Reflections on Commission Research

Alan C. Cairns
University of British Columbia

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the role of research in royal commissions. It is based primarily on my experience as one of three research directors for the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, popularly known as the Macdonald Commission. Since royal commissions appear in many guises, much of what I say may not apply to other commissions. In general, my remarks are more applicable to those commissions that give advice on significant public policy matters than to more narrowly investigative commissions set up in response to allegations of corruption or scandal in government or to determine the causes of serious
accidents. In these latter, essentially judicial, commissions, there is little need for the extensive social science research used in such policy inquiries as the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations (Rowell-Sirois), the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (Laurendeau-Dunton) and the Macdonald Commission.

Major policy-oriented royal commissions typically leave a double legacy—a report and published volumes of research. Individual research volumes, such as the Rowell-Sirois study by W.A. Mackintosh on *The Economic Background of Dominion-Provincial Relations,* occasionally attain the status of classics. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism published more than two dozen supporting research monographs that filled a yawning knowledge gap in the understanding of the crucial political issue of Canadian dualism. As a byproduct, the commission created a cadre of researchers for future studies after it had expired as a corporate body.

In general, royal commission research, both by its specific shaping effect on many of the researchers and by the diffuse long-run impact of its published research on the scholarly community, stimulates an enduring scholarly focus on the commission's policy agenda. In this way, royal commissions counter the narcissistic introspection to which academic disciplines occasionally succumb and remind academics of the social obligations of scholarship.

The Macdonald Commission's research legacy is substantial. The 70 volumes of research distributed in English by the University of Toronto Press have sold more than 100,000 copies. As several of the volumes are used as university texts, steady sales will continue for some time. My unsystematic observation of the recent literature of Canadian politics also suggests that the research volumes are widely used by political scientists.

The rationale for this extensive research output came from the most ambitious mandate given to a royal commission in Canadian history.

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3 One of the most ambitious research projects of recent decades, Kenneth McRae's ongoing multivolume study of four multilingual western democracies—Switzerland, Belgium, Finland and Canada—was stimulated by his senior research role on the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission. Two volumes have appeared, *Conflict and Compromise in Multilingual Societies: Switzerland* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983) and *Conflict and Compromise in Multilingual Societies: Belgium* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986).

4 All research volumes are also available in French from the Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Supply and Services Canada, Ottawa.

5 Ronald Watts, referring mainly to the federalism research, stated: "Although the quality of these studies is uneven, the body of research will undoubtedly provide, for many years, invaluable materials for scholars, students, and policy-makers." "The Macdonald Commission Report and Canadian Federalism," (1986) 16 Publius at 179.
2. THE MACDONALD COMMISSION 1982–1985

The Commission's comprehensive, open-ended mandate, made public in November 1982, was sometimes paraphrased in the aphorism "[T]he universe is in trouble, please advise." The Commission simultaneously confronted the unfinished agenda of constitutional reform left behind after the 1982 Constitution Act and a battery of issues related to Canadian economic performance in a tougher, leaner world.

The two main surviving constitutional issues from two decades of intergovernmental struggle were the reform of central government institutions and the accommodation of the Quebec government that had angrily rejected the agreement hammered out in November 1981. Although clearly on the Commission's agenda, these political and constitutional concerns lacked the urgency of the economic issues. The Constitution Act of 1982, whatever its imperfections — including its rejection by the Quebec government — was in place. Reforms to serve such political values as regional responsiveness and accountability appeared to be of lesser priority than a commission response to the inadequate performance of the economy in terms of inflation, unemployment, low productivity and conflictual labour-management relations.

The economic issues focussed on the role of the state in the domestic economy and Canada's position in the global economy. The former included the issue of the fragmentation of the Canadian economic union that the federal government had put on the table in the summer of 1980 and which indeed was part of the title of the commission. The latter, how Canada would relate to the international economy, required an assessment of the likely future evolution of the post-World War II liberal international economic order and the devising of policy for the best way to change, or render more secure, the growing dependence of Canadian export trade on the United States market.

The Commission thus had to deal with many topics. Such topics of concern included the politically explosive issue of Canadian-American relations, with the 1911 reciprocity election as a reminder that this was sensitive territory indeed; the related issue of the positioning of Canada in a global economy characterized by Darwinian economic competition; the debate over the domestic economic and social role of the state that was on the political agenda of democratic governments throughout the west, reflecting both the neo-conservative resurgence and the recession of the '70s; and the need to assess the viability of parliamentary government and federalism, now joined by the Charter as a third constitutional pillar, in the light of anticipated future demands on the Canadian state.

6 Honourable Jean Chretien, Securing the Canadian Economic Union in the Constitution (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1980).
This intimidating mandate was handed over to an unusually large group of 12 commissioners and a chairperson. The latter, Donald S. Macdonald, a former Minister of Finance and a lawyer, led an intellectually, politically and occupationally diverse group of Commissioners. His was a difficult role, not because the Commissioners were a particularly fractious group, but because their varied backgrounds gave them differing perspectives on their collective task.

The Commission undertook extensive hearings across Canada. The first round of hearings in the fall of 1983 lasted 59 days and elicited over 1100 briefs and over 700 oral presentations. A shorter second round of hearings in five cities over 15 days in the spring of 1984 generated feedback to the Commission's interim discussion paper *Challenges and Choices*. The public hearings were supplemented by many private consultations with provincial governments, interest groups and experts.

