior to 1979, Jeffrey Simpson (1980, p. 125) reports on the new prime minister's stated intention to "balance the traditional public service with some excellent people who share our goals of reform." And in a chapter entitled "Confronting the Mandarins", he observes that, after some months in Office, the new Government was "learning how to co-exist with the civil service - one of the prerequisites of the successful exercise of power." (Simpson, 1980, p. 120). This issue will be considered in Chapter 5, as part of the discussion of public policy decision-making. Similarly, John Lashinger, a highly-experienced campaign operative and sometime senior bureaucrat, offers a trenchant comment on the importance placed upon partisan policy proposals by persons most likely to become ministerial exempt staff, when he states,

Elected politicians value policy, if only because it serves as a suit of armour, protecting them from opponents' allegations that they have no ideas and no remedies
for the problems that afflict the province or nation ... Backroom politicians understand that policy is mainly for show. It is something to put in the window while the real work goes on behind the curtains. What matters is not policy positions, but issues management. (Lashinger & Stevens, 1992, pp.13-14).

Reading this passage reminded me of a remark made by a senator and former principal secretary to the premier of Nova Scotia to the effect that, "a policy convention is the price a political party pays for losing an election." Questions of cynicism, idealism and partisanship will be reviewed in Chapter 5.

Hedrick Smith, in assessing the power of modern-day political staff, both personal and committee, in the congressional context, comes to conclusions which in my opinion mirror the position held by senior exempt staff in Canada today. He asserts that, "One vital facet of power in Congress is the quality of staff ... Although leaning on staff for substance is hardly a new phenomenon, it is more prevalent today than it was a decade or two ago. As issues have become more intricate, complex and technical, and as members of Congress have grown busier, their staffs have become more indispensable." (Smith, 1988, p. 274). I will comment further on the relative power of contemporary political exempt staff in Chapter 5.

On incentive or motivation, Smith quotes a senior backroom adviser,

This is a very hands-on thing. You're here because it's what's going on. What you're dealing with every day is interesting. The problems are important. You like the excitement. What you can do in jobs like this is infinitely more than you could ever hope to do in the private sector. You have a lot of influence, even if it's at the margin. Some of us are a little more crazy about it than others. I mean, power - the exercise of power. (Smith, 1988, p. 271).

I will return to this topic in Chapter 4.

3.0 SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

The scholarly literature dealing specifically with political exempt staff, while relatively sparse, provides a considerable number of insights. One academic commentator has noted that,
"Cabinet ministers are highly varied creatures, with orientations ranging from status, to mission, process or simply advancing the views of their department.” (Stanbury, 1993, p.216). He has also pointed out that in a minister's office it is all but impossible to separate partisan political activity from public policy-making (Stanbury, 1993, p. 218).

A former principal secretary to Prime Minister Trudeau, in writing about whether politicians, particularly those in a leadership position, can implement an agenda and master events, argues forcefully that it is possible to prevent the urgent from overwhelming the important. This can only be accomplished, however, if a strategic plan is adopted, a highly competent, partisan political staff is available to implement the plan, and the lines between political exempt staff and the civil service are clearly maintained. (Axworthy, 1988). He asks whether those in power always require a loyal retinue and, if so, what is the proper role of a political leader's office? If a politician wishes to govern, and not merely preside, what qualities should he or she seek in a personal staff? Axworthy (1988, p. 248) argues that in recruiting exempt staff,

a politician must distinguish between the demands of partisanship and the virtues of a professional civil service. Partisans bring creativity; public servants provide perspective. The political arm makes things move; bureaucratic routines prevent errors. Both kinds of counsel are necessary ... a strongly partisan personal office is the best way to defend an apolitical public service. Good advice necessitates different kinds of expertise.

Interestingly, Axworthy favours a small number of senior advisers around a politician. In discussing the P.M.O., he states

A prime minister requires a few assistants, not another layer of bureaucracy. The purpose of the staff is to leave the leader more time, rather than less, to concentrate on major policy decisions. A large staff usually generates more work by taking up everyone's time in endless meetings. For the purposes of manning a prime minister's office the operative principle should be that less is more. (Axworthy, 1988, p.258).

He believes that politicians should have highly partisan personal office staff for
if politics is a debate about values, there is a need for a contingent of value-driven people to influence the direction of the State. Commitment fosters creativity. It is the political dynamic of our system which brings about reform. (Axworthy, 1988 p.260).

Cabinet ministers must understand the political implications of policy decisions. Exempt staff should promote the partisan perspective to ensure that bureaucratic priorities do not always carry the day.

A former federal ministerial assistant, writing twenty years ago, asserts,

The political interface provided by ministers' staffs is a significant, although comparatively recent, innovation in Canadian Cabinet government. This relatively obscure aspect of the machinery of the political executive merits our attention, particularly because there has been minimal academic commentary to date concerning its organization and importance. (Lenoski, 1977, p.165).

Little attention has been paid to this subject in the intervening two decades.

Lenoski (1977, p. 167) states that, beginning with the advent of the Diefenbaker Conservative government in 1957, exempt staff have evolved through a process of trial and error, with statutory legitimization being conferred in the Civil Service Act of 1961. He argues that,

Straightforward generalizations about specific categories of ministerial assistants are difficult to make. Every minister, according to his personality traits, socialization, political stature, portfolio, goals and so forth, really is *sui generis*. Thus, the type of staff each wants and needs traditionally has been quite diverse ... In the broadest sense the functional value of ministers' staffs, although undeniable, defies precise description. Increased in size and scope, nowadays as before, they are an amorphous group much of whose behaviour is subject to idiosyncratic variables. Inasmuch as each minister is a peculiar political personality, versatility is implicit in the staff structure that has developed to serve all manner of political-cum-administrative needs ... The common denominator pervading the efforts of all ministers' staffs is competitive Party politics. In the abstract his staff should behave as an extension of each Cabinet member, especially regarding his instinct for political survival. (Lenoski, 1977, pp.168 & 174).

In describing the role of exempt staff, Lenoski writes,

Ministerial assistants constitute the functional dividing line between politics and administration ... they are in a position to supplement the advice of neutral civil servants with assessments based upon political intelligence. Their chief
preoccupation is to further their minister's aims and interests according to his specific departmental responsibilities combined with his general political duties. Thus, they become intimately involved with the advancement of his viewpoint and, where possible, the enhancement of his reputation. (Lenoski, 1977, p.167).

In discussing the relative influence of ministerial aides and assistants, he states that,

Members of a minister's staff, individually and collectively, have the potential for becoming a creative and constructive force. The influence of political staffs hinges largely on the minister's attitudes. His interpretation of how political direction and control should be put into practice in his department is central to the degree of his staffs' manoeuvrability. The minister's willingness, along with his ability, to assert the required political leadership over that portion of the government machine under his direction is crucial ... The size and nature of government today often permits ministers' staffs (and, for that matter, sometimes ministers themselves) only a peripheral impact on policy development. They can, however, exert a substantially controlling influence in the policy-making process ... Ministers' staffs serve as independent sources of vitality, opinion and political ballast. They are in a pivotal position to help counterbalance the monopoly of professional bureaucrats on policy advice. They can affect as well as enforce the "political impulse" (that is, the momentum derived from policy commitments underpinning the governing Party's last electoral mandate) which helps ensure that government priorities and decisions are a proper synthesis of Party initiatives and departmental policies. (Lenoski, 1977, pp.168 & 171).

On this point, a former Secretary of State for External Affairs has noted,

Without some protective mechanisms the minister is at the mercy of bureaucratic domination, not because of some devious manipulative plot, but simply because that is the way the system has been allowed to develop ... I was determined that my personal staff would play a critical role in the evaluation of all politically sensitive policy issues. Their independent and sometimes irreverent analysis of these issues was invaluable (MacDonald, 1980, p. 31).

In conclusion, Lenoski states,

... a great deal of difference exists between the impact ministers' staffs actually have made and still make, as opposed to what the theoretical boundaries might allow. Politics and personality account for the distinction. The accretion of political staffs to ministers has taken place with the tacit acceptance of the civil service, in the absence of any expressions of concern for a rationale by any of the political parties. Initially an expedient, progressively they have accumulated a corporate identity. (Lenoski, 1977, p.175).

On occasion, a political aide or adviser may acquire immense influence. For instance, in
discussing the unique style of governing employed by Premier Bill Vander Zalm of British Columbia, one author noted,

Vander Zalm concentrated all significant political and administrative power in his own hands and then let it be used by only one other person. He appointed David Poole as the sole member of his staff with ready access to the premier. Poole was constantly at Vander Zalm's side, he issued political directives to the Party organization, hired and fired members of the premier's entourage, as well as deputy ministers, helped the premier select new ministers, involved himself with all significant policy developments (and with some insignificant ones as well), attended all Cabinet meetings, and on one famous occasion in the premier's absence actually called the Cabinet to order. (Morley, 1996, p. 161).

Studies specifically focused on political exempt staff in Canada have been carried out by Tilley (1977) and Williams (1980), whose work was based in part on the survey research of Brooke (1978). Subsequently, an academic observer, who more recently has looked closely at the issue of managing government transitions, conducted a more extensive study during the early 1980's into the kind of staff resources available to federal cabinet ministers, the backgrounds of individuals who work in ministers' personal offices and the responsibilities performed by such people. (Savoie, 1983). He posed the questions of whether a minister's staff was important and, if so, to whom and for what purpose? The focus of the enquiry was on whether exempt staff were a means to give ministers the capacity both to provide policy directions to their departments and to assess policy advice coming from permanent public servants.

Savoie notes that, as at the time of his work,

... few studies have been undertaken on the role and responsibilities of people in ministers' offices. Yet it is an area that should interest students of politics and public administration because, for one thing, there exists a great deal of uncertainty regarding the responsibilities of a minister's staff. (Savoie, 1983, pp. 509-510).

Despite Savoie's admonition, no further work has been done concerning this subject until the present study. In Chapters 4 and 5 the research findings of this study will be presented in juxtaposition with data gathered in each of the three earlier enquiries.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This is a study examining the recruitment, characteristics, motivations and work experience of political exempt staff. While based on new empirical research (interviews with former political exempt staff) this study is largely a qualitative one in that it involves "the non-numerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships." (Babbie, 1986, p.558). It involves a study of attitudes and behaviour, with the intention of gaining some understanding of the complexities of a socio-political environment and the influence of personalities.

The case study has been used extensively in both social science research and practice-oriented fields such as public or business administration because "as a research endeavour, it contributes uniquely to our knowledge of complex organizational, social and political phenomena." (Yim, 1994, p.3). It is an "empirical inquiry into a contemporary situation with the intent of making an analytical, rather than statistical, generalization." (Yim, 1994, p.13).

1.0 TYPE OF STUDY

This is not a case study. Rather, it is a small scale empirical study utilizing a non-random sample. This study is focused on the role performed over time by persons commonly referred to as political exempt staff. In particular, it looks at the experience of 33 individuals who served as exempt staff for at least a few years during the last four decades. The limited sample size does not lend itself to systematic statistical analysis, but some aggregated results are given.

The objective is to make "descriptive or explanatory inferences on the basis of empirical information about a given world ... By definition, inference is an imperfect process. Uncertainty is a central aspect of all research and all knowledge about the world." (King et al, 1994, p.8).
The contribution of this project is more in the nature of inference from a small sample, considering the estimated number of persons who have served as political exempt staff during the subject period. For instance, at the federal level alone over the past four decades there may have been as many as 2,000 individuals working on ministerial staff, exclusive of the Prime Minister’s Office (i.e., assuming an average cabinet of 30 ministers, a typical exempt staff complement of five and an average individual tenure on staff of three years).

In British Columbia during the past twenty years, another 300 persons may have served as exempt staff (i.e., assuming an average cabinet of 15 ministers, an exempt staff of three and an average tenure of three years). Considering that there are 10 provincial governments in Canada, the total number of individuals who have served in one or another exempt staff position over the past four decades would be substantial.

