

Exploration of perceptions related to decision-making in the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

An Exploratory Study

Marc-Antoine Therrien | Doctoral candidate
École nationale d'Administration Publique (ENAP) | 4750, avenue Henri Julien |
Montréal (Qc) Canada | H2T 3E5
marc-antoine.therrien@enap.ca
<http://www.enap.ca>

Table of Content

Abstract	i
Introduction.....	1
Literature review	2
Central agencies: Kafka’s castle.....	2
Decision-making: At the heart of the organization	3
Methodology	5
Phenomenology: The human experience.....	5
Methods and data collection.....	6
Selection of executives.....	6
Preparation of the interview guide	7
Data collection and coding	7
Analysis of results.....	7
Role of executives.....	8
Characteristics of the decision	9
Decision factors	10
Political context	10
Operational environment.....	10
Expertise	10
Access to information and privacy (ATIP).....	11
Common good	11
Perceptions and attitudes	12
Consciousness of decisions	12
Uncertainty, decision-making challenges and stress	13
Perception of the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat	14
Working “in silos”	15
The Secretariat and other central agencies	16
Back at Kafka's castle.....	16
Conclusion	17
Bibliography.....	19

Abstract

Goal – This article focuses on perceptions related to decision-making amongst executives at the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, to understand the particularities of decision-making in the context of a central agency, define certain factors associated with it, and expand the knowledge on federal central agencies.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting an interpretivist epistemology, this article uses a methodology rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the meaning of decision-making for executives, and how they perceive their work environment and their department. The article focuses on the emotions of the executives and the sense given to their functions in the Secretariat, the role of the Secretariat within the federal government, and the public's knowledge about this central agency.

Results – The executives interviewed pay particular attention to the political context surrounding the decisions they are expected to make. The impact of decisions varies according to the sector in which they work. All recognized the Secretariat as an elite organization characterized by excellence, expertise and professionalism, but some underscored the ambivalent nature of the Secretariat's power and role as a central agency.

Limits – Although based on only three interviews, this exploratory article opens the door to further research into the perceptions and motivations of officials within the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and other central agencies, namely, the Privy Council Office and the Department of Finance.

Implications for practitioners – This article could contribute to raising awareness among federal public servants of the unique nature of central agencies, by providing them with an overview of the experience of the actors evolving in these organizations, and by highlighting some of the factors that influence decision-making in such context.

Originality – This article gives a voice to officials in a central agency and focuses on their perception of decision-making, their understanding of their role and that of the organization in which they operate. This unprecedented perspective on the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, seen through the eyes of these officials, provides a better understanding of the complex universe of central agencies.

Key words Decision-making, Central agencies, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Perception

Type Exploratory research

Introduction

Central agencies are at the heart of the machinery of government, for which they manage financial resources as well as the policy orientations arising from the program of the sitting government. As pillars of executive power, central agencies hold a privileged position in the public service by virtue of their management, coordination and oversight roles with respect to “frontline” departments and agencies. The influence of the Privy Council Office (PCO), the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS, the Secretariat) and the Department of Finance (FIN) on other departments is undeniable.

In addition to their centrality within the administrative apparatus, their proximity to the highest spheres of political power imbues them with a distinctive aura and an authority often feared by departments and agencies. But what are these powerful organizations, which represent only about 1% of the federal public service, but which control about 27% of the federal government budget?¹

The main role of the TBS is to provide advice and recommendations to Ministers of the Treasury Board on investments in government programs and services and the regulation and management thereof. The Secretariat ensures that public funds are used wisely and efficiently, in accordance with the principle of value for money. To obtain spending authority, federal organizations must present a submission to the Treasury Board. In preparing this submission, they must seek guidance from the Secretariat’s analysts and senior staff. Those are responsible for recommending or not the approval of such departmental submissions.

Decisions made by Secretariat officials have therefore a significant impact on departmental programs and management. Mindful of the political context that provides them with direction and privileged information, these officials must take into account considerations of which their clients may not be aware. Departments and agencies are in some ways at the mercy of decisions made by the Treasury Board and its administrative body. We could argue that decision-making is one of the manifestations of the TBS’s, and central agencies’ more generally, specificity.

