

Notes and Comments

Notes et commentaires

The Role of the Registrar in Academic Government— Some Contrasts Between Canada and Britain

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I spent the spring term 1977 seeing how the academic governmental processes in the universities and colleges in one province of Canada, British Columbia, compared with British practice. My purpose was to discover what kind of administrative support existed for formal decision-making and how far co-ordination was achieved between the different parts of the system. In Britain “academic administrators” are those people who are in quasi-civil service positions and whose whole career will normally be in administration of a type solely connected with the functioning of an academic institution. The most important of these officials, in the relation to academic government, is the registrar or secretary. I am using the former title as it is the more usual in Britain and is the one normally used in Canada.

Titles are deceptive. The registrar is an easily identifiable member of the bureaucracy; his function is unambiguously non-teaching and there are certain clerical tasks traditionally associated with his post which one expects to be universal. His role in academic government can be formal, it can be subtle and it can vary between active and passive. British registrars’ roles cover a broad range of duties in academic administration; some also have responsibility for the non-academic administration of a large organization such as personnel and buildings. The responsibilities of Canadian registrars fall solely into the academically based administrative area but nevertheless their roles have a different bias from their British counterparts. Reading the legislation which governs the existence and operation of the three provincial universities in British Columbia led me to expect that the registrar’s functions would resemble the academic administrative tasks of registrars in Britain. I found that, despite the legal wording, the actual operation is rather different.

The British Columbia Universities Act 1974 ascribes three functions to the registrar. The first is as returning officer for elections. It is the second and third which interested me. They are ‘There shall be a registrar, who shall keep such records and perform such other duties as the board or senate may require. The registrar is secretary of convocation, the senate and of each of the faculties, but he has no right to vote as such.’

According to Moodie and Eustace in their substantial study of British university government, British university charters are even less specific, assigning duties “such as council ‘shall deem fit’” but, as they wryly noted “councils rarely deem by formal pronouncement.” They

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found that the Privy Council Model Charter gave a reasonable definition in making the registrar ‘responsible for providing secretarial services for the court, the council, the senate and for the administration of the university’. In a whole chapter of their book *Power and authority in British universities*, they discussed the important role the registrar plays in supporting the ability of committees to make decisions based on well-researched facts.

An interesting contrast is found in the major Canadian study. In 1966 a British vice-chancellor (Sir James Duff) and an American political scientist (Robert Berdahl) completed a report commissioned by the (now) Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the Canadian Association of University Teachers. It is worth looking at their brief. It asked them “to examine the charges . . . that universities are becoming so large, so complex and so dependent on public funds that scholars no longer form or even influence their own policy, and that a new and rapidly growing class of administrators is assuming control, and that a gulf of misunderstanding and misapprehension is widening between the academic staff and the administrative personnel with grave damage to the functioning of both.” They found that many of these points had some validity in some universities.

In analysing the situation in Canada in the mid-sixties Duff and Berdahl made many sound recommendations, some of which, such as broadening representation on the board of governors and senate, now read as standard for the period all over the world. Others are interesting to a British observer in that they highlight an essential difference between the nature of academic government in the two countries, as borne out by my recent observations. Duff and Berdahl were anxious about the inadequate functioning of senates, suggesting that the bicameral system only worked well if senate was able and willing to play a full part. A senate therefore needed to ensure that its voice was heard by the board and ‘that it is sufficiently well informed by the board, president and other agencies to be realistic in its recommendations’. They also recommended that senate “should concentrate on the ‘commanding heights’ of educational policy and leave the day-to-day administration of the university to the president and his associates.”

No reference is made to the support in these policy and detailed matters which might be expected from the registrar. The only role for him which is mentioned is one which would appear normal in Britain but is unusual in Canadian universities. Duff and Berdahl asserted that it was ‘essential for administrative assistance and record keeping services to be provided by the registrar. This function of serving the committees of senate should be laid down as one of the registrar’s fundamental duties’.

One might imagine that the functions listed in the Universities Act accord with Duff and Berdahl’s wishes but that is not how I observed the reality of the situation.