Political exempt staff must also be placed in the context of a much larger group of political activists whose primary focus is the continued electoral success of the party in power. These individuals would include party headquarters’ staff and field personnel, certain members of the Senate, campaign volunteers and persons elected to constituency association executives, “unpaid” advisers (who often are appointed to regulatory agencies or Crown corporation directorships), and pollsters or image consultants, all of whom work to sustain the political impetus of the government they support.

2.0 PARTICIPANTS

This research project was conducted among a sample of 33 individuals, each of whom being a former member of a political exempt staff, at either the federal or provincial level, some time between 1957 and 1996. The choice of particular participants was a deliberate attempt to ensure varied representation of generations, partisan affiliation and experiences. Former as opposed
to current ministerial aides and assistants were interviewed in the belief that they would likely feel less constrained and be more candid in their observations. Individuals were identified for participation in this study based on knowledge gained from my experience of 25 years in Canadian political backrooms. All but two of the persons approached for an interview agreed to participate in this study. Participants were either personally known to me or were referred to me by others with whom I had a personal connection.

A list of the interview subjects, together with their title(s), locations and years of service is attached as Appendix "A". Constraints of budget and time meant that all interview subjects were selected from persons residing in either the Vancouver or Victoria area. While it is possible that a sample bias may exist, in that all interview subjects reside in either the Lower Mainland of B.C. or the southern portion of Vancouver Island, the likelihood of this bias having any significance is remote, given the considerable life experience of most interviewees.

Given the relatively small sample size, this paper refrains from making generalizations and relies more heavily on direct quotations. The intent is to give the reader a flavour for the personalities and experiences of political exempt staff, without making potentially false claims about universality, as well as to raise more questions for a larger scale, randomly-chosen sample from which better inferences might be drawn.

For instance, in 1983 when Savoie conducted his study there were 206 exempt staff working in Ottawa (Savoie, 1993, p. 511), while today there may be 132, exclusive of those located in the Prime Minister's Office (Bryden, 1997, p. A3). During the nine years of the Mulroney administration there were considerably more, given an expanded cabinet and larger exempt staff salary budgets.

Collectively, participants had occupied one or another exempt staff position during the past
forty years, from the principal secretary to Prime Minister Diefenbaker to a communications adviser to a cabinet minister in the first Chretien government. In addition, four aides from the Pearson era (1963 to 1968), eight from the first Trudeau ministry (1968 to 1979), two from the Clark government (1979-80), one each from the second Trudeau (1980 to 1984) and Turner (1984) governments, and 15 from the Mulroney years (1984 to 1993) were selected. (Some of these individuals served in more than one ministry). In addition, exempt staff from recent governments in each of British Columbia, Manitoba and Ontario agreed to be interviewed (see Table 3-1 on page 25). Of the 33 interview subjects, 23 held two or more exempt staff positions over time. Some served at both the federal and provincial levels, while others were either promoted within a federal minister’s office or served more than one Government. Hence Table 3-1 involves some double-counting of positions.

Seventeen persons had worked for Conservatives and nine for Liberals at the federal level. Seven had worked for Social Credit politicians in British Columbia. Eighteen percent of those interviewed were women.

Of the participants, 11 had held a position in the office of a prime minister or premier, while 22 had worked for a cabinet minister. The interview subjects included six principal secretaries, four chiefs of staff, 13 executive assistants, and a variety of special assistants, senior policy advisers and press aides. Several participants held different roles as their careers progressed. Some were recruited as special assistants or policy advisers by one minister and moved on to become an executive assistant or chief of staff to another. Others returned during subsequent administrations to occupy positions of greater responsibility. One interviewee began his Ottawa career as an executive assistant and went on to serve as a deputy minister, principal secretary to the prime minister and, ultimately, as a senior cabinet minister himself, an exceptional experience.
3.0 INTERVIEWS

In each instance, a personal interview was conducted, rather than relying upon a response to a survey. It was felt that this approach would be much more fruitful in getting a sense of the texture of an exempt staff experience. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted, on average, one and one-half to two hours. The interview format was based on a prepared schedule of questions, attached as Appendix "B", with a focus on four areas: personal history and recruitment, motivations, experience on exempt staff, and reflections. The questions were designed, in part, to make this study compatible with the previous three and, thereby, to permit commentary on generalizations advanced by authors of the earlier work. The scope of this study is, however, broader than the previous three, in that detailed questions were asked concerning methods of recruitment, prior political experience, personal motivation, and perceptions of exempt staff influence relative to that of the civil service.

Interviews were conversational in nature and loosely-structured, permitting flexibility in direction of enquiry and topics covered. They were not tape-recorded. Detailed notes were made during each interview and, where necessary to ensure accuracy or completeness, were reviewed over the telephone with participants. These notes were read and re-read. Cross-referencing was done to identify similarities or variations among responses on isolated topics or themes.

In some instances, my personal experience was helpful in verifying comments or responses. However, this intimate knowledge of the process and, in many cases, personal acquaintance with the participants required being on the alert to prevent my own views from colouring the comments of participants.

Normally accepted routines respecting confidentiality and ethical procedure were followed. No attributable quotes have been used. Prior to their interview, each participant was sent a letter,
together with a thesis abstract, informing them of the purpose of this study and promising confidentiality. Participants were not identified to each other (many know each other or, at least, of each other).

This study is limited principally to the Ottawa and, to a lesser extent, British Columbia political scenes. However, it is expected that discussion and analysis of the nature and role of exempt staff may be relevant to other jurisdictions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position/ Government</th>
<th>Principal Secretary/ Chief of Staff</th>
<th>Executive Assistant/ Policy Adviser</th>
<th>Special Assistant/ Press Aide</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diefenbaker (1957–1963)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pearson (1963–1968)</td>
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<td>Trudeau (1968–1979)</td>
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<td>Clark (1979–80)</td>
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<td>Trudeau (1980–1984)</td>
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<td>Turner (1984)</td>
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<td>Chretien (1993– )</td>
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<td><strong>Total Federal</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennett, W.R. (1975–1986) (British Columbia)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vander Zalm (1986–1991) (British Columbia)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Filmon (1988– ) (Manitoba)</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peterson (1987–1990) (Ontario)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Provincial</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Many of the 33 interview subjects (23) held two or more positions over time, which leads to double-counting (see Appendix “A”).
CHAPTER 4

RECRUITMENT, CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATIONS

1.0 ORIGINS

In this chapter, I discuss the origins of political exempt staff, and review the research findings of the study as they concern methods of recruitment; and characteristics of exempt staff, including: age upon recruitment, prior political participation, previous work experience, and tenure on ministerial staff; as well as factors relating to personal motivation.

The emergence of political exempt staff is a relatively recent phenomenon in Canada, as well as in the United Kingdom, and in neither instance did it appear to come about according to a pre-determined plan. Indeed, the appointment of political staff was viewed by some (e.g., Mallory, 1967) as unsavoury, if not outright constitutional heresy, insofar as it was inconsistent with the fundamental precepts of a merit-based, neutral civil service. In other words, the appointment of individuals who, while paid by tax-payers, were exempt from restrictions on partisan political activity, as well as being hired according to a method and rationale which was not subject to the rules and regulations of the public service,

ran contrary to the established British orthodoxy of administrative continuity merged with political neutrality introduced in the 1870's by the Gladstone government. Constitutional propriety, as well as a variety of institutional and political barriers, meant that it took a long time for political exempt staff to traverse the considerable distance between being a tolerable institutional aberration and an acceptable constitutional convention. (Lenoski, 1980, p.271).

The concept of political staff began with the office of principal private secretary which had its roots in the United Kingdom during the last century. "It grew out of an upper class tradition: a nineteenth century minister often brought with him into his department a young man of good social position who could be trusted to handle tactfully and confidentially all business personal to the minister." (Lenoski, 1980, p.22).
Early in this century, David Lloyd George, first as Chancellor of the Exchequer and later as Prime Minister, was a proponent of an expanded personal staff.

He liked to gather round him people who were not of the official hierarchy but had full access to secret information, in order that they should give him independent advice as a check on his officials. He claimed that freedom of access to independent information is quite compatible with order and due respect for the hierarchy if that liberty is tactfully and judiciously exercised by the minister and wisely acquiesced in by the (civil) service. As prime minister, in 1917, he established his own private secretariat, the famous "Garden Suburb". It was comprised of outstanding appointees, such as John Maynard Keynes, whose influence permeated the entire governmental machine and gave him extraordinary political ascendency. (Morgan, 1971, p.381).

By the early 1960s, Canadian ministers and, to a somewhat lesser extent, their British counterparts, had accepted as given that they should be supported by a retinue of personal appointees paid from the public purse and who could perform political - even partisan - tasks. The desire for exempt staff was kindled largely by new governments facing the seemingly eternal problem of ensuring ministerial control of the bureaucracy and ministerial predominance in policy-making. For, as one author explains,

The challenge of assuming, virtually overnight, the responsibility for leading a government is daunting ... All political parties, particularly those with a strong ideological bent, are impatient to put their own stamp on numerous areas of public policy and many politicians fear the prospect of being captured by permanent officials whose experience is vastly greater than their own. (Savoie, 1993, p.213).

The existence of political exempt staff would, or so some partisan adherents believed, enhance a minister's ability to ensure that the bureaucracy carries through with the policy initiatives of its political masters. Parties which had been in the wilderness of Opposition for many years and, as a result, were highly suspicious of the civil service mandarin class, were prone to be more vociferous in calling for the institution of political exempt staff. In Canada, the 1957 election of the Diefenbaker Conservative government (Newman, 1963) and, in Britain, the 1964 victory by Labour, under Harold Wilson, were cases in point. Although, as former prime minister Wilson
acknowledges, in memoirs concerning his first administration (1964 to 1970), the civil service were apolitical and professional. He states,

Once again, the civil servants responsible, under the leadership of the Secretary to the Cabinet, Sir Burke Trend, had anticipated our needs. Neutral and non-political though the civil service is, it is as sharp as any other body of men in recognizing political realities. They had read the [Labour] election manifesto, and studied every statement. The first draft of the Queen’s Speech was ready within days, perhaps hours, of the opening of the ballot-boxes; or was it, I wondered, ready even before? Had two drafts been prepared, on alternative election assumptions? Whatever the answer, it was a first class draft: all our major policy commitments were there, and we felt it right to endorse them. (Wilson, 1971, p. 20).

While in Opposition, a man who would become a particularly powerful cabinet minister in the Wilson government, and whose personal diaries were the basis for the amusing and insightful television series Yes, Minister, became a leading advocate for political staff. He wrote,

Each minister should be encouraged to bring with him to his department a small "Brains Trust" of three or four people to act as his "eyes and ears". He should have in effect, a little departmental "Cabinet". Some of them might be drawn from the universities, some from politics, and they would act as a team, reading the papers for him and enabling him to have a well-informed judgement when he faces the department officials. (Crossman, 1956, p.16).

2.0 RECRUITMENT

How then are political exempt staff actually recruited? Is it through the personal intervention of a minister or some other more systematic means? The research for this study revealed that, of the 33 former exempt staff interviewed, 57% had been recruited for their position directly by the elected office-holder for whom they went to work, 19% had been selected by a senior staff member already working in the politician's office, and 15% were recruited by a political party activist, such as a local constituency association president or campaign manager. The remaining 9% actively sought a position on an exempt staff. In virtually every case, the individual was hired only after a personal interview with the elected official in whose office he or she wished
to work. In this sample, there were no discernable differences in method of recruitment experienced by persons of different generations or partisan affiliations. Neither Savoie (1983), Williams (1980), nor Tilley (1977), address this question in their respective studies.

Recently, some authors have commented on a few notable government transitions and the issue of political staffing. In 1984, the Mulroney Conservatives, on the advice of their "transition team", developed rather elaborate plans to re-organize ministers' offices. In particular, executive assistants were to be directed by a more exalted political appointee, a chief of staff.