In administration, be it in the public or private sector, decision-making is considered the cornerstone of leadership. Among executives, the ability to make relevant and timely decisions is a key expression of managerial authority. Concomitantly, the negative fallout from a decision, just as much as the inability to make a decision, may be harmful to a manager’s reputation (Bozeman & Pandey, 2004, p. 553).

Initially mechanical, procedural and nomothetic in nature, the goals of research on decision-making have evolved in several directions over the past 30 years. However, little has been written about how public sector executives perceive their decision-making and its day-to-day importance. The decision-making experiences of executives at a central agency could enable us to explore this type of organization from a novel perspective: How do executives at the TBS perceive their organization, their roles and day-to-day decision-making?

¹ Planned data for fiscal year 2016–17, from the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat InfoBase.

This question shapes the present exploratory article, the subject of which is TBS executives' perceptions, a topic that will introduce us to the central agency environment. We will make this first foray through decision making.

Literature review

Central agencies: Kafka's castle

Very little was written on Canadian central agencies before the mid-20th century. Beginning in the 1960s, literature on the subject is primarily intended to elucidate the operation of these largely unknown organizations,² focusing on the description of roles and responsibilities, and on government mechanisms within central agencies. This fundamentally descriptive literature evokes the difficult reconciliation between central control and departmental flexibility, the main conundrum central agencies face. For example, MacLean examined the function of the Comptroller of the Treasury, which he considers to be the "safety belt" protecting the government from mismanagement (MacLean, 1964, p. 133). Following the publishing of the Glassco Commission report in 1963, A.W. Johnson (1971) and Michael Hicks (1973) studied the Treasury Board and its Secretariat. Johnson, then Secretary of the Treasury Board, maintains that replacing regulations with directives for the imposition of standards on departments resolves this classic management dilemma (1971, p. 363). Hicks argues that the Treasury Board was reluctant at that time to provide more flexibility in departmental management as long as audit tools, including measures of program efficiency and effectiveness were not sufficiently tested (1973, p.201). Robertson (1971) described the evolution of the Cabinet Committee system in the PCO from the 1940s onwards. According to the author, the complexity of government operations required a strengthening of the organization and procedures of the committees in order to increase the Cabinet's effectiveness. In continuation of Johnson's work, Veilleux and Savoie described the transformations taking place at the Treasury Board and its Secretariat beginning in the early 1970s. They note during this time the swing of the pendulum between control (i.e., the Lambert Commission's report on Financial Management and Accountability), and flexibility (i.e., the initiative of the Treasury Board "Increased Ministerial Authority and Responsibility"). Ultimately, the relationship between control and flexibility refers to the issue of departmental administrative accountability, the authors argue (1988, p. 535).

On the other hand, Campbell and Szlobowski (1979) studied the role of central agencies through interviews with senior officials. The two researchers reject the idea of an inner circle at the apex of power (1979, p. 216) and of a distinct socio-economic class (1979, p. 215). Rather, the uncertainty and complexity of the system ensure the opening of such a circle, where we find young educated analysts of diverse origins. Campbell and Szlobowski also argue that these "superbureaucrats" who are close to the political power actively participate in public policy formulation and decision-making (1979, p. 218).

The book was considered at the time to be the most thorough review of the Government of Canada's central executive processes and its administration (Aucoin, 1980, p. 135). Aucoin and

² The Treasury Board and its Secretariat have been likened to Kafka's Castle due to their inaccessibility, opacity and incomprehensibility (see Johnson, 1971; Veilleux and Savoie, 1988; Lindquist, 1996; Kelly and Lindquist, 2003).

Bakvis described the central agencies as the government technostructure that supports the Prime Minister and the cabinet (Aucoin & Bakvis, 1988, p. 41).

