



Prime Minister Harper and Governor General David Johnston in conversation before the 2011 Speech from the Throne. No event engages the government like a throne speech. PMO photo

The Making of the Speech From the Throne

Geoff Norquay

The Speech from the Throne is a critical element of the British parliamentary tradition; it contains the agenda of the government for a new session of Parliament – the priorities, the issues and the directions – in other words, the narrative of governing. At the beginning of a newly-elected government, it outlines a set of departures from the previous government's agenda. In the middle of a mandate, it can also rejuvenate a tired or flagging agenda, and help put a “new face on the old crowd.” And, overall, an SFT galvanizes the bureaucracy more than any other event. Except of course, for an actual change in government.

The Government of Canada Challenger soared over north-western Ontario. There were only two passengers, Brian Mulroney and me. It was the fall of 1986 and the prime minister was on his way to Saskatchewan to meet with Premier Grant Devine to discuss some difficult agricultural issues. I was on the flight as one of the PM's policy staff but for another purpose as well. There was a new session of Parliament about to open, and the PM had asked me to bring the final draft Speech from the Throne (SFT) with me. It was time for the last “snake check” and the final sign-off before the speech went off to the printer, and we would do that on the flight west.

I knew the SFT process well. I had been the principal writer for the first Mulroney government throne speech in 1984 and knew it was complex, with as many as 40-50 successive drafts and numerous hands on the pen along the way. Inspired by the platform that had elected us in 1984, the overall political narrative and the basic framework originated with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), but after that, there were scores of one-on-one consultations and negotia-

tions with ministers and their policy staff to find the right content and nuance as the speech developed. Successive drafts bounced back and forth between PMO and the various groups in the Privy Council Office (PCO) and the Federal-Provincial Relations Office for their expert advice, and every few days, the latest draft would go up to the PM for his input and direction. Mulroney is a gifted writer, and he took this seriously; he constantly challenged us to say it more elegantly, more completely, more accurately. He worried over every word.

The drafting process for the 1986 SFT was no different, except that my colleague L. Ian MacDonald, from the PMO communications group had the pen, and so far, I had not really been that intimately involved. So here I was with the PM in the Challenger, reading the speech for the final time, page by page, paragraph by paragraph, word by word, checking flow, phrasing, meaning and tone. At a certain point, I began to get the uneasy feeling that perhaps I had missed something, so I went back a few pages to revisit the earlier text.

In the months leading up to the fall of 1986, we had promised to provide new directions to regional development in Canada, and had decided to create new economic development agencies for both Atlantic and Western Canada. Through successive drafts of the speech, I had seen that various folks throughout the system had tried their hand at naming the new agencies and that the names kept changing with each new draft. I hadn't really paid it that much attention until the uneasiness struck that day on the plane.

I found the paragraph, and here is what it said:

“As a first step in achieving improved results from this sustained national approach, an Atlantic Canada Development Corporation will be constituted to facilitate and coordinate all federal development initiatives in the area.”

Staring at the words, it finally struck me. We were about to announce a new agency and the obvious acronym by which it would instantly be known was “AC-DC”. This carried certain sexual undertones that would have instantly made us the laughingstock of the western world. I underlined the

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four letters and passed the page across to the PM. A huge laugh resulted.

I never did find out who it was that got to name the new agency, but I do know that that is how the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency – ACOA – was born.

Throne speeches are a critical element of the British parliamentary tradition; they contain the agenda of the government for a new session of Parliament – the priorities, the issues and the directions – in other words, the narrative of governing. SFTs can serve other purposes as well. At the beginning of a newly-elected government, they signal a new beginning and a set of departures from the previous government's agenda. In the middle of a mandate, they can also serve to rejuvenate a tired or flagging agenda, and help put a “new face on the old crowd.”

One of the key impacts of a throne speech is the “mobilization” of the various departments of government. When the message goes out from PMO to ministers and from PCO to deputy ministers that an SFT is in the works, the ideas flow in to the centre. They may be specific or general, and legislative, programmatic or policy oriented. They may adjust or fine-tune old programs or propose new ones.

There is often a fair amount of competition for the attention of the PM and cabinet. Every department wants to have its piece of the new action that is represented by a throne speech. In addition, to the extent that they set new priorities, or raise lower ones to higher status, SFTs often require the reallocation of fiscal and staff resources within departments to meet new circumstances and pursue new objectives. Overall, an SFT galvanizes the bureaucracy more than any other event, except of course, for an actual change in government.

SFTs nearly always contain an internal inconsistency, a battle between continuity and departure, between same-ness and innovation. Since the key

challenges of public policy are broadly known, the trick is always to find the right balance between the major objectives the government has already been pursuing and the new directions it wishes to take. In positioning new directions as logical outcomes of well-worn paths, governments tend to step on their own message. As a result, throne speeches are usually proclaimed to be a disappointment by the media: “Nothing much new here; no surprises; no grand vision for the future; no radical departures; business as usual.”

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As a government at mid-term, the Harper Conservatives have established some hallmarks through which they have become known: competent economic management, trade expansion, a more independent and robust foreign policy, re-equipping the armed forces, and many “tough on crime” initiatives. At the same time, however, many of the priorities outlined in their first majority government SFT have already been achieved, or are in the hands of others; the Canada-Europe Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and the Keystone XL Pipeline are two prominent examples. So what might be the content of a renewal narrative? What are the key issues we can expect the throne speech to address?