The new position ... was designed to provide ministers with senior, strategic political advice in relation to departmental responsibilities and to balance advice from public servants. However, for various reasons, the position did not develop as planned. There were problems establishing the new role and finding the right kinds of people for the jobs, problems getting ministers to choose from names on a central list, and problems working out the relationship with the career bureaucracy. (Manion & Williams, 1993, p.107).

In 1990, the incoming N.D.P. government in Ontario also adopted a centralized approach to political staffing.

By and large, the transition team assigned executive assistants to ministers, though ministers were given the opportunity to interview the people who had been selected to work for them and usually were offered one or two alternatives. It was very clear that the executive assistants had been recruited by, and were responsible to, the Premier's Office. The executive assistants did most of the subsequent hiring of ministerial staff, although some variations did occur across ministers' offices, particularly with regard to the involvement of the minister. The executive assistants made extensive use of the data bank of applicants assembled by the transition team. (White, 1993, p.125).

In 1991, the new Harcourt N.D.P. government in British Columbia did not opt for the central hiring of exempt staff like their political cousins at Queen's Park (i.e., the N.D.P. government led by Bob Rae). Instead, "the Premier's Office was to be kept informed of political staff hirings - and could exercise a veto - but for the most part ministers were able to recruit persons of their own choice". (Morley, 1993, p.201). The latter approach is much more likely to produce a
situation in which a minister will have confidence in the loyalty of his staff, a quality at least as important as competence.  

None of the interview subjects for this study was hired from a list prepared by either a transition team or a central agency, such as the Prime Minister's Office. When asked to express their views on the nature and role of political exempt staff generally, the most common response dealt with matters of recruitment. There was a general agreement that the historical, rather haphazard approach to exempt staffing was likely inevitable given the large differences between each politician's office. "The highly personal nature of the relationship between ministers and their staff" (Tilley, 1977, p. 411), coupled with the fact that "ministers are highly varied creatures, with differing orientations" (Stanbury, 1993, p. 218) produces a peculiar structure and dynamic in each minister's office, despite the similarities which may exist in terms of function and responsibilities. There was a consensus that an elected office-holder ought to personally select his exempt staff, as he will be accountable for their actions, and that senior ministerial assistants ought to have strengths which complement those of the minister. It was suggested that a politician should never hire a friend, someone from their constituency, or, in the case of a federal cabinet minister, a person from their home province. To do so would involve honouring a promise or reinforcing a bias, both of which being poor reasons to hire a staff member.  

One former principal secretary expressed surprise at how open our system of government is and how casually someone can obtain a powerful position and proceed to have a significant impact on public policy and administration.  

Many of those interviewed agreed that incoming ministerial assistants would be well-served by a specialized training program (i.e., perhaps best organized and conducted by former exempt staff members). As one person explained, "Everyone should have swimming lessons before being
thrown into a fast-flowing current, full of hidden dangers." In this respect, they were echoing a former Clerk of the Privy Council (Osbaldeston, 1989) whose experiences concerning the Mulroney transition led him to advocate such a training course.

This issue is not unique to Canada. A recent analysis of U.S. congressional staff states,

One of the biggest concerns about congressional staffs, rarely mentioned by critics, is the level of professionalism. Staffs are hired in a haphazard fashion, without any formal standards, often through an old boy network with a continuing role for patronage ... Turnover is alarmingly high. Older traditions emphasizing non-partisan career professionalism, that are still typified by the Joint Committee on Taxation and on some of the Appropriations Committees, have eroded. Many staff see their posts as temporary, mere spring boards to positions in the executive branch or downtown in lobbying or law firms. (Romzek et al., 1997, p. 1252).

The point was made by a number of interview subjects that Canadian political parties, which operate in a highly uncertain and dynamic world, need to think in a longer term, more systematic way about recruitment and that current exempt staff ought to serve as talent scouts and mentors. It was suggested that an expansion of the parliamentary and legislative intern programs, together with the development of a concept akin to the White House Fellowship, might help foster a "culture of service" which would attract smart, talented people.

A significant concern for more than a few of those interviewed, particularly among individuals who once held the most senior exempt staff positions, was what one former principal secretary described as "the growing disconnect between government and the business community", in part evidenced by the relatively recent growth (i.e., 1984 onwards) of so-called "government relations" consulting firms. Another highly experienced individual, who once held the same title, asserted that, "In most modern societies politics and business are not artificially bifurcated, whereas in Canada, an enormous adversarial culture has built up between business and government." This sentiment was echoed by a number of other interviewees. It was recommended that elected office-holders aggressively recruit exempt staff from the business world, thereby drawing into ministers'
offices people with more life experience and management skills than might otherwise be the case.

One former executive assistant suggested that the Public Service Commission maintain a registry that would serve as a sort of domestic Canadian Executive Services Overseas, supplying Ottawa and the provincial capitals with retired business executives willing to devote two or three years to public service. He claimed, "Political exempt staff don't have to be partisan, just loyal to the minister and generally sympathetic to the philosophy and objectives of the administration."

Some of the interviewees commented upon the need for the regular injection of fresh, able people to the ranks of political exempt staff as a government mandate extends over a significant period. They pointed to the tendency, in the absence of such recruits, for top positions to be taken through attrition by junior staff who are not sufficiently qualified, by either education or experience, for their new, more responsible and demanding roles. These comments reflect the observation of Williams (1980, p. 221), writing about ministerial staff in place during the tenth year of the first Trudeau era, that an extended, uninterrupted period in Office tends to produce distinct changes in the composition of ministerial staffs, with individuals becoming younger, less well-educated and lacking in close personal or political ties to their minister. The result is that exempt staff in ministerial offices become progressively less experienced and have less influence, despite a seemingly steady growth in budgets and personnel.

3.0 CHARACTERISTICS

This study offers a broader perspective on the subject of political exempt staff than do those conducted previously, in that it involves interviews with individuals who served as ministerial assistants at one time or another over a 40-year period, at either the federal or provincial level (principally in B.C.), for one of three different political parties. Interviewees were asked questions regarding their age upon recruitment to an exempt staff, their previous contact, if any, with the
elected official for whom they went to work and about their prior partisan political activity, if any, including specifics concerning election campaign roles performed or party offices occupied. They were also asked questions concerning their educational background, previous work experience and the length of their tenure in the one or more exempt staff positions held by them. (See Table 4-1 on page 45).

The data for this study indicate that political exempt staff come from a wide variety of occupational backgrounds, have a reasonable amount of work experience prior to recruitment, overwhelmingly demonstrate previous partisan allegiance, and are relatively well-educated at the time they are hired.

3.1 Recruitment Age

The average age of the interview subjects upon their recruitment to an exempt staff position was 28. The range of individual's ages upon recruitment was 20 to 45, with the median age being 26. Tilley (1977, p. 410) found that ministerial aides "tended to be hired in their late 20's", Williams (1980, p. 221) refers to them as being "young and upwardly-mobile", while Savoie (1983, p. 515) notes that "a large number of individuals in ministers' offices were starting or early on in their careers ..."

This study found that while 57% of the former exempt staff interviewed were recruited directly by the elected official for whom they went to work, 82% of the interviewees had no contact previously with their employer. However, 88% were involved in partisan political activity prior to being recruited for an exempt staff position. Of these individuals, 48% had held elected office within their party, 55% had taken on a senior role at least once during an election campaign and a further 13% had performed a junior campaign function.
3.2 Previous Political Participation

While there was no partisan differentiation with respect to prior political involvement, this activity appears to have been more common among those recruited from the mid-1970s onwards. One individual from an earlier generation of activists remarked that, "Becoming involved in Canadian politics during the 1960s was positively Masonic. The secret to how one joined a political party was never revealed."

Almost half (45%) of the interviewees had been active in the student wings of political parties before joining a minister's office. Again, this was more common among those who were recruited to an exempt staff in more recent years. It was particularly true of the Conservatives who went to work for the Mulroney ministry.

Tilley (1977) discovered that 29% of his sample of exempt staff had been close friends of the elected official for whom they went to work, while 22% had no previous contact with their employer. One-quarter of the ministerial aides surveyed had held office in the relevant political party prior to assuming their job on the exempt staff, with 9% having been previously elected to public office. The Williams (1980) and Savoie (1983) studies are silent on these matters.

In writing about the advent of the Rae administration in Ontario, White (1993, p. 127) states,

The qualities sought in executive assistants were good organizational skills, good political judgement, good human relations skills and (least in importance) the capacity to deal with policy. It went without saying that anyone considered for a position in a minister's office had to be a member of the Party faithful who had paid his or her dues over the years. The closest analogue within the NDP sphere of reference was a good campaign manager and a high proportion of executive assistants came from that background.

The research findings for this study, gleaned from interviews with individuals having a variety of other political affiliations, would tend to confirm the relative importance of partisan
political experience to those who would seek to serve on a minister's staff.

3.3 Previous Work Experience

The people interviewed for this study had an average of five year's experience in the work force prior to joining a minister's office. The range of previous work experience was from none to 21 years, with 14 individuals having had 3 years or less and 10 persons having had at least seven year's experience. None of the time considered in these calculations involved work in another exempt staff position. Their previous occupations were varied: including a chemist, a stockbroker, two teachers, an advertising manager, a foreign service officer and two sales representatives. Three persons had been in public relations, four were lawyers and another four were from journalism. There were also two individuals who had been political party organizers before becoming an exempt staff member.

Tilley (1977, p. 411) also found that ministerial aides came from a wide range of previous occupations, including students, engineers, social workers, lawyers, film-makers, businesspersons, economists, sales managers, accountants and the clergy. While Williams (1980, p. 221) concluded that, "There is, clearly, no dominant occupational category from which ministerial aides are drawn", Savoie (1983, p. 514) discovered that, among his sample, 50% had no previous work experience, other than in another minister's office or that of a member of Parliament, 30% had an unspecified amount of private sector experience, 10% had spent an undetermined time in the employ of the federal government and 10% had worked for an unknown period at some other form of occupation.

3.4 Educational Background

As for educational background, the present study found that among those interviewed, 12% had only completed high school, 18% had some years in university or college, 45% had obtained a university degree, 15% had completed two degrees, and 10% had finished three. In other words,
70% had obtained at least one university degree prior to recruitment. By way of comparison, the most recent Statistics Canada report states that only 13% of Canadians hold a university degree. (The Labour Force, 1996). A number of the others completed university during the period between serving two stints on a minister's staff.

Tilley (1977, p. 410) reports that of his respondents, 9% had completed high school, 47% had obtained a university degree and 43% had completed two or more university degrees. Williams (1980, p. 221) states, simply, that, "In general, ministers' offices are made up of ... relatively well-educated individuals." In 1977, a mere 8% of Canadians had obtained a university degree (The Labour Force, 1977).

Lastly, Savoie (1983, p. 514) determined that, of those who responded to his survey of federal ministers' office staffs, 35% had no university degree, 55% had completed one degree and 10% had obtained two degrees. As of 1983, some 10% of Canadians had earned at least one degree (The Labour Force, 1983). Savoie concluded that the employee profile of a minister's office was equivalent to that found at the junior to middle level of the federal civil service. He states, "...If one views educational background and work experience as important criteria in assessing the competence of employees, as does the Canadian public service, then ministers' staff are lacking." (Savoie, 1983, p. 515).

Savoie surveyed ministerial assistants employed towards the end of a longstanding Liberal Party regime in Ottawa. His findings are consistent with both the observations of Williams (1980, p.221) and remarks made by various interview subjects during the current research concerning the tendency toward decline in the calibre of political exempt staff as a government's mandate is extended over a significant period.

Other than describing objective criteria (i.e., education level, work experience, prior
political involvement) it is extremely difficult to measure the calibre of exempt staff. An accumulation of a substantial amount of anecdotal evidence based on first-hand observation is likely the best way in which to approach this task.