The magnitude of the Commission's task was summed up by Senator Lorna Marsden, a critic of the report, who claimed that "the terms of reference were impossibly wide, the Commissioners impossibly numerous and diverse, [and] the time constraints impossibly short." The terms of reference had a sunset clause requiring the Commission to report within three years of its establishment. Given the time required to get such a complex operation underway and the wind-down time necessary for writing, editing, translating and printing the report in both official languages, this was a heroic timetable. The Commission's three-volume report appeared in September 1985 and 70 volumes of research in both English and French were published over the next several months. The heterogeneous makeup of the Commission contributed to supplementary statements (minority reports) by six Commissioners who disagreed with particular proposals.

Much of the life of the Commission was dominated by the effort to come to terms with the breadth of the mandate. For the first two-thirds of its existence there was a pervasive uncertainty about what would be the ultimate focus of attention of the Commissioners. Beyond the broadest generalities it was not known what the final report would cover, how long it would be, who would write it, how its audience should be defined, and whether its style should be analytically rigorous — and thus based on the academic disciplines represented in research — or more exhortative and populist. The relative importance of the hearings and research in contributing to the substance of the future

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9 At the time of writing, October 1988, two research volumes were still outstanding.
report was also unclear. For much of its existence, the Commission's efforts were directed towards a target that could only dimly be discerned.

This openness and uncertainty was written large over the Commission's interim document, Challenges and Choices, released halfway through its three year mandate and after the first round of hearings. The generally negative reception of the indecisive Challenges and Choices, along with the inescapable necessity of finding a structure and sense of direction for the looming final report, meant that the third year was devoted to developing the Commission's policy recommendations, working out the underlying philosophy that should undergird them and writing the final report. Although Challenges and Choices consumed a considerable amount of the Commission's scarcest resource, time, and had short-run negative effects on both internal morale and external evaluation of the commission, it was a valuable learning experience. The Commission was learning by doing, in the same way that a student who has produced a weak M.A. thesis may produce a better Ph.D. thesis than a fellow student who skips the M.A. stage and goes straight to the Ph.D.

3. NOT A BUREAUCRACY LIKE THE OTHERS

The royal commission is a bureaucracy with a difference. Its ephemeral existence, absence of routinization, task specificity and independent status distinguish it from the ongoing departments of government with their permanent staff, bureaucratic memory, subordination to political authority and enduring institutional concerns for their own survival and future strength.

A royal commission is made up of a temporary assemblage of personnel drawn from many backgrounds. They have only a short-term commitment to each other, to the organization and to their common task. They are often on loan from other employers and they cannot be indifferent to their post-commission existence.

Each royal commission commences with a clean slate. There are no bureaucratic memories and no old hands to educate newcomers in the genre's workings. Thus, each stage in the life of a royal commission is a new challenge, the response to which is not preplanned or predictable. For its major activities — the hearings, research and report writing — there is no routinization, for they are not cyclically repeated activities following the seasons or the budget year, but are only experienced once.10

In the Macdonald Commission this basic fluidity was compounded by the fact that many of the key participants were neither full-time nor located in Ottawa. While there was an ongoing core of administrative staff at head-

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10 There may, of course, be more than one round of hearings, and an interim report may be published.
quarters, the Commissioners themselves did not move to Ottawa and they did not drop all of their former responsibilities. Except when on the road during the hearings, or on their frequent commuting trips to Ottawa, the Commissioners operated from their various home bases. Further, the bulk of the research was undertaken by university-based academics scattered across the country who retained their normal teaching responsibilities, to which they added a specific piece of contract research. For most of the individual researchers, working on a small project on a contract basis, the Commission probably existed at the margin of their attention most of the time. Both their knowledge of and psychological involvement in the Commission were limited. Even among those more intensively involved in the research program — the three research directors, and the coordinators of the 19 research subfields — most continued their teaching and university administrative responsibilities, sometimes at a reduced level.

Given these organizational attributes, also shared by other large commissions, the success of such commissions in producing reasonable responses to their mandates is impressive. In part, and especially for commissioners and senior staff, extra effort is elicited by a civic sense of participating in a significant public activity. The memory of past commissions that have issued landmark reports, substantially influenced a major policy area, or both, is a constant reminder of the judgment day ahead. A chairperson knows that his or her reputation will be profoundly influenced by the quality of the report issued under his or her name.

Within limits, the fluidity, uncertainty and unpredictability that pervade the existence of a large commission are functional. Intellectually, on the Macdonald Commission, they prevented premature closure on issues that might be viewed differently when the results of the hearings and research were fed into the Commission. Politically, this openness worked against the creation of identifiable minorities among the Commissioners at an early stage, and thus probably helped to maintain group cohesion. With a large and heterogeneous commission, early decisions on basic policy issues that might not obtain a commission consensus would have risked turning the commission into a multi-party system with minority commissioners psychologically readying themselves for their anticipated dissenting minority reports. Bureaucratically, an instant organization composed of individuals who have not previously worked together and who face rather ill-defined future tasks is incompatible

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11 The practice of appointing a large commission, whose membership mirrors much of the relevant diversity of the society its proposals are to affect, threatens harmony among commissioners. The effort to enhance a commission’s legitimacy by making the commissioners a microcosm of the social divisions they seek to transcend puts an inappropriately heavy burden on commissions to mobilize consent and detracts from their more intellectual task of education and policy clarification.
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with an inflexible regime of rules and a predetermined assignment of roles and responsibilities. The appropriate philosophy to guide the organization of a royal commission must facilitate the recurrent rearrangement of commission personnel in the light of new tasks and ongoing assessments of individual performance.

