

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Marland, Alex. *Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control.* Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. \$ 39.95 CAN, hardcover (9780774832038).

Stephen Harper's government was known above all for one thing – message control. *Brand Command*, written by Memorial University political communications expert, Alex Marland, helps make sense of this message control and explores the implications of such control for democracy in Canada. It is a well-researched and well-written book, but it is not a comforting read.

Marland takes a provocative and highly relevant position vis-à-vis Canadian politics, power, and communications – i.e., that as interactive, web2.0 media expand democracy itself shrinks. Indeed the dominant metaphor for the Canadian political scene is that of a communications war. Marland argues that while rhetoric and image manipulation are as old as politics itself, there is something new under the political sun – branding.

Brand Command's thesis is that centralization of power in the hands of the political elites has to be understood in the context of communication practices and technologies. With what is called the “permanent campaign”, governing parties integrate governing with promotion of the image (brand) of the party leader and the larger party. The autonomy of parliamentarians, the media, and civil servants (who serve the people) is compromised as branding erodes essential barriers between partisanship and governance. Moreover, Marland argues that Westminster systems like Canada's - with their tendency toward party unity and centralization of power - are more prone to political branding than presidential systems.

The branding of commodities begins in the mid-eighteenth century when consumer goods with little discernible difference (coffee, tea, cocoa, soup) were packaged and marketed around a brand name. Later, advances in consumer research allowed consumer desires and longings to be fed back into and stimulate the overdetermined brand. Marland does not suggest that Harper's Conservatives invented political marketing and branding, but they developed it to an extreme.

The key to branding is the integration of all aspects of one's product - control, repetition, and "outward-facing symmetry" (49) of image and messages. Hence, for example, the Government of Canada website's appearance, and government signage and logos, changed from traditional red to Tory blue as state, government, and party blurred into one brand.

Secrecy and discipline are also essential to political branding. As branding strategy develops within political parties the capacity for journalists and academics to gain insider information declines, and pressure on party members toward the party line as "brand ambassadors" increases (regardless of personal conscience and the obligations to local riding constituents on the part of parliamentarians). Marland's research is impressive on this count. He attained access to top Conservative strategist, Tom Flanagan, and thousands of pages of internal party files and documents, as well as other unnamed informants. Access to information applications were used to attain insider communication (even though the PMO is immune from such applications).

Marland argues that legitimate policy formation and branding are antithetical. The former is messy and complex, while the latter is pleasing, emotional, and seemingly easy. As communication technologies develop toward more democratic participation (two-way, immediate communication) the more the electorate demand transparency and the more political elites seek to control communications (while appearing open and transparent). Public monies are fed into the continuous campaign by way of policy - e.g. in 2014 Health Canada spent \$7 million on anti-marijuana advertising (but failed to gain expert support because of the appearance of partisanship and the requirement of signing a confidentiality agreement) as Justin Trudeau began to promote the legalization of marijuana.

Brand Command is filled with examples of the integration and blurring of government, state, civil service, and party. One chapter offers a case study of the Economic Action Plan, a stimulus program that was advertised for years after the program concluded. Using all types of media, and supported by a 35-page "visual style guide", the EAP was used as an umbrella brand to integrate all government messages and images. Agencies that were previously considered impartial bodies, like the Canada Revenue Agency, were pulled into promoting the EAP. The Privy Council directed that all government websites steer visitors to the EAP site. Images of Harper filled the site. And while the press corps famously complained about staged and restricted access to the government and the PM (including being

forced to agree to contracts restricting the content of their reports), they also fed into political branding by making use of entertaining content. When Harper would throw them a bone – e.g. playing Beatles tunes on the piano – the press would eagerly oblige him with publicity.

Brand Command went to press shortly after the 2015 federal election that swept the Liberal Party to a majority win. Marland apparently penned the preface just after this election, inviting readers to consider how the observations in the book apply (or fail to apply) to Prime Minister Trudeau and his party. Certainly, the Liberals practice brand command as much as the Conservatives had, but Marland points out that they employ what is on the surface more “direct” communication between leader and citizens, taking advantage of 2.0 interactivity and the celebrity-type intimacy of Trudeau and his family. The trick for the Liberals is to exert brand command in a more Goffmanian way – that is, so that the effort of impression management does not itself show. It was this gap between efforts and effects that had made Harper appear a control freak with, for example, his rare, tightly scripted press conferences, that encouraged the press to frame him as an autocrat. Marland points out that civil servants greeted the new Prime Minister with cheers and applause. Are they beholden to this prime minister through adoration just as they were to the former PM by coercion? Are the Liberals the real masters of brand command?

Canadian sociologists will always have a special relation to Stephen Harper and his government. Not only did we watch the dismantling of information-based policy tools like the mandatory census, but Harper twice famously invoked the word “sociology” to denigrate those who seek to make policy issues complex. *Brand Command* shows how easily any government can turn against the public consideration of policy and democratic representation as a part of its consolidation of power through continuous branding, the permanent campaign, and compromising the independence of parliamentarians and the civil service. The book ends with a list of law and policy reforms necessary toward making government responsible to its citizens in this brave new world. This list is a must-read, as is the book as a whole. As a jargon-free, narrative-driven account of Canada’s political landscape, *Brand Command* is relevant and appealing to academic and lay readers alike.

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