3.5 Tenure as Exempt Staff

This study discovered that, with regard to their tenure as a ministerial aide, the average time spent was four years, with 10 people spending five or more years on staff. Among the sample of 33 interviewees, 15 served in two separate administrations. Of those interviewed, 36% served less than three years for, as one person stated, "It was a tough job, with horrendous consequences for one's personal life. It was also an "insider's process", by nature exclusive. Rather like a comedians' convention where everyone spoke in code."

Tilley (1977, p. 410) found that ministerial assistants tended to serve, on average, two and one-half years in their position, while Williams (1980, p. 221) asserts that such individuals "regard their stint in Ottawa as a valuable stepping-stone on their way to a more permanent career ... The average term of employment for a ministerial assistant is slightly more than two years." Savoie (1983) does not comment on the tenure of ministerial staff.

4.0 MOTIVATION

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the research for this paper concerned the motivation, or more correctly, motivations of political exempt staff. Why did they become involved in politics and, more particularly, why did they seek to join, or agree to an offer of employment in a minister's office, as a member of his or her exempt staff?

Among the literature on human behaviour in relation to politics it has been claimed that,

A general proposition relating stimuli and political participation appears repeatedly in the research findings: the more stimuli about politics a person
receives, the greater the likelihood he will participate in politics, and the greater
the depth of his participation. Evidence supporting this proposition comes from
at least twelve different studies and eight different countries [not including

And, further, that, "Persons of higher socio-economic status, especially higher education, are more
likely to become very involved psychologically in politics than others. The surest prediction of
political involvement is the number of years of formal education." (Milbrath, 1965, p.53). These
claims are supported by each of the Tilley (1977), Savoie (1983), and current studies, which found
that 90%, 65% and 70% level of political exempt staff had at least one university degree. The
proposition is also reinforced by the research findings in this study concerning the level of prior
partisan political activity by those who go on to become part of an exempt staff.

In order to address the issue of motivation, the 33 interview subjects were asked questions
concerning several distinct types of incentive: expected economic reward, proximity to power,
ideological commitment, and affiliative needs. Prospects for career advancement, status rewards, a
shared vision of a better society and a sense of belonging to a team seemed to broadly cover the
range of likely motivation(s) of persons who become political exempt staff.

As anticipated, virtually no one claimed to have been attracted to an exempt staff position
because of expected economic rewards. While it was acknowledged by the Mulroney era
ministerial aides that salary levels were decent relative to obvious alternative sources of
employment, income was not a factor in their decision to join an exempt staff. As for job security,
everyone understood before taking such a position that it was one of the most uncertain occupations
imaginable in terms of tenure. You are employed at the pleasure of the minister, with no public
service protection, and should your minister's seat at the cabinet table disappear, so does your job.
As one person explained, "It was understood and accepted that all slaves were to be buried with
their Pharaoh." None of the people interviewed had been under any illusions about the degree of
insecurity and likely short-term tenure of their post in a ministerial office.

It was expected that a goodly number of these individuals, each of whom appearing to be an upwardly mobile young man or woman at the time of recruitment, would have seen a stint on a minister's staff as part of the effort to improve their socio-economic status. Some 40% of the subjects did see their tour of duty on an exempt staff as a vehicle for career advancement. Most of these people saw the position as ideal for building a network of contacts for future endeavours.

However, given that their work is physically and intellectually taxing, requires long hours and weekend work, and is both insecure and non-lucrative, it cannot be the formal conditions of employment which attract these people to positions on a political exempt staff.

I found that only one of the interview subjects went on to seek elected office after their experience in a minister's office. None of the exempt staff employed during the 1980s or early 1990s did so. This may in part be explained by the deterioration which seems to have taken place in the socio-cultural context of Canadian politics over the past two decades or so. If ministers' exempt staff, consisting of highly motivated young people who have become well-acquainted with the political process, no longer go on to seek elected office in disproportionate numbers, it may indicate a weakening in our democratic government, or at least a decrease in the attractiveness of a political career. Any such trend is worrisome, for a "political system, must attract as well as direct men's aspirations. Political ambitions must be aroused as well as restrained for the system to function properly. If it does not kindle ambition for office it is in danger of breaking down." (Schlesigner, 1966, p.107).

However, research findings for this study indicate that career considerations in general, but not the desire to seek elected office or join the public service in particular, were a major factor motivating many people's decision to do a tour of duty on a political exempt staff. Some 36% of
those interviewed were attracted to the job because it constituted a rare opportunity to acquire esoteric knowledge. Those who were motivated by intellectual considerations said they thought that the experience would "enhance their professional equipment" or "be a very useful step for their subsequent career". Others felt it "would be a unique opportunity to see things from the centre" or that it "would be a once in a lifetime opportunity to work closely with a premier and get a real sense of how government operates."

While 27% of the interview subjects acknowledged that their prime motivation was the excitement of the political process, only one person admitted to having been attracted to the work by status considerations or the perceived proximity to power. One person wanted "to avoid the drudgery of real life".

Some 45% of the interviewees claimed that their principal incentive in joining a minister's staff was a sense of mission or a desire to help make a better society. These people tended to see public service as an important, worthy thing. Many were influenced in their thinking by parents, other close relatives or teachers whom they admired. "Make change happen" was the leit-motif running through the interviews with those who were motivated by fundamental emotional incentives rather than intellectual considerations.

While only one person claimed to have been attracted to work on an exempt staff by an affiliative need, such as a sense of belonging to a team, some 52% of those interviewed were motivated to do so by the appeal of a particular politician, either a party leader or the individual for whom they went to work.

The motivation of the various subjects was rarely singular and, where otherwise, not mutually exclusive. No discernable patterns were identified nor was it possible to differentiate motivations by generation or partisan affiliation.
No previous study has enquired into the motivations of ministerial aides and assistants except Savoie (1983), who claims that a prime attraction of an exempt staff position was the potential for access to a federal civil service career via the "three year rule". Relative to the federal civil service, Savoie found that ministerial staff were poorly paid, had virtually no job security and very few opportunities for advancement. However, those with at least three continuous years of service were able to place their names on a priority list with the Public Service Commission. They could then be offered a junior or intermediate level position without going through a competition or formal examinations, provided that there was a vacancy and they met the general eligibility requirements. Savoie (1983, pp. 515-516) asserts that ministerial staff frequently enter public service under the "three year rule". He does not, however, cite any evidence, from his survey or otherwise, to support this assertion. The research for this survey does not support Savoie's claim. Only three of the 33 people interviewed went on to pursue a career in the public service upon leaving their exempt staff position, although the “three year rule” was in place while all served as ministerial assistants. It remains in place today. (Section 71 of the Civil Service Act, 1962, as amended.)

Writing in 1980, Williams examines the role of ministers' offices as a recruiting vehicle for the political party in power. He claims that ministers' staff provide a "superb source" of workers and candidates for the governing party (Williams, 1980, p.225). As evidence in support he points to the then federal cabinet, nearly one-third of whom had been at one time members of a minister's staff. Neither Tilley (1977) nor Savoie (1983) examine this point. This study does not support Williams' contention. Rather, it reveals a pattern of subsequent career paths which involved a continuation of close ties to government on behalf of private sector interests. Almost two-thirds of those who did not join the public service following their time on an exempt staff went on to pursue
a career as a lobbyist, a public policy analyst, a pollster, a lawyer, a trade association representative or a corporate public affairs officer.

It is interesting to trace the career paths of two of the most experienced and successful individuals among those interviewed. The first completed an undergraduate degree in political science and, shortly thereafter, went to work at the national headquarters of a federal political party. He moved on to become a field organizer for a provincial political party, the executive director of another such party in a different province and then became principal secretary to the premier of the latter province. His career took him back to Ottawa as the national director of a federal political party and then on to a senior government relations position with a major national industry association. He returned to politics, once again as principal secretary to a premier, and went from there to become the chief executive officer for a leading provincial business group.

The second individual, after completing a graduate degree in law and then both practising and teaching law for a number of years, went to Ottawa as the executive assistant to a federal minister. He became the deputy minister of a national department and then served as principal secretary to the prime minister. Ultimately, he was appointed to the Senate of Canada and himself served as a minister of the Crown. Currently, he remains a Senator and has returned to the practice of law.

In some ways, the most interesting portion of the interviews was that which dealt with the former exempt staff members' reflections on their own experience working for an elected officeholder and their observations on the role which exempt staff generally perform in the political and governmental systems. As a result of their experience, some 36% of those interviewed found that their partisan political allegiance intensified, while only 2% saw it diminish. Almost two-thirds of these former exempt staff maintained the same level of partisanship which they took into the job.
Notwithstanding the constant or intensified partisan commitment of almost all interviewees, only 52% have engaged in significant political activity since leaving the exempt staff position. This represents a substantial drop from the 88% level of political participation by these individuals prior to joining an exempt staff. This attrition rate may be related to the large number of interview subjects who referred to the experience of being a ministerial aide as a "burn-out job", which effectively eliminated any chance for a personal social life.

In a classic study on political participation in the United States, Milbrath (1965, p.18) constructs a "hierarchy of political involvement" in which an individual's participation in active politics follows a natural progression. "As a person becomes more involved in politics, he engages in a wider repertoire of political acts and moves upward in the hierarchy from the more frequent to the less frequent behaviours." (Milbrath, 1965, p. 19). People rise from being "apathetic", or completely uninvolved, to "spectators", who may initiate a political discussion or display partisan identification on their person or property, to "transitionals", who will attend a political campaign event or make a financial contribution to a candidate, and, ultimately, to "gladiators", who are active in political parties or election campaigns, raise funds or seek elected office themselves.

According to Milbrath (1965, p. 21), at the time of his research, about one-third of the adult American population could be characterized as being politically apathetic and another sixty percent performed largely spectator roles in the process. Only seven percent were actively involved in politics, with a mere one or two percent who could properly be described as "gladiators".

Political participation rates in contemporary Canadian society, at least judging by recent voter turn-outs, financial contribution records, candidate volunteer numbers and party membership levels, would seem to be roughly similar. A fairly recent demographic profile of political party activists in British Columbia (Blake et al, 1991, p. 26) confirms Milbrath's contention that
persons active in partisan political organizations tend to come from the socio-economic elite. This study does not, however, directly address the question of participation rates as a percentage of the adult population. A study for the 1991 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform (Stanbury, 1991) clearly demonstrates how few people or corporations make financial contributions to Canadian political parties. In any event, even though research for this study indicated a significant decline in the number of exempt staff who have engaged in "gladiatorial level" political activity since leaving their position, virtually every interview subject remained sufficiently involved in the process to come within the "transitional" category.

Some 24% of those interviewed experienced an increase in their level of idealism as a result of working in an exempt staff position, while 33% found that their cynicism level rose. A few individuals stated that they had become both more idealistic and more cynical as a result of their experiences. Many expressed a greater appreciation for both the complexities of government and the opinions of others stemming from their time on a minister's staff. Interestingly, every person interviewed felt that their stint as an exempt staff member had been a rewarding experience and each one said that they would encourage others who were interested in signing up.
TABLE 4-1
CHARACTERISTICS OF EXEMPT STAFF, FOUR STUDIES

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<td>Recruitment</td>
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<td>(Average Age)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>&quot;Early in Careers&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Young&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Late 20s&quot;</td>
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<td>Non-Political</td>
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<td>Work Experience</td>
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<td>&quot;50% have none&quot;</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Average No. Years)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Degree(s)</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>&quot;Relatively Well-Educated&quot;</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Percentage)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure As Exempt Staff</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
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<td>(Average No. Years)</td>
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CHAPTER 5

DUTIES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND INFLUENCE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the findings of the study as they concern the work environment of political exempt staff, including the roles performed by cabinet ministers; the duties and responsibilities of exempt staff, including an assessment of their relative influence on public policy-making; and the relationships between exempt staff and the civil service, professional lobbyists and other influence-seekers.