Despite the political challenges faced by Stephen Harper in May and June, summer polls confirmed that he still retained a solid lead over his two opposition rivals in the public's rating of capability on economic issues. Harper still stands at



Governor General Johnston reading his first throne speech. With his second one this fall, written by the Prime Minister's Office, the Harper government hopes it can break out of its spring slump. PMO photo

40 per cent approval on the economy, while Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau trails at 21 per cent, with NDP Leader Tom Mulcair at 14 per cent.

We should therefore expect a throne speech that is long on fiscal prudence and economic management, because the government's imperative remains to return to budget balance by 2015. This is the key to satisfying Harper's base, many of whom felt queasy about the deficit-creating stimulus package adopted to combat the financial crisis and global recession of 2008-09. Budget balance is also essential to meeting some important carry-over Conservative commitments from the 2011 election, such as income splitting up to \$50,000 for families with children under 18. The imperative of returning to budget balance also means that the SFT will not be throwing much new money around. Moreover, the government faces an unknown but hefty price tag for the costs of the southern Alberta floods and the railway disaster at Lac-Mégantic.

Steps to facilitate economic growth and job creation will be the next major economically-oriented throne speech theme. Trade will continue to have pride of place in the government's economic agenda. If the government has concluded the CETA negotiations with Europe by September-October, the SFT will contain a commitment to implement CETA, which will involve significant legislation. If the agreement has not yet been finalized, yet another pledge will be made to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion. After that, it is on to the negotiations towards the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the continuation of the ongoing trade talks with India and Japan, among other bilaterals under negotiations.

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On the jobs front, the July cabinet shuffle signaled a continuation of the government's extensive efforts to remake the Canadian labour market. In moving Jason Kenney from Citizenship and Immigration to the newly-named Department of Employment and Social Development, the Prime Minister effectively made Kenney "Minister of Jobs." In addition to completing the controversial employment insurance reforms begun by his predecessor Diane Finley, Kenney now inherits the all-important skills file. He must make the new Canada Job Grant program work with the provinces, and continue efforts to encourage the provinces to take down professional credentials barriers that stifle inter-provincial mobility and keep skilled immigrants driving taxis. And finally, he will need to manage changes to the controversial Temporary Foreign Workers Program, which caused the government some grief earlier this year.

On energy and pipelines, Harper's touting of Canada's future as an "energy superpower" has hit some heavy weather with

the delays on the approval of the Keystone XL pipeline to the US Gulf of Mexico, and opposition to the Gateway Pipeline across northern British Columbia. The primary objective is to get Canadian oil and gas to "tidewater" – in any direction – from western Canada to the southern US, from the west to the east within Canada, and from Alberta through BC to the Pacific. The environmental review of the Gateway pipeline is not due until the end of the year. Expect commitments of federal support to facilitate all of these major capital projects.

The throne speech will likely address the long-promised federal greenhouse gas regulations for the oil and gas sector. If they are already out by then, expect the federal government to signal its desire to seek equivalency agreements with provinces wherever practical. Canada's GHG policies have been in lock-step with the US for the last few years and, depending on new policies from the Obama administration, the government will likely continue this approach, although any US linkage between Canada's GHG policies and approval of Keystone will prove tricky.

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Whether we are talking about pipelines or mining development, one of the most challenging natural resource issues to be resolved is revenue sharing, without which it is difficult to see how resource development can meet the promise of durable economic participation for First Nations communities and jobs on reserves as well as in non-native remote and northern communities. The provinces and territories hold most of the cards, since resource revenues belong to them. It will be interesting to see if the throne speech signals federal efforts to resolve this issue.

There are a variety of smoldering aboriginal files, including First Nations land tenure, the need for increased federal funding for education on reserves along with a governance structure, and a way forward on comprehensive claims and treaty implementation. Expect most or all of these to be addressed in the SFT, in one way or another.

And then there's defence procurement and aerospace.

This has proven to be a nine-alarm catastrophe for the government, with cost over-runs, huge delays and too many "reset buttons" to count. In response to the David Emerson Aerospace Review and Tom Jenkins' report "Leveraging Defence Procurement Through Key Industrial Capabilities," the government is likely to promise changes to the organization, decision-making and management of procurement in the space, aerospace and defence sectors. Anything proposed is likely to be welcomed as an improvement in this disaster zone.

A refreshed Science and Technology Strategy to continue driving the innovation agenda is a strong likelihood in the SFT. The government considers innovation and the commercialization of research to be critical in increasing Canadian competitiveness and productivity. (The former minister of state conducted quiet consultations aimed at updating the current strategy in recent months.)

The throne speech will very likely promise a significant Elections Act reform initiative that will address the "robocalls" fiasco as well as the many other challenges facing Elections Canada, and attempt to restore the credibility of the electoral process in Canada.

The SFT will follow up on the 2013 federal budget's commitment to implement the long-term infrastructure plan, which begins April 1, 2014 and which will involve some \$56 billion in federal spending and transfers to

provinces and territories over the next ten years.

The Prime Minister has sent a reference to the Supreme Court on the future of the Senate, concerning both method of appointment and possible abolition. Given that the Supreme Court will not release its response until the end of the year or early 2014, it is hard to guess what the SFT can definitively promise. The best way forward to abolition would likely be the calling of a referendum, but that is hard to do while the issue is still before the court. Expect stirring commitments to solve the Senate conundrum once and for all, but few details in the throne speech. **P**

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