If the Macdonald Commission is typical of the large policy-oriented commissions, there is a recurrent and inescapable crisis atmosphere. This coincides with a great deal of groping, experimenting and learning on the job. The process is frantic, exhausting, exhilarating and at times seriously demoralizing. For the big policy-oriented commission I suspect that this is the normal context within which the research role is worked out. When uncertainties extend to the foci and themes of the future report, the resultant absence of a clear sense of direction contributes to expanding the amount of research undertaken as a safety measure.

4. RESEARCHERS AND COMMISSIONERS: A FRUITFUL TENSION

For the policy-oriented commission dependent on research for much of its analysis, a crucial question is whether or not research is to be published in whole, in part or not at all. The nature of the research, its role on the commission and indeed the structure and identity of the commission are profoundly influenced by the answer. If there is to be an extensive published research output, the commission is caught in a dualism of structure, identity and final product. Effective leadership is necessary to ensure that the tension this may engender is creative.

The decision to publish research has various consequences.

1. The published research may weaken the persuasive case that the report makes for its recommendations. Whereas the report will seek to convince the reader of the rightness of its policy recommendations, the separately published research studies may identify roads not taken and weaknesses in the report's intellectual underpinnings. Such research is the functional equivalent of minority reports by dissenting commissioners, although it lacks their high profile. In such cases, research provides some ammunition for the report's critics. While this may appear to weaken the report from a narrowly political perspective, such discrepancies between report and research add to the quality of the debate a royal commission should engender.

2. The knowledge that research of acceptable quality will be published helps to attract academics to a commission's research program. It also means that their academic colleagues constitute an important audience for their work. This enhances the significance of disciplinary considera-
tions, possibly to the detriment of interdisciplinary research the commission may be trying to foster.

3. The dual output of research and report and the distinctive, if overlapping, audiences to which they are directed, are likely to elicit some tension between commissioners and researchers. Inevitably, the two groups will weight the relative legacy of report and published research differently. The commissioners will see research as an instrumental means for the production of a high quality report, viewed as the *raison d'être* of the commission's existence. For individual researchers, and for those with research management responsibilities — in the Macdonald case the three research directors and the 21 individuals who co-ordinated the 19 subfields — the research is additionally viewed as a semi-independent, discrete part of the commission's responsibilities. Part of the research task will be seen as the provision of a published intellectual legacy of the state of the debate on the subject matters the commission addresses.

4. This dual research mandate may generate a subtle tension between the commissioners' desire for policy advice and the academic temperament, reinforced by the prospect of separate research publication, that is often hesitant to make categorical statements about means-ends relationships.

5. In the early stages of the Macdonald Commission, the demands of a complex research mandate and the commissioners involvement in an exhausting hearings process tended to isolate senior research staff and the commissioners from each other. Both were burdened by the pressures of separate responsibilities that left them little time to prepare for the future when their isolation from each other would have to be bridged. Further, the fact that most of the research topics had to be, and were, selected before the first round of hearings was underway effectively precluded a major impact of the latter on the selection of the former.\textsuperscript{12}

The early Commission decision that research of acceptable quality would be published stimulated the research directors to create an infrastructure designed to ensure the integrity of the research process. The three main research streams were broken down into 19 subfields, each with one or two academics acting as coordinators. They were responsible for the supervision and monitoring of about 300 projects.

Most of the 19 subfields established Research Advisory Groups (RAGs) that met several times to assess research progress and to offer advice. Although they were composed mainly of academics, they also included a sprinkling of public servants and practitioners from the private sector. These RAGs broadened the constituency of academics and others involved with the

\textsuperscript{12} Additional research projects were undertaken in response to issues arising in the hearings and to specific requests from commissioners.
Commission and increased the diversity of views that surfaced for discussion. They were intended to produce some degree of cohesion, intellectual sharing and sense of community among researchers working with a coordinator.

Research papers and monographs were sent to outside referees for evaluation. This often resulted in revisions. In a number of cases, following criticisms from referees, manuscripts were not recommended for publication.

The working assumption was that manuscripts that had gone through this screening process and were recommended for publication, initially by the coordinators and then by the research directors to the chairman, would be published. On the whole, this procedure worked smoothly.

These arrangements reminded researchers that quality controls similar to the adjudication process for reputable scholarly journals would be applied to their work. They controlled the coordinators and research directors by confronting potential idiosyncratic recommendations for publication with negative assessments by external assessors. At the same time they depersonalized requests for revisions and rejections by locating their source in an impartial process that was normal in academic communities. On the other hand, the combination of positive assessments by referees and recommendations by both a coordinator and a research director for publication logically inhibited any possibility of political objections from “on high” opposing publication. These procedures to enhance the quality of research and to control the exercise of discretion were effective.

The partial replication of a normal environment for academic research reflected a crucial psychological consideration, the resistance of academics to hierarchy, of being treated as staff. University hierarchies are loose and flexible. Authoritative direction is least evident on the research side on which academic reputations are based. The prevalent assumption clearly is that creativity is most likely to flourish in the absence of formal constraint and direction and that the academic, like the artist, is driven by his/her own demons in the detection and unravelling of puzzles. The exercise of this freedom takes place in a complex system of academic disciplines, journals, professional associations, conferences, honours and the never-ending implicit and explicit ranking of individuals and departments. The individual scholar, in the evocative phrase of Michael Polanyi, belongs to a “society of explorers” engaged in the collaborative task of finding patterns in the universe.13 The institutional structures of academic life link together individuals who constantly influence each other by their published research although they may never meet.