It is difficult to generalize about exempt staff, who collectively constitute a rather select group of actors on the political scene. In almost every case, they are recruited from outside the ranks of the civil service, usually from a partisan political background and often as a result of the personal intervention of the elected office-holder for whom they go to work. Whether these political auxiliaries perform as powerful, policy-influencing confidants or act merely as a glorified, overpaid valet depends on a great many factors.

Whether the individual works in a central agency, such as the Prime Minister's Office or a premier's office, as opposed to a cabinet minister's office affects their degree of influence, as does their specific designation: principal secretary, chief of staff, executive assistant, policy adviser, special assistant, media aide, research assistant. Titles do signify something in terms of salary and authority but they can be, in some instances, misleading as to a person's relative influence in the overall scheme of things. You need to look behind the formal designations to determine such factors as what degree of previous attachment, if any, does the aide have to the elected official, how much direct access does he have, or what is the reporting relationship which the assistant enjoys?

In general, however, there is a hierarchy among exempt staff; they do not merely constitute
a pool of equals. The exempt staff in a central agency, such as the Prime Minister’s Office or a premier’s office, is headed by the principal secretary. This individual is usually an exceptionally powerful figure in Government circles. In a minister’s office, the top exempt staff position often carries the title of executive assistant or chief of staff. Administratively, all other exempt staff report to this key person.

Unlike special assistants, press aides, or research assistants, policy advisers may have more latitude for independence in dealing with elected officials. Senior policy advisers often have considerable influence. Usually, they are not interested in nor adept at administration.

2.0 WORK ENVIRONMENT

Interestingly, only one person out of the 33 interviewed was at any point during their stint on an exempt staff presented with a formal job description. It was rather vague and proved to be irrelevant in short order. Savoie, Williams and Tilley each comment on this phenomenon. Savoie (1983, p. 511) discovered that,

Provided his office operates within budget, a minister has considerable flexibility in whom he employs and the kind of tasks his staff carry out. There exist a remarkable variety in the tasks performed by ministerial staff, as well as a great variety in previous occupations and educational backgrounds of ministerial assistants ... So far as could be discerned, no job descriptions or detailed outline of responsibilities existed for any of the different positions. Ministers established their own working relationship with staff and directed the tasks and responsibilities that they were expected to assume.

Williams (1980, p. 222) states,

that any discussion of the organization and functions of ministerial offices cannot be categorical. The operation of a minister's office varies with the personality of the minister, the individual traits of staff members, the nature of the department and certain conditions imposed by the prevailing political environment.

Tilley (1977, p. 411) concludes,

The size and effectiveness of a minister's staff and the degree of authority it possesses varies widely due to the highly personal nature of the relationship
between the minister and his staff. A minister is responsible for choosing his staff, assigning duties to specific staff members and judging their qualifications. They are accountable to him alone and he will bear the responsibility for their actions.

The style of a particular administration will often be reflected in the size of political exempt staffs, the budget allocation pertaining thereto, and the prominence permitted certain unelected political operatives. The Mulroney government created a virtual parallel bureaucracy with political staff, many of whom were fairly visible. Conversely, in the W.R. (Bill) Bennett, Social Credit administration in British Columbia (1975 to 1986), exempt staff were few in number and the unwritten, but well understood, rule was that if a ministerial assistant was quoted in the media they were to be fired immediately. Also, the point at which a Government finds itself in terms of the usual four-year mandate, or the number of consecutive elections which it has won, were mentioned by more than a few of the interview subjects as being significant considerations in determining the influence of political exempt staff, individually and collectively. The consensus view expressed was that, over time, Governments tended to lose their partisan vigour and, in general, exempt staff members became less closely connected with, and therefore less influential with, their minister. This opinion was shared equally by interviewees from different parties.

Again, each minister is unique due to a variety of factors such as personality, political stature and ambitions, ministerial responsibilities, policy interests, etc. Some may be status-oriented, while others may be "policy wonks". The type of exempt staff each may want or need is subject to a great many variables, idiosyncratic and otherwise. Some ministers were described as being "high maintenance" individuals who required a glorified babysitter. Another was so immersed in his departmental policy process that all partisan work, including decisions on patronage appointments, was delegated to his exempt staff.

All interview subjects agreed, however, that as exempt staff their chief pre-occupation was
to further the aims and ambitions of the politician whom they served. This required that they exhibit a special personal loyalty, not in the spirit of servitude but, rather, as confidant, adviser and, in some cases, alter ego. For, as Axworthy (1988, p. 247) notes, according to Francis Bacon, "The greatest trust between man and man is the trust of giving counsel."

Politicians exist in an unforgiving, highly competitive world, where the lust for power produces strange and often unforeseen behaviour. It is a dynamic and uncertain world, one in which people tend to form alliances rather than friendships and in which information is the chief medium of exchange. Loyalty is often praised and seldom practised. As one minister once remarked, upon taking his seat on the treasury benches for the first time and looking across the Legislature, "So, there are the enemy". "No," replied a more experienced ministerial colleague, "That is the Opposition. The enemy is seated behind you."

There was general agreement among those interviewed that, in recent decades, electoral contests have become a mass-marketing phenomenon and a political party's fortunes have become increasingly tied to the image of the party leader. Accordingly, in order to advance a minister's political career, his or her staff ought to focus their efforts on keeping him or her regularly in the news and always, of course, portrayed in a favourable light. The minister, with their help, has to appease the parliamentary caucus and party adherents, influence the media, placate various interest or grievance groups, impress the electors and, in particular, his constituents, and, most importantly of all, maintain or enhance his status and worth in the estimation of the prime minister, or premier, and his cabinet colleagues. Again, the interviewees agreed that the crucial ingredient in ensuring a politician's success in such a demanding environment was preparation for each of his varied roles. The quality and timeliness of the information which a minister takes into cabinet, committees, Parliament or the Legislature, a media interview, or a "town hall" meeting determines his or her
credibility. This in turn is the key to commanding attention from his or her colleagues, interest
groups and the media. Increased attention results in a perception on the part of the public and his or
her fellow politicians that the minister has greater influence, he or she is "someone to watch", a
coming force. In short, he or she has power and is likely to acquire more.

One individual, who has held a number of senior exempt staff positions, provided an
excellent example of "aligning a staff's agenda to the minister's needs". He once inherited a
minister whose political career was in trouble. The minister had a good grasp of his departmental
responsibilities but he was not well regarded by opinion leaders in the Prime Minister's Office or by
the news media. Accordingly, the staffer set out to rehabilitate the minister's career by, firstly,
doing a complete overhaul of the exempt staff. This involved bringing in people who were "well
plugged-in" and popular around Ottawa and Parliament Hill in particular. He identified the
minister's main detractors, recruited exempt staff who were close to them, and turned opinions
around. He pushed the minister to improve his performance in the House and with the media.
Lastly, he brought to an early completion a few high profile "success stories" for interest groups
associated with the department. This demonstrated that the minister "had some juice" and started
people talking. In fairly short order, perceptions of the minister changed significantly for the better
and his political career began once again to rise.

As stated earlier, only one of those interviewed had ever been provided with a written job
description and it proved to be irrelevant. There was a consensus that the work of political exempt
staff was arduous and all-consuming, with twelve to fourteen hour days being the norm. One
person described life as a ministerial assistant as constituting a "five to nine job". The work culture
is analogous to that of Capital Hill in Washington, D.C., which U.S. Senator John Glenn has
described as "the last plantation" (Romzek et al., 1997, p.1257). As in the U.S. Congress, Canadian
ministerial assistants work at the whim of their employer, who sets the style and pace of work for the office.

3.0 ROLES OF CABINET MINISTER

The time and energy demands on a cabinet minister, let alone a prime minister or premier, can approach overwhelming levels, as they have such a broad range of responsibilities. Simultaneously, they are the administrative head of a department, a member of cabinet, with collective accountability for the entire government, a legislator, a constituency representative, and a senior partisan politician, subject to a variety of party demands and duties.

While public servants usually perform the dominant role in assisting a cabinet minister in his or her capacity as both administrative head of a department or legislator, political exempt staff come to the fore in relation to their minister’s activities as constituency representative and partisan politician. The efficient processing of constituents’ case work, the minister’s attendance at both a myriad of ceremonial functions and interminable meetings with local government officials and other worthies, as well as the obligatory and constant nurturing of the constituency association rank and file, require extraordinary amounts of time and effort from the minister’s exempt staff.

As a senior partisan politician, a minister will likely be responsible for the promotion of party fortunes across a fairly large geographic area or among one or more identifiable demographic groups in the population. Again, the amount of scheduling, liaison and political intelligence-gathering tasks to be performed by exempt staff are enormous. In the contemporary Canadian political world a cabinet minister exists in a fish-bowl atmosphere, one in which the acceptable time for a substantive, or at least plausible, response to an opponent’s allegation or a media enquiry is extremely tight. Exempt staff are essential to keeping their minister at the top of his or her political game. In order to do so the guiding imperative must be to get the job done, regardless of one’s title
or perceived position on the totem pole.

In discussing the demanding, multi-faceted role of a minister, Savoie (1983, p. 519) notes that, in addition to departmental administrative tasks,

he must attend to House duties, to his correspondence, to caucus duties, to his constituents and Party affairs. He is expected to read a flood of documents for Cabinet and Committee meetings. He also has other responsibilities, including special responsibilities for other government agencies [such as Crown corporations] and regional [political] responsibilities for the ridings assigned to him.

In Canadian cabinet government, ministers are at the apex of power. They constitute the integration of politics and administration. A cabinet minister's job involves huge, virtually absurd time demands, especially in the political realm. As Mallory (1967, p. 26) observes,

Their political as distinct from administrative responsibilities are great and omnipresent, and it is not surprising that ministers have clung fiercely to the right to surround themselves in their private offices with congenial and politically useful staffs. This is all the more important because the necessities of representation in the federal system have imposed a certain ambiguity on ministerial responsibility by recognizing that ministers have, in addition to their departmental responsibilities, an ill-defined but important representative role in relation to matters connected with their districts or provinces which gives them a right to "interest themselves" in the operations of other departments which bear on this special political constituency.

According to the interviewees, the pressures on political exempt staff, particularly those who occupy senior positions such as principal secretary, chief of staff or executive assistant, though less public are no less intense. Some 52% of those interviewed were assigned their duties and responsibilities by the elected office-holder for whom they worked, while 64% maintained a direct reporting relationship to the elected official. All interview subjects professed to have easy access to their minister whenever the need arose, while only those who were in top exempt staff positions had unlimited daily access.

4.0 RESPONSIBILITIES OF EXEMPT STAFF

The scope and mixture of exempt staff duties and responsibilities seems from the interviews
to be broad and varied. While it is virtually impossible to compartmentalize functions or separate them into partisan or non-partisan categories, there appears to be a universe of tasks associated with political exempt staff. They can be grouped according to three broad headings: co-ordination, liaison and counsel.

Given the extra-ordinary demands on an elected official's time, and the apparently endless volumes of paperwork which confront them, the essentially administrative tasks of co-ordinating the paper-flow (correspondence, cabinet submissions and related documents, departmental memoranda and policy position statements, speech drafts, news releases, etc.) and the schedule (cabinet or committee meetings, parliamentary attendance, departmental briefings, appointments, speaking engagements, media interviews, travel arrangements, constituency duties, social functions, etc.) become a first order priority. Interviewees agreed that disorganization in a minister's office is not uncommon. It would lead inevitably to unpleasant surprises, missed opportunities and an often politically fatal perception of ineptitude on the part of the minister's colleagues, the media and the public.