It would be naive not to expect to find some differences in the operation of different institutions. The scope of responsibilities of registrars in British universities varies; in polytechnics the registrar’s support role for academic decision-making varies even more, due to quality and quantity of staff, individual and institutional experience and expectations. In British Columbia the registrars at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University are responsible for all those tasks listed in the Universities Act whereas at the University of Victoria the functions are divided between the registrar (secretary of senate and the board of governors – a combination normally only found in Ontario) and the administrative registrar (admissions and records). As with many apparently odd organizational decisions there were good reasons rooted in history.

In Canadian universities faculties are the principal seat of power and, in many areas, authority. In British Columbia faculty meetings are open to all members of the faculty. Although it is not unusual for a faculty-wide committee to be established to consider a particular topic, with resultant recommendations, many items are presented from departments by their chairmen without full and clear recommendations. At senate committees a similar type of documentation appears normal. The form of the debate is more reminiscent of a debating chamber than a body fundamentally expecting to arrive at decisions by consensus. Whereas convention is strong in Britain and resort to formal rules of procedure normally only a political tactic, in the universities in British Columbia many decisions – even approval of the minutes – are made by formal motion from the floor.

The role of the registrar or his representative ranges across a broad spectrum of activity. In some bodies there is a junior member of staff acting as recording secretary, a passive role in which he or she has little part in the drafting of decisions. At the opposite end of the spectrum is a less usual type of involvement in which the registrar or his deputy is more active in assisting the committee arrive at a workable constitutional and politically realistic decision. One registrar described academics' acceptance of his assumption of this level of participation as proving he had won his spurs. The system does not expect officials to show much initiative in committee meetings but individuals may mould the system.

The style of meetings tends to be more formal than in Britain unless the membership is very small. Procedure is based on *Robert's Rules of procedure*, either explicitly or implicitly. This surprised me mainly because there is no equivalent constitutional manual in Britain and procedures tend to be simpler than many of the finer points of *Robert's Rules*. Two complementary comments came to mind as I sat through meetings. The points are relevant whether the meeting is of a whole faculty or a committee. The first is that in the Canadian style of meeting decisions are clearly made in a formal manner by motion so members are completely clear as to what is being decided and that a decision is being made. This is not always clear in British committees where decisions often emerge like flotsam from a disturbed sea of discussion. The Canadian system is so clear that it probably enhances the understanding and acceptance by those affected by the process of decision-making. However, the system with which I am familiar whereby the secretary has a more active role, mainly played before the meeting, has value too. If decisions are made on the basis of properly researched documents with possible decisions suggested, and their implications considered calmly and objectively, it is possible for all members to know what is being discussed without need for recourse to formal motions from the floor to round up the discussion. The chairman can summarize the decision, which may be exactly as recommended in the document or may be a subtle variation to it, and the secretary can refine the wording later. In this situation, discussions have more purpose as they are focussed from the start – and members know before the meeting what kind of decision they may expect to make – but more is required of the chairman and secretary. In particular, the latter has to be thoroughly familiar with the nuances of the topic and to be able to sense when a point was so strongly supported as to have been accepted by a majority.

Perhaps even more important is how the secretary is regarded by members of the committee and by the body of academics as a whole. Academics are not noted for their love and understanding of administrators (a kind of Achilles' heel in their otherwise strong bias towards fact, reason and objectivity I have always thought). If a committee is served by no

secretary or by one who is expected to be a mute recorder of discussions on topics with which he/she has had little association, it is not surprising if the role of the secretary is regarded as subordinate, with no dignity of its own. However, where the secretary is able to communicate with academics on a level with them on the basis of knowledge understanding and sympathy with their aims, the secretary can be expected to contribute constructively to the process of making decisions which will stand some chance of being acceptable to the body itself and to the institution as a whole.

Committee servicing is increasingly regarded in Britain as a professional skill performed by administrators rather than clerks. In British Columbia I found two contrasting types of person engaged in this work: a few professional graduate administrators at the registrar or deputy level, who are usually most active with the top level bodies and whose advice is much sought between meetings; and recording secretaries who are normally from a secretarial background rather than graduates actively recruited for administrative training and development.