Accordingly, the research community is driven not by command or authority, as conventionally understood, but by competitive evaluations and

the reputations they foster, based primarily on published research. In matters that concern research, this dependence on peer judgment makes academics peculiarly resistant to thinking of themselves as staff and of their research as subject to authoritative direction by hierarchical superiors.¹⁴

On the other hand, many of the Macdonald Commissioners were practical men and women of the world, accustomed to wielding authority and conscious of their responsibilities as commissioners. For some Commissioners, the academic world and mind were alien. Commissioners hoped for answers and the academics who “served” them often provided more questions. Some Commissioners, at least in the early stages, would have liked to bring more practitioners into the research streams. Not unexpectedly, the idea that academics were wordsmiths who did not understand the practicalities of business and government was not entirely absent.

The system of mutual dependence in which academics and Commissioners found themselves did not conform to the idealized world of either group. On the one hand, the university model of academic independence was clearly unrealistic in a commission setting where the choice of subject, timetable for submission and the influence of research were properly subject to commission direction. On the other hand, the involvement of Commissioners in the direction and management of research, beyond agreeing to the general parameters of research, could only be selective and intermittent. In fact, for the Commissioners as a group, their numbers coupled with the part-time nature of their involvement led them to a board of governors model for their role, with the crucial exception of the chairman who was, appropriately, a powerful presence.

The partial separateness of the researchers’ world on the Commission was given extra support by the vastness of the research program and the share of the budget it consumed. Presumably, a handful of researchers with a much more limited research mandate would have been more tightly linked to other units of the Commission.

It took some time to work out an acceptable pattern of relationships that was compatible with the above academic dispositions while still respectful of the central fact that research had to be relevant to the Commission’s mandate, had to be approved by senior commission staff and had to be submitted on

¹⁴ Cynthia Williams and Doug Williams have both suggested in correspondence that implicit in this paragraph, and elsewhere in the paper, there is a romanticization of the academic role and a misunderstanding of the extent to which senior public servants are driven by professionalism, looking inward to their professional consciences and outward to their professional associations for norms to guide their discretion. They are simply driven, no more than academics, by a command or authority system. Nevertheless, the academics on the commission clearly tried to reconstruct a university context for their research which, rightly or wrongly, they contrasted with a conflicting image of government bureaucracy.
time or its utility would be lost. Even so, for some Commissioners, it is probable that the academics continued to be viewed as a somewhat difficult group, prone to seek an exaggerated independence and allegedly more concerned with research for its own sake than for its contribution to the report.

Had the research been defined as simply for the internal use of Commissioners, and hence not to be published, the tension would have been reduced. Such research could have dispensed with much of the normal scholarly paraphernalia of reviews of the literature, disciplinary jargon, and the forbidding apparatus of footnotes. Such research would be closer to the normal pattern of permanent officials advising political executives which is customary in the bureaucracy. Researchers would have been closer to being staff and their subordination to Commissioners and senior commission officials would probably have been more pronounced.

Speculatively, it may be suggested that research in such a context would not only be different in nature — approximately more to policy-briefing memos than to scholarly articles — but it would also be weaker in quality than research that is intended for publication. It would not be subject to the constraints that attend research that is judged by scholarly peers nor to the controls of bureaucratic conscience that guide civil servants in historic branches of government. Further, given the hothouse atmosphere, the sense of urgency and crisis and the fluidity that are abiding royal commission characteristics, such unpublished in-house research might have become an exercise in persuasion and manipulation to which the “court politics” aspect of royal commissions lends itself.

In summary, the understanding that research is to be published gives researchers an autonomy that may be viewed as unwelcome by some others on the commission and it unavoidably leads to a dual commission output that may weaken the political authority of the report, however, it almost certainly contributes to the quality of the research and subjects it to professional norms. Paradoxically, this increases the autonomy of the commissioners by reducing the possibility of their manipulation by researchers. Prospective publication is a device that keeps researchers honest, and thus serves the interest of the commissioners.

5. RESEARCH AND TIME CONSTRAINTS

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of limited time as a constraint on research and on the Commission more generally. Since an initial six months was consumed in the start-up activities of selecting the Commissioners, appointing key staff and establishing the Commission structure and a concluding six months was devoted to writing, editing, translating and publishing the final report, the effective working time was cut by one-third. Additional months were spent in assembling the research teams, appointing
coordinators, and deciding what research to undertake. In the area of politics and institutions, the research did not get fully underway until most of the first year was over. For political science, this meant that about 80 projects, including lengthy overviews to edited volumes and a number of major monographs had to be brought to completion in about 15 months if they were to be useful to the commission.

Given this large research program, which was smaller than that mounted by economics, any impression that the Commission provided an atmosphere of monastic serenity for the unhurried examination of problems is categorically wrong. Both for research directors and for coordinators, the management of research conflicted with its digestion.

While the size of the research program was no doubt partly driven by the entrepreneurial ambitions of the research directors and coordinators, supported by appropriate budget allocations, the larger explanation lies in an intimidating mandate that seemed to exclude little from its purview and in the related fact that the Commission’s own philosophy, or basic policy direction, only emerged after virtually all of the research had been commissioned.