With respect to the liaison function, political exempt staff play a pivotal role in an elected official's interaction with cabinet colleagues, the parliamentary caucus, interest groups, the media, constituents, and bureaucrats in both his or her own and other departments. For instance, Tilley (1977, p. 413) found that, given the overwhelming time demands upon a minister and the fact that he or she is often in a forum which keeps him or her out of contact, the only way for senior departmental officials to get their minister's thinking on a subject was through his or her exempt staff. Ministerial assistants serve as both "a buffer and a bridge" for their minister and become a vital channel for information, the medium of exchange, particularly political intelligence. The key to success in this latter role is the development of a broad network of friendly contacts among other
ministers' staff, influential party activists, the media, interest groups and the bureaucracy.

As an example, one interviewee, who had become concerned about the alienation of exempt staff from each other as the Government's mandate became extended, created "Wonderful Wednesdays" - a mid-week social event on Parliament Hill which attracted widespread regular attendance from exempt staff and provided an excellent opportunity for the informal exchange of political gossip and other "intelligence". It also helped foster a camaraderie among the ministerial aides and assistants.

In particular, it is essential to prevent your minister from suffering political isolation due to what one interviewee described as the "enveloping embrace of the civil service". Exempt staff must maintain the minister's "political lifelines" and keep him or her regularly involved in the partisan activity which gives a politician's life meaning and expression.

One of those interviewed emphasized the importance of ministerial travel in this regard. At some point, his minister's departmental responsibilities involved virtually every community in Canada, no matter how isolated. The minister was keen to visit every departmental facility across the nation and, not surprisingly, was greatly encouraged to do so by his senior public servants. The exempt staff made certain that every stop on the minister's itinerary had at least one significant partisan event. A ministerial aide kept track of the party adherents in attendance and, over time, the minister developed by far the largest network of partisan contacts in the country. Eventually, this fact enabled him to play a crucial role in determining who became prime minister.

According to interviewees, it was very common for exempt staff to travel with the elected official for whom they worked. Often during this "windshield time" ministerial aides have the greatest opportunity to influence their minister's opinions or decisions.

In their role as counsel to the elected office-holder, political exempt staff discharge a variety
of important and related tasks. They may serve as confidant, providing advice, reassurance and a "friendly ear" when the occasion demands. They prepare responses for the minister to anticipated questions in the House, during media interviews or public meetings. They examine and comment on cabinet submissions or other policy proposals, drawing attention to politically sensitive matters or electoral implications. This is particularly important concerning issues where the minister's own departmental officials have little interest and no expertise. In every instance, it is essential to brief the minister so that he or she may make an informed response to policy proposals in time to influence the decision of cabinet.

Exempt staff may also serve as an independent source of ideas, by submitting "think pieces" of their own or obtaining outside advice, so as to extend the range of policy options available to their minister. A number of interviewees stressed that this is done to supplement not supplant public service expertise. Often, they will produce or critique drafts of the minister's speaking notes and politically significant correspondence. Particular attention is paid to the minister's constituency casework.

An extremely important element of exempt staff responsibility, which combines the liaison and counsel functions, is to monitor the progress of ministerial initiatives and ensure that decisions are implemented both in the manner intended and in a timely fashion. As one interviewee stated, "You have to imbue the bureaucracy with a sense of urgency, while translating curt instructions into polite and reasonable requests." He explained that it is also important to "protect your minister from himself, by keeping things humanly possible", citing one instance in which the minister had "upwards of fifty pieces of consequence" in the legislative pipeline.

Throughout the interviews the theme of protecting the elected official came up. It was important to "keep the minister in touch with reality by protecting him from sycophants or axe-
grinders", or to "replenish the minister's intellectual well-spring by preserving sufficient time for him to read and reflect."

This was consistent with the findings of Tilley (1977, p. 413) who reports that when queried, ministerial aides agreed upon two key roles for those who occupy their positions: keep the minister aware of all potential trouble spots and try to ensure the minister is regularly portrayed in a favourable light before the public.

A former British prime minister, writing in the 1970s on the "Political Advisers' Experiment" stated,

Since a political adviser is the personal appointment of his Minister his specific role within any particular department will vary to some degree or another. His role will also depend on his particular background and experience. Examples, however, are: as a "sieve", examining papers as they go to Ministers ... as a "deviller", chasing ministerial wishes, checking facts and research ... medium and long-term planning ... contributions to policy planning within the Departments ... liaison with the Party ... contact with outside interest groups ... speech-writing and research ... It is for the Minister to decide what papers the political adviser sees and what work he does ... The political adviser is an extra pair of hands, ears and eyes, and a mind more politically committed and aware than would be available to a Minister from the political neutrals in the established Civil Service. This is particularly true for a radical reforming party in government, since "neutralism" may easily slip into conservatism with a small "c". (Wilson, 1976, pp. 203-204).

5.0 RELATIONSHIP WITH CIVIL SERVICE

To borrow an analogy from an earlier author (Axworthy, 1988), political exempt staff function as a "switchboard" which connects the party to the Government. In a sense, together with elected office-holders, they serve as custodians of the party's election manifesto, helping to ensure that the political values and policy priorities of the party are injected into proposals for government action. They are in place to help make certain that a prime minister, or premier, and his cabinet colleagues do not merely preside but, rather, govern - that elected office-holders are able to impose a pattern on events and see their decisions achieve the intended results. In short, to exercise power.
As Lipset (1981, p. 37) has observed, "The problem of modern politics is the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy, which becomes acute when those who hold political responsibility let the leadership slip from their hands and into the possession of the anonymous and therefore irresponsible bureaucracy". Reams of material have been published dealing with public policy formulation and implementation. As Osbaldeston (1989) and Langford (1990) have argued, over time there has been an erosion of ministerial decision-making and a corresponding increase in bureaucratic power.

Increasingly, the position of ministers is relatively disadvantageous vis-a-vis their supposed subordinates in the bureaucracy. As Crossman (1972, p. 24), himself an influential British cabinet minister for six years, noted, "The ascendancy of permanent civil servants over the fleeting succession of ministers who confront them shows no sign of abating." In Canada, some 25 years later, significant questions may be asked regarding the scope and capacity of an incoming Party to impress its policy program on the bureaucracy.

This is a serious concern, for the stability of any democratic society depends not only on economic well-being but also upon the effectiveness and legitimacy of its political system. Legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to keep government responsive to the will of the electorate. If public administrators are not perceived to be accountable and the political efficacy of the citizenry is cast into doubt, the system loses its ability to engender and maintain popular belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for society.

It is not uncommon in human affairs for the real centre of power to be different from that of nominal, legal authority. In the context of contemporary Canadian politics, contrary to constitutional principle, the executive, at least in times of majority government, has effectively usurped the powers of Parliament over the public purse and other matters of consequence. As one
commentator has observed,

The power of Parliament depends on the size of the Government's majority. Parliament no longer, if it ever did, exerts a major influence on public policy. Parliament does not control Government expenditures. Parliament's role as a legislative body is limited to ratifying legislation and, occasionally, amending it, usually in minor ways ... With a large majority, the Government can easily override the sound and fury of opposition parties ... (Stanbury, 1993, p.199).

All the more reason to be concerned about the relationship between the cabinet and the senior echelons of the civil service. In constitutional theory, democratically-elected and accountable ministers make the policy decisions, subordinate civil servants implement them. In actual practice, given the sheer size, complexity and myriad functions of the modern governmental “Leviathan”, the exigencies of the public policy process do not permit any such clear cut distinction. Ministers simply do not have enough time nor sufficient independent information to address all of the decisions required to maintain government services. Consequently, non-accountable civil servants, by default as much as by design, make a substantive contribution to the content of public policy.

Few of those interviewed expressed concerns over the risk of deliberate bureaucratic sabotage of a Government's policy initiatives due to a lack of sensitivity to partisan political considerations. Rather, the consensus view was that, while the foremost contribution of the senior civil service was it's accumulated knowledge and perspective due to permanence and experience, there was a decided tendency for these individuals to be somewhat rigid in their thinking and resistant to new ideas. Interviewees expressed the common belief that senior officials were predisposed to try and convince their political masters of the dangers of innovation. They would see one of their prime tasks as being the active discouragement of anything which might constitute bold experimentation or too radical a departure from traditional departmental policies (just like “Sir Humphrey” in Yes, Minister). Often, these constraints were narrowly defined. Such attempts to
stifle innovation would also be directed towards ideas emerging from within the lower ranks of the bureaucracy.

Some of those interviewed expressed the opinion that ministers who challenged bureaucrats to any significant degree were often made to look foolish or inept. One cited an example of a minister being forced to resign in "trumped-up circumstances". Access to complete and accurate information in a timely fashion is the key to a minister's credibility and performance. The senior civil service holds a virtual monopoly on much of the information an elected official may need. Ministerial briefings have been described by one writer as constituting "Blocked Channels", in which provocative, independent and incisive analysis or thought has been removed or seriously edited through a filter of repeated reviews. Reports to ministers "reduce hard facts to mush, a sort of intellectual pablum, which, while easy to digest, is readily forgotten." (Sallot, 1991, p. A19). Dissenting or unorthodox opinions are shunned and "group think" results.

Not surprisingly, given their background, all interview subjects agreed that, given the realities of modern government and certain of the tendencies of senior bureaucrats, it was essential to the accomplishment of a party policy program that ministers have a reasonable number of partisan adherents working in close proximity to themselves.

The environment in which elected office-holders, political exempt staff and senior civil servants function in the United Kingdom is well-described in the Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister television series, written by Jonathan Lynn and Anthony Jay in 1981 and 1986, respectively. The programs capture, through the use of humour and exaggeration, the essence of the relationship. They effectively popularize public choice theory, the notion of self-interested, utility-maximizing rational choice as the explanation for behaviour among voters, politicians and bureaucrats. (Borins, 1988, p. 13). Despite efforts to act independently and the not infrequent
atmosphere of confrontation, there is a recognition by all parties involved that collaboration and mutual reliance is essential to each other's success. Interestingly, Lynn and Jay drew inspiration and material for their insightful and revealing work from the late Richard Crossman's *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, 1964 - 1970*, itself a difficult yet enormously informative read. As Osbaldeston (1989, p. 29) argues, "A mutual dependence is inherent in the successful minister/deputy relationship. It is needed to move departmental policies and programs through government."

During the interviews, trust was identified as being a key factor in relations between a minister and his exempt staff on the one hand and the senior civil servants on the other. It also was indicated that it was neither the wish nor style of most ministers to intrude upon the administrative purview of the deputy. There tended to exist an uneasy co-existence based on a recognition of the reality that, however fragile or tentative, some sort of partnership had to be established in order for either the political class or the bureaucracy to function well. It became apparent fairly early on that, without trust, regardless of the level of administrative involvement by the minister or members of his exempt staff, the working relationship was doomed. As Milne (1995, p. 18) has observed, in commenting upon recent British experience,

... the civil service has acclimatised. At best, [ministerial] advisers are regarded as a helpful sounding board; at worst, an inevitable nuisance. Officials may try to assimilate, or to marginalize, the outsider - people who don't play as a member of the team.

According to those interviewed, relations between the senior civil service and political exempt staff were generally quite cordial and productive. As one person remarked, "Good ministerial aides get things done while bad ones are ignored by everyone. It is often a matter of personality, maturity and diplomacy." Only two of the 33 interviewees expressed the view that, in order to effectively advance a party policy platform and overcome bureaucratic roadblocks, it is necessary that our governmental system be dramatically altered so as to adopt the American
approach whereby each new administration brings a wholesale change in the upper echelons of the public service.

In terms of public policy formulation, the consensus view of those interviewed was that the influence of exempt staff would "ebb and flow" depending upon the issue. Some would require more political sensitivity, in which case ministerial assistants would "try to add value, rather than interference". Those who held a senior exempt staff position would serve as a "filter for bureaucratic advice", often intervening to make the "best political product" they could in the circumstances. As one former principal secretary stated,

A top adviser can have a real influence on policy priorities and how a political leader does his job. First, you must analyze how the politician operates and work within the parameters of his or her personality. You must be prepared to counter the conventional wisdom. There is no room for sycophants.