Since then, several researchers have expanded the knowledge on Canadian central agencies (Savoie, 1990; 1997; 1999; 2013; 2015; Dunn, 2010; Lindquist, 1996; 2004). Through their work with senior civil servants (Bourgault, 2011) or through the study of certain phenomena that characterize them, whether they relate to the politics-administration relationships (Bernier & Fortier, 2014), innovation (Bernier, Hafsi, & Deschamps, 2013), control (Sutherland & Doern, 1985) and performance management (Carroll & Dewar, 2002), or budgetary processes (Good, 2014; Graham, 2010), other researchers have shed new light on the organizational realities of central agencies.

Decision-making: At the heart of the organization

Decision-making is a central theme in public administration theory and research (Bozeman & Pandey, 2004). Chester Barnard is the first to address the concept of decision-making in his 1938 work, *The Functions of the Executive*, in which he focuses on the notions of choice and discretion, which, in Robert Chia's view, stray from the deterministic principles of scientific management as defined by Taylor in the early 20th century (1994, p. 781). Other influential researchers in the field of public administration, such as Simon (1944) and Lindblom (1959), delve more deeply into decision-making during this period (1994, p. 782). These authors believe information and organizational factors play a critical role in individual decisions (see also March, Simon, & Guetzhaw, 1958; McCamy, 1947). The behaviorist perspective on decision-making, although more nuanced than that of scientific management, does not emphasize the interiority of the human being, that is, its subjectivity, and reduce the brain to an information-processing machine.

During the 1980s, researchers abandon the behaviorist principles and venture into the realm of interiority in a decision-making context. Randall Schuler develops a model describing perceptions of role and expectations as factors that explain the relationship between participation in decision-making and employee attitudes (1980, p. 331). Schuler's article highlights a certain kind of interiority among those participating in decision-making and the human aspect of interpersonal relations in such a context. James Walsh holds that a belief structure shapes the selectivity of the perception of information to be processed and mobilized for problem-solving and decision-making. Further to statistical tests, however, Walsh does not find any strong correlation between work experiences and belief structures (1988, p. 887). Beyond beliefs, perceptions and expectations, we find the emotional dimension of decisions, an idea brilliantly defended by Damasio in the following decade. This neurologist argues that reasoning strategies does not cope well with the uncertainty and complexity inherent in personal and social problems (1994, p. 191). In humans, biological impulses and emotions support the instruments of rationality, and can therefore influence decision-making. Although they can cause irrationality, emotions are often essential to the decision-making process (1994, p. 192).

Along with this breakthrough in emotionality, the concept of sensemaking has emerged in the theories of organization and public administration. Citing Taylor and Van Every (2000:275), Weick and Sutcliffe define sense-making as "a way station on the road to a consensually

constructed, coordinated system of action” (2005, p. 409). Sense-making involves language, discourse and communication, through which situations, organizations and environments come to exist (id.). Thus, sense-making allows us to organize a continuous flow of unknown, unexpected experiences so as to create order in the world (2005, p. 410). The relationship between emotion and meaning construction is undoubtable. These two notions are taken up by Dougherty and Drumheller, who argue that organizations are "emotion-laden environments" (2006, p. 215). By studying the emotional experiences of 19 individuals in their workplace, the two researchers observe that the employees accept and reinforce the duality between rationality and emotionality (2006, p. 233). They conclude that organizational actors would be more successful in achieving their goals if they stopped rationalizing their emotions: "(...) this can only happen if the duality is closed and organizations are recognized as both emotional and rational locations for sensemaking" (2006, p. 235).

Pfister and Böhm, on the other hand, grapple head on with the matter of emotionality in decision-making. The two researchers distance themselves from the dominant position, which considers emotionality an exterior force affecting the non-emotional decision-making process (2008:6). Rather, they establish a precise and useful internal conceptualization of emotion in its rapport with decision-making. According to Pfister and Böhm, emotional mechanisms are a means of meeting certain functional requirements of decision-making, that is, the provision of information, speed, relevance and commitment (2008, p. 9). In agreement with Doherty and Drumheller in this regard, these researchers believe that the rationality of decision-making is subordinate to an individual's ability to form the appropriate emotions (2008, p. 8).