Another difference in approach is found in the inclusion of the registrar in the list of members of senate committees. It is obviously seen to be important that procedural and factual information is available in discussion but the registrar is seen as a member (albeit non-voting) not as an official. The registrars themselves appear to get over this problem of role by referring to themselves as 'resource persons' or 'executive secretary'.

Although the Duff-Berdahl report stressed it strongly, the registrar in British Columbia is not often in an active supporting role for senate committees. There is a tendency to adhere strictly to the letter of the legislation in terms of acting as secretary of senate and faculties (although at Simon Fraser political pressures in the past have prevented the registrar from fulfilling the faculties' role.) Many of the less important senate committees have no registrar's representative associated with their meetings. Their agendas, papers and minutes are the responsibility of the chairman who may or may not have been able to persuade a departmental secretary or another member to act as scribe. There is no central channel through which liaison between committees can be guaranteed. Furthermore, I came across one topic which was under consideration in faculties, a senate committee and a president's committee with no formal link between them.

The contrast with British practice is well illustrated by Moodie and Eustace's description of the officials' relationship to the committee structure of the university: 'They attend committees, in many cases they supply the briefs and documentation without which committees would not know what they are deciding, and they are expected to see that committee decisions are carried out.' In commenting on the usefulness of the senior officials they observed that 'they are particularly well placed to feed in ideas or proposals at the point in the structure, and the time, at which they stand the greatest chance of a favourable reception; not least of their strengths being the opportunity, as close observers of all committees, to know the styles, prejudices and personalities involved.' The emphasis is clearly on a strong active but subtle central role which enables co-ordination to take place.

I have not witnessed this occurring to the same degree in British Columbia and conversations with people knowledgeable about other North American institutions lead me to think that British Columbia is not exceptional in this regard. One must therefore assume that either this kind of co-ordination and factual support comes from elsewhere or that it does not exist. The deans appear to hold the key. They are full-time and are regarded as administrators, a description which their British counterparts, where they exist, would not care to

admit to. They hold considerable power and authority much of which relates to matters, such as salaries, which are outside the realms of individual institutions' command in Britain. Their relationship with the university president is strong although in the three universities in British Columbia the extent to which this is formalized into regular meetings of all deans, president and vice-president varies. The inclusion of the registrar in such meetings also varies. The importance of these high level meetings is considerable. Deans are appointed by the board of governors on the recommendation of the president, normally from nominations made by a faculty search committee. They serve on senate, which not all the vice-presidents do, and they are often found among the membership of senate committees. Consequently they are the only people who naturally have access to all the levels of decision-making. However, their role is not one of administrative support; it is of academic (and political?) involvement in the way the university is and will run. Indeed, their loyalty is to their faculty not to senate or the university as a whole.

Although the president is an *ex officio* member of all senate committees his involvement with them is often slight. The British practice whereby the vice-chancellor/director or a deputy chairs the major committees is not much seen at UBC although it is clearly found at Simon Fraser and Victoria. The separation between the management responsibilities of the president's office and academic government is strongly felt by some vice-presidents and non-faculty deans. Co-ordination of academic government, at an administrative level, does not appear to be carried out in the president's office.

The conclusion must be that the role performed in Britain by the registrar in providing and co-ordinating a professional support service for decision-making is not one thought to be important in British Columbia. This conclusion is even more relevant to the other post-secondary institutions where the registrar has no role at all in the committee system. The influence which a registrar in Britain can acquire over a long period may be anathema to Canadians who are used to more political influence in top civil service appointments than the British would like to know about and it may be related to the fact that the top executive structure of the universities changes when a new president takes office. In a situation where presidents, vice-presidents and deans are appointed for five-year terms (and many have lasted much shorter) it might not be politically acceptable to allow an official to get too close to the process of academic decision-making at all levels of the university. It is a fundamental principle of academic government in Britain and in Canada that academic staff decide academic policy for their own peer group. It is a matter of detail – but I tend to think of efficiency also – how they proceed to those decisions. However, to make a *public* judgement of the relative efficiency of the decision-making processes and support of any institution requires more than three months' observation.

References

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