Time constraints also implied that much research would be devoted to the repackaging and dissemination of conventional wisdom. Although the emphasis varied from one research stream to the other, there was a considerable stress on survey articles that would consolidate the best academic understanding available in discrete policy areas. This research definition was present in the early research staffing decisions as the chairman clearly indicated that, unlike Rowell-Sirois, this Commission had a developed and substantial intellectual capital to exploit and bring to bear on the Commission’s agenda. Thus the perceived maturity of the academic disciplines, as well as the constraints of time, worked against the undertaking of extensive original research.

In retrospect, the maturity thesis was somewhat misleading. Where policy concerns, such as the impact of free trade on sovereignty, involved more than one discipline, the available literatures did not speak with a single voice. Even when a policy question was primarily within one discipline, such as the contribution of alternative electoral systems to the integrative capacities of the Canadian party system, there was often no consensus on the particulars of the most appropriate reform.

In reality, the “mature discipline” thesis, along with the constraints of time, inhibited efforts to move away from the dominant intellectual orientations in each discipline. For various reasons this was particularly true of the Commission’s economics research. Simeon, accordingly, attributes the Macdonald Commission’s support for “contemporary mainstream neoclassical economics” to the absence of a “credible alternative,” given the Commissioners’ perception that the major crisis they had to address was economic and that neither the hearings nor the other two disciplines of law
and political science produced the self-confident prescriptions on economic issues that the neo-classical economists could deliver with virtual unanimity.  

Time constraints also worked against the Commissioners’ assimilation of the several hundred research reports which, in successive versions, cascaded through their mailboxes in the period leading up to the final report. Not surprisingly, not all of the research was available at the time when commission decisions on policy had to be made.

6. INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Interdisciplinary research is much lauded and seldom effectively practised. The Macdonald Commission, with a policy agenda that spanned much of the activity of the modern state and focussed on policy areas that transcended disciplinary boundaries, provided an obvious context for its deployment. It was recognized from the early days of the Commission that no single discipline had the breadth to respond to a generous mandate that excluded little from its purview. Accordingly, the task of researching the interdependent realities of the “adaptive political economy” 6 that the Commission sought to stimulate was given to the three disciplines of economics, political science and law.

Although individual researchers from other disciplines were employed on a contract basis, they were in a distinct minority. Each of the three research streams was headed by a research director. There was no research superior to which the three research directors reported, although they were, of course, accountable to the executive director, the chairman and the Commission as a whole. The three streams varied in the resources they deployed and the number of projects they mounted, from economics, which was the largest, through political science to law, which was the smallest.

Given the mandate, the singling out of these three disciplines was not illogical or arbitrary. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a respectable, rather than token, scholarly representation from history, commerce, geography and sociology would have been defensible. The economists’ view of labour markets, for example, could have been supplemented by the different labour market perspective of sociologists. 7 More generally, a broader representation of academic disciplines would have diversified the research input Commissioners received and thus would have modified the report they produced. On

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17 Supra, note 8.
the other hand, greater disciplinary diversity would probably have been purchased at the cost of additional intellectual incoherence. More disciplines would have compounded the already difficult problem of intellectual digestion.

The argument for three discrete research streams and a multi-headed research structure, rather than grouping all researchers into a single integrated unit with one research director, was based on the premise that the disciplines involved were no longer infant and struggling, but mature. Disciplinary maturity was held to inhibit the easy crossing of disciplinary boundaries practised by the Rowell-Sirois scholarly generation of the late '30s. On the other hand, establishing the research structure on disciplinary lines discouraged researchers from stepping outside of disciplinary boundaries and from getting involved in the work of researchers in other streams. Thus the organization of research, as well as the privileging of three disciplines over others, structured the academic analyses available to commissioners in particular ways, with consequences for the substance and analyses of the Commission's published report.

The research directors collaborated on numerous shared concerns on the funding, quality and autonomy of research. They prepared successive versions of an overall program of research which they took to meetings with the Commissioners. They also spoke as a group to various public and semi-public gatherings. With the help of their coordinators, they produced the interim commission research document, *Research for the Commission on Canada's Future: A Progress Report.* Along with their executive assistants, they were heavily involved with the editorial team in the decisions that culminated in one of the largest publication programs in Canadian history.

Each research director tried to keep his fellow research directors informed of what was going on in his domain; we were notified of each other's various research meetings and occasionally attended them. This was also true of the coordinators. In one area, federalism and the economic union, which ultimately led to the publication of 12 volumes containing work by nearly 50 different authors, there was a relatively high degree of collaboration and joint meetings involving all three disciplines. In the second summer, a number of coordinators from all three research streams moved to Ottawa and various theme seminars were held with Commissioners present.

In spite of the interdisciplinary tendencies noted above, the generally civil and friendly relations among the three directors and the numerous administrative arenas in which they collaborated, the overwhelming reality was a very high degree of *de facto* separation of the three research streams. In the accurate words of one senior research participant: "The frequently expressed aspiration that the research program would serve as a vehicle for

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18 *Supra,* note 16 at 7.
integration across disciplines was largely unfulfilled."

As noted above, this was partly due to structure — the autonomy of each of the three research streams — the effects of which were compounded by the centrifugal scattering of the research enterprise across the country.

The crushing workload of managerial tasks in each research stream, and for each coordinator, also conflicted with interdisciplinism. The first priority was always to try to bring the commissioned research to completion. Since this involved research advisory groups, external assessments, one or more revisions and the addition of new projects as the focus of the commission became clearer, extensive involvement in other research streams was a luxury that almost no one could afford.