While the public service in most instances control the information which politicians rely upon in making policy decisions, the real friction point centres on the matter of "agenda control": who is to set legislative and other priorities, as well as to determine the level and pattern of expenditures. This issue is central to the understanding of political leadership and power. The answer to the question will differ from one administration to another and, as Axworthy (1988) argues in his discussion of a "strategic prime ministership", often determines whether the cabinet governs or merely presides. The relative influence of exempt staff, particularly those in the most senior positions, can tip the balance in favour of partisan vigour and creativity over bureaucratic perspective and caution.

Each of the six interview subjects who had at one time been the principal secretary to a prime minister or a premier offered some intriguing insights into the issue of agenda control. One discussed how the political imperatives of the leader, fleshed out into a strategy by senior exempt staff, determined the legislative agenda of the administration. Another wrote the government's
Throne Speeches and recorded all cabinet decisions, thereby becoming in Crossman’s terminology “keeper of the muniments”. This position bestows upon its occupant a “tremendous discretionary prerogative” (Crossman, 1979, p.9) because only that which is recorded officially ranks as precedent. Yet another related how he would often find himself, by force of circumstance, interpreting the political leader’s opinions and directives for the benefit of cabinet ministers as well as senior civil servants. He states, “You don’t fully realize the power you have until after you leave the position.” If so, perhaps that is just as well. Certainly the long hours working in close proximity, and the virtually unlimited access to a minister, gives senior exempt staff the opportunity to exercise what some may argue is an undue influence upon their political masters.

There was general agreement among those interviewed, particularly individuals who once held a senior exempt staff position, that party adherents working in the personal office of elected officials play a vital role in ensuring that a Government does not, to quote Lenoski (1980), "forfeit the political impulse" derived from its electoral mandate.

With respect to the public policy-making and legislative process, Williams (1980, p. 226) expresses a contrary view,

Ministers’ offices have very little involvement in the planning and drafting of government legislation. Some ministerial aides do, however, serve as a political sounding-board and screening agent for policies which emanate from the departments. Here again, the magnitude of this role varies considerably according to the personalities involved, but substantive contributions by political staff members in the policy-making process are the exception rather than the rule.

In commenting on relations between political exempt staff and the bureaucracy, especially relative to the former’s influence on public policy decision-making, Savoie (1983, p. 518) asserts, "our interviews with ministerial assistants and senior public servants confirm that ministers’ staff usually have no appreciable influence on shaping government policies and programs." Indeed, reading his analysis, in which he emphasizes the lack of time a minister is able to spend on
departmental matters and how even those few hours per week are spent responding to the initiatives of departmental officials, one gets the distinct impression that he believes even ministers themselves have relatively little influence on public policy formulation. Savoie (1983, p. 521) claims civil servants prefer ministers not to become involved in the policy-making process and he states, “with few exceptions, ministers are viewed as short-term appointments, short on ideas, and short on appreciation for the department's long-term interests.”

The findings of this study suggest that the potential exists for political exempt staff to exert considerable influence upon the opinions and decisions of elected office-holders and, further, that this potential is often realized. Senior exempt staff, such as a principal secretary to the prime minister or a provincial premier, may possess sufficient clout to exert a controlling influence in many circumstances.

6.0 RELATIONSHIP WITH LOBBYISTS

Another significant issue respecting the role and relative influence of political exempt staff was canvassed during the interviews: potentially how important are ministerial aides and assistants to the aims and aspirations of professional lobbyists, trade associations and other interest or pressure groups? Certainly, as government in this country has assumed an expanded role, influencing corporate behaviour and individual lives to a greater degree, the need to approach government for information, support or a specific decision has grown dramatically.

Given the sheer size and invasiveness of modern government the political agenda is always crowded and there are limits to the number of matters which can be processed at any one time. This is reflected in the pressures on the legislative time-table. Also, as one British author (Grant, 1995, p. 54) has noted, "Once a piece of legislation enters Parliament or a legislature the prospects of getting any significant changes are very remote. Accordingly, pressure groups will try to
influence policy as early on as possible, while in the formative stage, by talking informally to civil servants and ministers." He also asserts that,

Most lobbying is a rather dull business ... A lot of negotiation takes place with junior or middle-ranking officials. The great proportion of administrative judgements made and communicated to the public are by officials who have been well-trained in the largely fictional convention of ministerial responsibility. Most representations should be directed at a relatively low level of the administrative hierarchy. Action tends to be taken at the lowest level in the civil service at which it can be competently handled. (Grant, 1995, p.60).

The interviews with former exempt staff confirm the truth of both these assertions as they relate to the Canadian experience. The consensus view, however, was that both information seeking and lobbying for either general support or a specific decision could and should be carried on at various stages of the process and in a number of places. Stanbury (1993, p. 199) asserts that, in Ottawa, "Real power rests far further down the public service hierarchy than is often believed. The crucial grades are Assistant Deputy Minister to Director General."

Those interviewed agreed with the suggestion that ministerial assistants should be approached because they "are close to their minister's thinking, can ensure that information is conveyed to him if there is any risk of emasculation by over-jealous officials, and act as a ministerial opinion former." (Miller, 1987, p.162).

Interviewees expressed considerable interest, perhaps not surprisingly, in lobbying. A number held the view that, in contrast to their American, Japanese and European counterparts, Canadian business and professional groups, with the exception of those from Quebec, do a very poor job of staying in touch with government. As one former chief of staff commented, "They seem to believe that they can have influence without effort." Interestingly, the consensus among those who expressed an opinion on this topic was that so-called "social" interest groups tended to be much more effective in their lobbying efforts as they were shrewd and hard-working in their
approach to government.

There was general agreement that the advent of major, American-style lobbying in Ottawa coincided with the election of the Mulroney Conservatives in 1984. In part, this was due to the new government's acceptance of a more prominent role for "friends and insiders", who traded on their political connections (Cameron, 1989) and, in equal or greater measure, this development came about due to the large number of suddenly unemployed, but able and aggressive, Trudeau-era exempt staff, who made good use of their ties to the bureaucracy. In discussing the sudden influence and affluence of professional lobbyists, one Mulroney cabinet minister is said to have remarked, "What I don't understand is why it is better to know the minister than to be the minister." None of those interviewed, again perhaps not surprisingly, expressed much concern over the rise of professional lobbyists, except for one or two, who observed that regulation of the industry could use more emphasis on transparency. This concern has been addressed to some degree by the Chretien administration through amendments to the Lobbyists Registration Act and by the introduction of an ethics code.¹³

One former principal secretary stated that a great deal of his time was spent serving as "either a buffer or a bridge" to special interest groups, lobbyists or others "with an axe to grind". He remarked that, "A smart lobbyist is a good listener. He should know when and how a decision is going to be made." A former chief of staff would meet regularly with people on behalf of his minister, particularly where the minister was concerned about the propriety of a direct personal exchange with the party involved. This individual observed that "Door-openers were a real turn-off. People should represent themselves."

It has been suggested that government has fallen prey to special interest groups and lobbyists, who have formed a symbiotic relationship, or, more darkly, an unholy alliance, with
senior elements in the bureaucracy insofar as they have developed compatible and complementary vested interests. (Stanbury, 1993). While some of those interviewed had not observed this phenomenon, a number of those who had held the most senior positions would not disagree with the proposition. Interviewees agreed that exempt staff provide a valuable direct conduit to elected office-holders and, while that does not mean politicians will necessarily take their advice in preference to that offered by civil servants, they do provide a second opinion from a known sympathizer, someone who may often be an extremely close confidant and adviser.

In summary, the interviews revealed a consensus view that the degree of influence of exempt staff on public policy decision-making and their relative importance as a target for lobbyists varied considerably according to a number of factors, including the political saliency of the issue in question, the personal chemistry and level of trust between the politician and the staff member concerned, and the position of the Government in its mandate, relative to the electoral horizon.

Tilley comments inferentially on the relative influence of exempt staff in the policy-making process by acknowledging that often “the only way for senior departmental officials to get their minister’s thinking on a subject was through his exempt staff.” (Tilley, 1977, p. 413). Clearly, in such circumstances the opportunity for discretionary interpretation by exempt staff is substantial. Williams (1980, p. 226) asserts that “substantive contributions by political staff members in the policy-making process are the exception rather than the rule”, while Savoie (1983, p. 518) claims that, “ministers’ staff usually have no appreciable influence on shaping government policies and programs.”

Lenoski states that,

The size and nature of government today often permits ministers’ staffs (and, for that matter, sometimes ministers themselves) only a peripheral impact on policy development. They can, however, exert a substantially controlling influence in the policy-making process … They are in a pivotal position to help counterbalance the
monopoly of professional bureaucrats on policy advice (Lenoski, 1977, p. 171).

He concludes that,

The influence of political staffs hinges largely on the minister’s attitudes ... The minister’s willingness, along with his ability, to assert the required political leadership over that portion of the government machine under his direction is crucial (Lenoski, 1977, p. 168).

There can be no hard and fast rule laid down concerning the degree of influence which political exempt staff may wield in relation to elected office-holders. However, their potential for exerting considerable, if not controlling, influence is clear.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

As stated at the outset, the objective of this study was to examine the nature, function and influence of political exempt staff in Canada. Who are these people and what motivates them? Do they have an appreciable influence on government policies and programs? To what extent do they help shape the opinions and decisions of elected office-holders? Do they make worthwhile points of contact for persons seeking information, support or a favourable decision from government?

1.0 EXISTING LITERATURE

There is a relative dearth of literature on the subject of political exempt staff in Canada. In particular, only three research studies have previously been done concerning the calibre and activities of the staff in ministerial offices, with the last one having been conducted in 1983.

The author of the most recent study, Savoie, concluded that, based on the criteria of educational background and prior work experience, ministers' staff were "lacking in competence". The authors of the two earlier studies, Williams (1980) and Tilley (1977), did not comment upon the previous work experience of exempt staff and, as for educational background, Williams concluded that ministers' assistants were "relatively well-educated", while Tilley found that 90% of exempt staff had obtained one or more university degrees prior to beginning work in a minister's office. Williams noted that, an extended, uninterrupted period in Government tended to produce ministerial staff who were younger, less well-educated and less influential.

2.0 CURRENT FINDINGS - CHARACTERISTICS

This study found, as did the one conducted by Tilley, that exempt staff came from a wide range of previous occupations. While neither Tilley nor Williams report on the amount of previous work experience, this study determined that exempt staff had, on average, five year's experience in
non-political occupations prior to their recruitment, with one-third of those interviewed having had at least five year's work experience. While Savoie reports that 50% of his sample had no previous work experience, other than in another political staff position, he does not specify the amount of experience gained by the remaining half of his subjects prior to recruitment as a minister's assistant.

As for educational background, the research findings for this study, like the work of Tilley and Williams, do not support Savoie's claim that exempt staff are "lacking" in formal education. This study found that 70% of those interviewed had obtained at least one university degree prior to their recruitment to an exempt staff position and that a number of others completed university during the period between serving two stints on a minister's staff.

However, comments by some of the interviewees for this study supported William's observation about the relative decline in the calibre of exempt staff over the length of a long-serving Government. Savoie's study is consistent with such a phenomenon in that it was based, in part, upon two surveys conducted among exempt staff employed in Ottawa during 1983, toward the end of a virtually uninterrupted twenty year's of Liberal Government.

Similarly, each of the studies by Tilley and Williams was based on research conducted among ministerial assistants employed in Ottawa during the final two years of almost sixteen straight years in office by the Liberal Party. Conversely, those interviewed for this study had served in Ottawa, or one of three provincial capitals, at one time or another over a forty year span and represented three different partisan affiliations.

The research findings for this study do not support Savoie's claim that an important motivation for people in seeking an exempt staff position is the opportunity to gain entry to a public service career under the "three year rule". This may, however, indicate a sample bias in this study, given that all interview subjects were residents of British Columbia.
Nor does this study support Williams' assertion that ministers' offices serve as an effective recruiting mechanism for partisan activists and candidates for public office. Rather, the results of this study indicate a significant decline in the level of partisan political activity by former exempt staff members, relative to their experience prior to joining a minister's staff.

Interestingly, the findings for this study revealed no significant differences in the characteristics or motivations of exempt staff by either generation or partisan affiliation.

3.0 CURRENT FINDINGS - INFLUENCE

Among those interviewed for this study there was a clear consensus that exempt staff play a pivotal role in an elected official's interaction with the political and administrative worlds. They serve a dual function as both "buffer and bridge" for their minister and constitute a vital channel for political intelligence and other valuable information. In addition, they often serve as an independent source of ideas or advice and may, in some instances, be a close confidant of the elected official.

Given the inherent limitations of small, non-random samples and the necessary reliance upon a preponderance of anecdotal evidence, it is difficult, if not illegitimate, to make analytical generalizations concerning either the influence of political exempt staff per se upon government policies and programs or their ability to shape the opinions and decisions of elected office-holders. However, the research findings for this study indicate that exempt staff are well-positioned to make a major contribution in both respects. They are as close as can be to the centre of real power in our form of government, the cabinet. Time pressures on a member of cabinet in the contemporary Canadian parliamentary system verge on the absurd. As a result, ministers tend to rely heavily on their personal staff.

Close and almost constant proximity to their elected superiors, coupled with what often
amounts to virtually complete control over the flow of paper and the access of people to them, provides exempt staff with a unique opportunity to exercise discretionary authority. In addition, individuals in a senior exempt staff position, such as principal secretary to the prime minister or a premier, can exert considerable control over legislative and other priorities, including the level and pattern of public spending. Although exempt staff operate in the shadows cast by their political masters, it appears from this study that they are potentially very powerful individuals. The fact that their activities are often clandestine in nature, or at least substantially removed from public view, does not necessarily imply that such activities are nefarious. However, given the potential for abuse of power which exists in the realm of political exempt staff it would seem wise to subject these individuals to closer scrutiny than has been the case to date.

The influence that a person, or class of persons, may wield is, like power itself, an ephemeral phenomenon, and is, therefore, a topic which does not lend itself to blanket statements. The political stature and ambitions of the elected official, the nature of his relationship with the exempt staff member in question, the political sensitivity and saliency of the issue involved and the point in a government’s electoral cycle all may play a role in determining the relative influence of the ministerial aide or adviser. However, this study indicates that, on balance, exempt staff will have an appreciable effect in sustaining the political impulse.

4.0 CURRENT FINDINGS – POINT OF CONTACT

Should a professional lobbyist, trade association representative, or anyone else seeking information, support or a favourable decision from Government spend time dealing with political exempt staff? The findings for this study would suggest that they should do so. Exempt staff would appear to often be privy to significant amounts of potentially valuable information and also clearly seem to be a principal point of access to the public policy decision-making process.
As Government becomes increasingly omnipresent and its regulatory reach continues to extend (i.e., in British Columbia, during the past seven years alone, the revised statutes have grown from 9 to 15 volumes) it is becoming more and more apparent that business people in particular must maintain close connections with a wide variety of public sector policy animators and administrators.

Political exempt staff may make an especially attractive point of contact for business representatives if, as has been suggested, an "unholy alliance" exists between certain elements in the senior civil service and social pressure groups, such as environmental activists, etc.

This study has suggested a more positive frame of reference for political exempt staff respecting their characteristics, motivations and relative influence in the scheme of public life. It has challenged some previous assertions and provided certain insights into the particular perspective on the world of government-business relations held by exempt staff members.

5.0 FUTURE RESEARCH

This remains an area ripe with future research opportunities. For instance, the observations of exempt staff concerning the relative growth in size and power of central political agencies such as the Prime Minister's Office could be of considerable value. Unlike the Savoie (1983) study, with one exception the research for this study did not involve interviews with current or former ministers or deputy ministers. It would be useful to have some contemporary insight into the opinions of such individuals respecting the relative merits and significance of political exempt staff. Lastly, it would be particularly interesting to obtain the views on this topic of professional lobbyists and industry or trade association representatives, as well as others who deal on a regular basis with government departments and agencies. The range of issues for future research in this area would appear to be broad. For instance, what effective substitutes exist for political exempt staff? Would
it be appropriate for public servants, seconded from a department, to perform some of the more
blatantly partisan tasks currently done by exempt staff? What steps could and ought to be taken so
as to increase transparency surrounding exempt staff activities?

One thing is certain, an increasingly ubiquitous government necessitates that all who are
likely to come within its regulatory embrace must learn as much as possible about how to influence
not only public policy decision-makers but also those who are in a position to play a significant role
in shaping the opinions and actions of such decision-makers.
END NOTES

1. "Political Exempt Staff", also commonly referred to as ministerial assistants or, less often, as the "para-political bureaucracy" (Williams, 1980, p. 215), are exempt from both the restrictions on civil servants which constrain their political activity and the normal hiring rules and procedures of the Public Service Commission.

2. Studies specifically focused on political exempt staff in Canada have been carried out by Tilley (1977), Williams (1980) and Savoie (1983). Williams' study was based in part on survey research undertaken by Brooke (1978).

3. Calculations have been done using the Consumer Price Index to convert subsequent nominal dollar amounts into constant 1997 dollars. These figures are shown in brackets.

4. Interestingly, External Affairs Minister Joe Clark encouraged the Prime Minister, in a letter dated July 2, 1985 (some nine months after the Mulroney Government was formed) to increase political exempt staff levels. He wrote, "I think we made a mistake in limiting so severely the size of exempt staff. If we want to control policy and run the Department, Ministers need more staff." Quoted in Newman (1995), Appendix Two, p. 406.

5. Since the mid-1960s Canadian cabinet ministers have had, on average, five to seven exempt staff members. These individuals have been principally responsible for the minister's constituency work and partisan political duties which, depending on the stature of the minister, can be formidable. Further, Parliamentary Committees have no full-time staff, relying instead on the ad hoc assignment of Library of Parliament (Research Branch) personnel.

6. The object of the Dorion Inquiry was to investigate the efforts of Raymond Denis, Executive Assistant to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, and others to influence a lawyer acting for the United States' authorities not to oppose a bail application on Rivard's behalf.
7. Sandford Borins (1988) discusses how the popular British television series draws much of its inspiration from the public choice model of decision-making and how this is reflected in the behaviour of the key characters in the series. The politicians and bureaucrats are shown engaging in humourous exchanges which involve self-interested, utility-maximizing rational decision-making.

8. J.L. Howard and W.T. Stanbury (1984) review various dimensions of governmental activity, with the objective of determining the significance of the modern State in our economic life and the impact of government upon the behaviour of firms and individuals in the private sector.

9. In addition to the three studies by Tilley (1977), Williams (1980) and Savoie (1983), Lenoski (1977) and Axworthy (1988) have written insightful articles on this topic.

10. None of the interview subjects for this study came from the ranks of N.D.P. exempt staff. In a number of ways, the N.D.P. appear to be a political party unlike the others. Activists at the federal level and in the provinces tend more to share a common worldview. Resources, including key people, are shared by the federal party and N.D.P. provincial governments. Individuals who become exempt staff in an N.D.P. administration are more likely to make a career out of work in the para-political bureaucracy, party headquarters or the civil service of one or another province where the N.D.P. form government.

11. However, patronage is an integral aspect of politics. Cabinet ministers tend to have a relatively significant number of appointments which may be filled by party adherents or personal supporters. The wise politician makes patronage appointments which involve public sector positions well removed from his or her regular sphere of influence or activity, thereby making it easier to avoid future conflict.

12. Blake, Carty and Erickson (1991) define political party activists as persons who have three vital
roles to perform: provide the manpower for the party’s electoral machine, define the party as a "community of believers", and attend local meetings or provincial conventions in order to vote on questions of party organization and policy, the nomination of candidates for public office or the selection of party leaders.

13. The “Lobbyists’ Code of Conduct” came into effect on March 1, 1997. It’s purpose is to assure the Canadian public that lobbying is done ethically and with the highest standards, with a view to conserving and enhancing public confidence and trust in the integrity, objectivity and impartiality of government decision-making. The Code establishes standards of conduct for all lobbyists communicating with federal public office-holders.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


**APPENDIX "A"

**INTERVIEW SUBJECTS**

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Positions</th>
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</table>
John Swift
Executive Assistant (Ottawa) 1972-74
Principal Secretary (Ottawa) 1984

Joseph Whiteside
Special Assistant (Ottawa) 1987-90
Legislative Assistant (Ottawa) 1990-92
Executive Assistant (Ottawa) 1992-93
APPENDIX "B"

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section A: Basic Personal Information:

1) Year of birth? 19__

2) Male [ ] Female [ ]

3) Country of birth?
   Canada [ ] Other [ ] Specify: ________________________________

4) Education prior to recruitment?
   High School [ ]
   University [ ] Degree(s) ________________________________

5) Occupation(s) prior to recruitment?
   Type(s) ________________________________

Section B: Recruitment & Partisan Political Experience:

1) Member of political party prior to recruitment? Yes [ ] No [ ]

2) Which one(s)? ________________________________

3) Age(s) upon joining party? _________

4) How recruited? ________________________________
   When? ___________________ By who? ___________________

5) Position(s) within party?
   i) Member of Constituency Association? 19__/__
   ii) Local Executive Member? 19__/__
   iii) Provincial or National office? 19__/__
   iv) Candidate? 19__/__
   v) Other Campaign role(s) 19__/__
      Specify: ________________________________
6) How recruited for political exempt staff? 

When? By whom?

7) Position(s) held on political exempt staff?

19 / 19 / 19 / 

8) Reason(s) for change/advancement?


9) Reason(s) for leaving political exempt staff?


Section C: Motivational Influences:

1) Expected Economic Benefits?
   i) Salary?
   ii) Job Security?
   iii) Prospects for advancement? (politics, civil service, other?)

2) Proximity to power?
   i) Status?
   ii) Excitement of process?

3) Partisanship/Ideology?
   i) Vision of a better society?
   ii) Civic-mindedness?

4) Affiliative needs?
   i) Sense of belonging?
   ii) Team-spiritedness?

5) Impact of individuals?
   [Parent(s), sibling(s), friend(s), teacher(s), politician(s), other(s)]

6) Motives change over time?
   Describe:
Section D: Duties & Responsibilities:

1) Central office (ie. PMO) or Minister's office?

2) Size of staff allotment?

3) Paid from public purse?

4) Subject to Public Service Commission rules

5) Written job description? Describe.

6) Who assigned position and duties?

7) Immediate superior?

8) Conflict of interest or other guidelines apply to position? Post-employment? Describe.

9) Functions clearly delineated?

10) Percentage of time spent on:
   i) Partisan political activity.
   ii) Media relations/spokesperson.
   iii) Speech-writing/research.
   iv) Office administration.
   v) Patronage appointments.
   vi) Scheduling/correspondence.
   vii) Travelling (with Minister).
   ix) Departmental liaison
   x) Interest group liaison
11) Relevance of education or occupational experience to role on political exempt staff?

12) Access to departmental briefing materials? Cabinet documents?

13) Control over Minister's schedule? Paper-flow? If not, who did?

14) Influence over public policy formulation or implementation?

15) Role change over time? How?

16) Was Minister supportive? Personal friend?

17) Attitude of civil servants?

Section E: Reflections & Observations:

1) Partisanship increase or decrease?

2) Become more idealistic or cynical?

3) Skills developed?

4) Networks developed?

5) Subsequent career?

6) Subsequent political activity?

7) Views on system?
   i) Recommendations for change?
   ii) Ethical concerns?
8) Rewarding experience? Repeat?

9) Encourage others to join political exempt staff?

10) Single greatest accomplishment?