The commission research program was based on the premise that the specialized knowledge of academic disciplines would initially be brought to bear in the focused individual research projects undertaken by single investigators. The findings would then by synthesized and integrated as they were brought to bear on the major policy areas encompassed by the mandate.

In retrospect, this was a utopian aspiration with its presupposition that integration would occur after the individual projects had been worked and reworked through the lens of particular disciplines. At this point, the assumptions, logic and analysis were no longer flexible and open to outside influence. They were embodied in finished products with their own internal symmetries resistant to modification. They had the characteristics of self-contained building blocks, not of the malleable clay they might have been at their onset.

On the other hand, the disciplinary bias that triumphed had the virtue of building on existing strengths. The goal of forging new models and methodologies for interdisciplinary work under the time pressures of a royal commission was unrealistic. Royal commissions are inappropriate contexts for retraining and retooling with their high failure rates. At best, they can foster a shallow eclecticism and a certain empathy across disciplinary boundaries. As a result, "interdisciplinism" in the report, with some exceptions, came to be an aggregation of work from different disciplines rather than an innovative, creative fusion.

The basic causes for this "failure" are not primarily attributable to the commission's research structure, but to the fragmentation of the academic knowledge on which it drew. That knowledge and the specialized professoriate that exploits it are the end-products of an historically developed division of intellectual labour that is unlikely to coincide with the policy concerns of an ambitious royal commission agenda. Further, disciplinary (or even sub-field) distinctions are not shallow, disposable intellectual fashions that rest lightly in

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19 Supra, note 15 at 172.
20 Supra, note 16 at 7.
academic minds. They embody laboriously assimilated intellectual capital and they shape the world views and professional identities of their possessors.

Academic disciplines combine openness with ethnocentrism. Openness is manifest in numerous cross-disciplinary linkages and in the recurrent emergence of new subfields spanning disciplines which may come to constitute separate intellectual universes. Changes in the external world which scholars try to understand continually challenge disciplinary boundaries. From within, individual scholars reach out to other disciplines when they become fascinated by new puzzles resistant to solution by intradisciplinary paradigms. While these tendencies and manifestations occur at more than glacial speed, at any given time the dominant reality is a disciplinary ethnocentrism manifest in the number of disciplines whose introductory texts proclaim their status as the master discipline or the queen of the disciplines. This inward-looking tendency is clearly function and stabilizing for each discipline — without it, disciplines would cease to exist — although it hinders interdisciplinary work.

Academics may be viewed as citizens of particular disciplines, communities of the like-minded into which they are socialized by graduate work, university departments, learned journals, professional associations and systems of honours and awards. Disciplinary distinctiveness is also sustained by the massive literature accumulated within each discipline, and now even within disciplinary subfields. With the explosion of literature and new specializations even intradisciplinary mastery is an unattainable goal for even the most gifted and diligent.

Different disciplines do not see the same world. For the political scientist, the state is the object of attention, and in liberal democracies, often of affection. For the economist, the market holds pride of place. While the political scientist and the lawyer both accord salience to the system of rules and regulations that emanates from the modern state, the political scientist is more concerned with the political and bureaucratic process of their formation and implementation than is the law professor who sees the state more in terms of the judicial process and its interaction with private actors in society and economy. Fruitful interaction between political scientists and economists flounders on the fact that the concepts of nation and state, central to the former, are much less central to the latter.

The difficulties these divisions create for interdisciplinary work is cogently summarized by David Easton.

We find ourselves in ... the Humpty-Dumpty phenomenon. Over the last two thousand years we have managed to break the understanding of society into the many pieces of specialties that now constitute the disciplines. When, however, we try to put them all together again for purposes of application we have only vague notions about how this might be done. We find it difficult to reconstitute the reality we have been forced to decompose in order to understand it. This has
become one of the major epistemological stumbling blocks in the way of the utilization of the social sciences. 21

The maturing of the social science disciplines and law in Canada has compounded the problem referred to by Easton. For the Rowell-Sirois generation of the '30s' disciplinary boundaries were fluid, numbers were much smaller and "amateurs" like John Dafoe, the great Winnipeg journalist, could be President of the Canadian Political Science Association; the Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, founded in 1935, was not only a journal for both disciplines but also occasionally attracted work by anthropologists and sociologists; law professors sometimes published in it and participated at the annual meetings. Accordingly, part of the Rowell-Sirois achievement, in producing a synthesizing political-economic interpretation that influenced subsequent scholarly generations, was due to the limited development of the disciplines that were brought together and the more eclectic scholarship which that allowed.

No future generation of Canadian scholars, however, will be blessed with that relatively easy interdisciplinary eclecticism of their predecessors. Even modest amounts of interdisciplinary research, accordingly, will require careful cultivation if they are to emerge in royal commission contexts.

One possibility is to search for the points of contact between disciplines and construct interdisciplinary teams around such points. For example, some models, schools and orientations that represent minority tendencies within individual disciplines have strong extra-disciplinary links. Marxist political economy transcends both political science and economics, as well as encompassing sociology and history. The bringing together of lawyers with a critical legal studies perspective and political scientists and economists sharing a Marxist political economy orientation would doubtless produce a degree of empathy and understanding across disciplines much less likely to be found in the more mainstream members of each discipline.

The suggestion, however, produces its own refutation. To concentrate on scholars and orientations that exist at the intersection of different disciplines would produce a narrow interdisciplinism at the heavy cost of excluding the conventional wisdom of the disciplines in which they represent minority tendencies. Further, the members of interdisciplinary minority schools are often hostile to their mainstream colleagues. In their early years, they have the characteristics of social movements seeking converts.

If our sights are lowered, modest moves towards interdisciplinism might be facilitated if the following suggestions are kept in mind.

1. The capacity for interdisciplinary ventures probably varies with academic personality type. Interdisciplinary skills are most likely to emerge in scholars who are not disciplinary imperalists, but who have an open playful attitude to other disciplines and lack a possessive attitude to their own.

2. In the case of the Macdonald Commission, a small number of in-house scholars from several disciplines, located in Ottawa, working closely with each other and with the Commissioners, and educating each other, might have produced a less sprawling, more integrated report. The magnitude of the Macdonald Commission research effort, with some 300 projects mostly undertaken by individual academics, precluded housing the researchers in Ottawa and thus worked against the proximity and interaction that would seem to be necessary for interdisciplinary research. A much smaller, focussed in-house team might have had an enhanced capacity to respond to Stephen Clarkson’s suggestion: “To be useful for government . . . the social scientist must operate by the same criteria as a Deputy Minister with a doctorate in generalism.” This might have produced a report less comprehensive and less confident in its small details, but more integrated and more confident in its big pictures of the Canadian state and its citizenry confronting the several challenges identified in the terms of reference.

7. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is difficult to isolate the influence of research in the overall internal policy process of this or other commissions. The Macdonald report bears the stamp of the Commissioners, is published under their names and is identified with the chairperson. The Macdonald Commissioners were influential in different walks of life, accustomed to authority and decision-making and moulded by various experiences from which they had developed personal philosophies they brought to the Commission. Their personal backgrounds contributed to a functioning small group whose nature could not be entirely predicted from what they individually brought to their common task. While the chairman of such a body, like a Prime Minister, is first among equals and has powers of persuasion and leadership that derive from his official status, unlike a Prime Minister he has little hierarchical authority over his colleagues. He cannot replace them; he cannot reshuffle them to less prestigious portfolios; and he lacks the support of cabinet solidarity. There is a tacit unspoken understanding that each Commissioner carries in his knapsack the potential to deliver a minority report. Indeed, to do so, as to issue dissenting opinions on

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the bench, may be seen as sending a brooding message to the future, one that may outlive the majority position.

The Macdonald Commission experienced powerful centrifugal pressures. The nature of the mandate, the number of Commissioners and the diversity of their backgrounds, the amount of research and the three disciplinary streams through which it was channeled, and an extensive hearings process constituted strong centrifugal organizational and intellectual tendencies that the Commission constantly struggled to overcome.

The Commissioners were the focal point for two major streams of potential influence, the hearings process and the research analyses. The influence of the former is often slighted by critics who view it as essentially a legitimizing requirement or as a consciousness-raising exercise to generate a supportive climate for the pending report. While such criticisms may occasionally be valid, my assessment of the Macdonald Commission case is that the hearings process gave Commissioners a sense of confidence and a feeling for the vastness and diversity of the country that not all Commissioners had previously experienced. It informed Commissioners of the political viability of prospective policy proposals. It highlighted phenomena, such as the strength and vigour of the women's movement, that might otherwise have had a lesser visibility. On the other hand, a commission whose agenda focuses on the long run may be pulled too far in the direction of contemporary politics by the pressures of the immediate issues that typically dominate the personal agenda of petitioners.

Research posed its own problems for Commissioners. Several Commissioners implied, or stated, that the research was too abstract, clinical, dehumanized and removed from the aspirations and sufferings of real people. It is clear that far more research was produced than the Commissioners could possibly read. Further, the scattering of research produced some studies which were off target. It is equally true that, even given the impressive (or depressing) magnitude of the research effort, some approaches, issues, etc., were understudied. An academic reviewer suggested that the political science research on Canada in the international economy was biased in favour of a neo-realist approach which stressed the constraints on policy-makers and

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23 Commissioner E. Gérard Docquier described the research program as "noticeably divorced from the realities expressed by those who appeared before us... theoretical research... based on assumptions which I do not support." He was particularly disturbed by what he saw as "a new orthodoxy... "self-reliance" and 'market forces'". He asserted that the "research work of the Commission and the final report have provided the people of Canada and the Government of Canada with no better understanding of the problem or its solutions. Original research on the causes of our unemployment was not undertaken." Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, Supplementary Statements, Report III (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1985) at 528, 536.
failed to include research from a Marxist political economy perspective. Some of the concerns the report dealt with received little or no attention in the research program. Several Commissioners objected to the market thrust of the report and of the economics research.

Commissioners doubtless found it awkward that as the lens changed through which the Canada-United States free trade issue was viewed so too did the answers. The discussion of the economic benefits of free trade was largely the preserve of the economists, whose endorsement was little short of lyrical. As the focus shifted to a host of related questions concerning sovereignty, autonomy, identity, the politics of protectionism in the United States and the legal infrastructure of a free trade regime, political scientists and lawyers assumed the main burden of answering. Their answers were much more cautious, hesitant and uncertain than were those of the economists. Not surprisingly, especially for political scientists whose concern is with such political objects as state, nation and citizenship — how they are formed, shaped, strengthened, weakened, and rise and fall — the free trade issue was not seen just in terms of enhancing G.N.P. or of the efficiency of market versus political allocations. Thus, within the Commission research community, the divisions of opinion on the free trade (and other) issues were not randomly distributed across the three disciplines.


25 In his “supplementary statement” Commissioner Clarence Barber criticized the macroeconomics research program for failing “to deal with a number of important economic issues,”— why the stagflation of the early ’70s followed the sustained prosperity of the ’60s, the basis for the explosion in commodity prices between 1972 and 1974, the issue of capital investment, and how a private enterprise economy would perform in a future Canada experiencing stationary or declining population. Royal Commission on the Economic Union, supra, note 23 at 485.

26 Commissioner John R. Messer opened his supplementary statement with: “Economic man is an imperfect fiction created by economists. He does not exist as a whole person in real life.” He went on to criticize the report’s embrace of the “currently fashionable economic nostrum which judges market determinations as ‘good’ and government interventions as ‘bad’,” a philosophy whose application to agriculture he strongly resisted. Royal Commission on the Economic Union, supra, note 23 at 537-38. See also Commissioner Laurent Picard’s animadversions on the aridity of the state versus market debate, and particularly on the abstractions of economists. Royal Commission on the Economic Union, supra, note 23 at 547-53.

Conflict between researchers and commissioners is not uncommon. See David W. Fransen, “‘Unscrewing the Unscruitable:’ The Rowell-Sirois Commission, the Ottawa Bureaucracy, and Public Finance Reform 1935-1941” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1984) at 363-64, for the conflict between Donald Creighton and some commissioners on the assessment of the centralist nature of Confederation in the historical chapter of the report dealing with Confederation.
The divorce between market concerns and state-nation concerns might have been bridged had the economists on the Commission been advocates of a more dirigiste, interventionist state as the instrument to achieve economic objectives or had the political scientists and lawyers, with their greater proclivity to employ public instruments, played a central role in the contribution of research to answering what were perceived as "economic" questions. Although the role of the state in industrial policy and in regulation was part of the research mandate in both law and political science, the economists unquestionably dominated the research contributions to intra-commission discussion of the major economic concerns. And, as Carmichael, Dobson and Lipsey suggest in an unusually positive endorsement, the report "reflects the remarkable consensus that has emerged within the economics profession over the last decade." Further, as Ronald Watts observed of the disciplinary division of labour on the Commission, the report's discussion of political institutions was not driven by economic goals, but by a "distinct set of political norms."

The limitations of research were most pronounced with respect to policy dealing with "soft" areas, such as the effect of free trade on the political autonomy, cultural integrity and civic identity of the Canadian state and its citizens. On these questions, among the most important on the Commission's agenda, research was helpful but provided no definitive answers. Contemporary academic specialization was more conducive to answering particular questions about electoral reform and the trade-off between high minimum wages and high employment, than to constructing large macro-analyses of a historic people confronting fundamental choices about its future. Neither research nor the hearings could banish the ultimate necessity of choice by the Commissioners in these matters. Ground to stand on had to be sought in social philosophies, intuitions and historic prejudices.

The terms of reference essentially asked, "what does it mean to be a people, and what are the tasks of government in the late twentieth century?" While the social sciences and law can provide information to such first order political questions, they cannot provide definitive answers.

However, I fear I am going too far and leaving the erroneous impression that the admitted difficulties of the research role on a commission such as this should be equated with a failure of performance, an assessment that is clearly ridiculous. Research, along with the hearings, constituted the raw materials that were filtered through the philosophies and understandings of the Commissioners to produce the final report they signed. Further, most of the report was


28 Watts, supra, note 5 at 180. See also Simeon, supra, note 15 at 172.
written by researchers. The Commission process produced a nucleus of researchers, in the persons of the research directors and the coordinators, who were intimately aware of the various parts of the mandate and who had thought long and hard about how their disciplines could be brought to bear on the issues the Commissioners decided to address. They had been educated by the research program they administered, and they were the vehicles through which its findings were orally communicated to Commissioners, in supplement of the written word, and found their way into the report. From this perspective, the task of the research program was to get the relevant wisdom from particular disciplines into the minds of a handful of individual researchers who then, along with others, engaged in a dialectical exchange with Commissioners as draft chapters of the report took shape.

The influence of research on the Carter Commission, especially the key role of Doug Hartle as research director, has been documented by Les MacDonald. A recent doctoral dissertation by David Fransen on the Rowell-Sirois commission, supplemented by the assessment of Doug Owram, convincingly argues that its landmark report was the vehicle for an intellectual consensus on the role of the state that had crystallized in the '30s in the emerging English Canadian social science elite. Perhaps we are too close to the Macdonald Commission for a similar judgment to be made about the influence of research in general, but if attention is restricted to the economists it can plausibly be argued that the imprint of mainstream economics is written large on the pages of the report dealing with state-market relations, and the position of Canada in the international economy. The economists' influence was supported by changes in the intellectual climate of western capitalist democracies, as the heady optimism previously sympathetic to state interventionism waned and market virtues resurfaced.

Finally, with 70 published research volumes supplementing the three volume report, the student of the policy process has access to the research that, directly and indirectly, along with the hearings, influenced the Commission. In that sense, the Commission's total output serves democratic values, not only by indicating one of the sources that positively influenced the Commission, but also by making available analyses and arguments that did not carry the day.

Part III

The Public Impact of Commission Hearings: Lawyers in a Different Forum