In *The Irrational Organization*, Brunsson asserts that organizations have been wrongly compared to individuals, which implies a strong cognitive bias (2000, p. 15). Without completely rejecting the role of the individual and cognition, the researcher believes that decision-making should be understood to have a broader meaning—that of action: "Making a decision is merely a step towards taking action. The decision is not the end product. Executives get things done—act and induce others to act" (2000, p. 18). Brunsson sets out three conditions for organizational action that echo the elements described by Pfister and Böhm: expectations, motivation and commitment (2000, pp. 19–20). The researcher calls into question the link between decision and action, and suggests that rationality is not appropriate for "big" decisions requiring complex coordinated actions. He advocates for the "rationality of action", a combination of rule-following and systematic irrationality (2000, p. xv). According to this researcher, irrationality is especially important when action involves a radical change, as it often elicits emotional reactions that require more motivation and commitment (2000, p. 26).

Author Mona Ericson, for her part, suggests redirecting research toward "sensed decision-making", an approach focusing on executives' interpretations, emotions and beliefs to give a plausible sense to reality and act effectively (2010, p. 148). Her research on two Scandinavian companies find several attitudes revealing the CEOs' commitment to sensed decision-making. Ericson disagrees openly with March: "Information cannot be sorted into exhaustive and exclusive input and output categories of decisions (March, 1994). The executives construct a frame by means of belief and emotions from which hunches for actions are generated" (2010, p. 143).

In the present paper, we agree with this concept of the organization as a place where rationality and emotionality are inextricably connected in a complex manner. In our view, decision-making must be apprehended with such parameters in mind. However, in disagreeing with the position of March, Dougherty and Drumheller, Pfister and Böhm as well as Ericson establish their own positions in reference to those of behaviourists and positivists, thereby perpetuating a paradigm from which one should distance oneself. Robert Chia's (1994) deconstructivist analysis of the "decision" concept allows for this distancing by proposing a new way to conceptualize decision-making, one that revives the emphasis on its ontological status. Chia states that "decisions are not so much about 'choice' or 'intentions' as about the primordial 'will to order' whereby interlocking configurations of micro-incisions punctuating our phenomenal experiences contrive to construct and reinforce a stable but precarious version of reality" (1994, p. 781). A deconstructivist analysis gives the author of this review a study of perception of decision-making among executives that is not subordinate to the burden of limited rationality so omnipresent in the literature, while remaining conscious of its influence in the study of decision-making.

With this in mind, from an epistemological standpoint, the present research would resemble that of Chia, Brunsson and Ericson. We believe that knowledge production is an intersubjective enterprise and we therefore advocate for a narrative and interpretive approach to social construction, according to which knowledge, as constructed by the researcher, arises from the study of interactions between individuals and the researcher's interpretation thereof (see Rouleau, 2007; Czarniawska, 2008).

Methodology

Phenomenology: The human experience

Given the entirely qualitative nature of this research, the topic of which is subjectivity among executives, we have chosen a phenomenological approach that will enable us to grasp the richness, nuances and depth of the managerial experience in the organization. According to Susan Hekman, phenomenology identifies the purpose of the social sciences as the social actors' comprehension of their action on two levels: that of individual consciousness and of their interaction in the social world (1980, p. 355). At the basis of phenomenology rests the idea of intersubjectivity, which holds that understanding and meaning in the social sciences emerge from the interaction of individuals in the sharing of an experience (1980, p. 345). Sloan and Bowe define phenomenology in these terms from a methodological perspective:

"The findings—or outcome—of this type of study is a collection of descriptions of meanings of individuals of their lived experiences; experiences of concepts or phenomena. The descriptions will usually appear as written phrases or statements that represent the meaning that a person—a study participant, for example— attributes to a related experience. (2014, p. 1293).

The interpretive perspective in phenomenology moves away from the research and description of a phenomenon's essence and emphasizes the (co-) construction of meaning.

Hermeneutics is the branch of phenomenology we adhere to in this research. This branch focuses on understanding the meaning of phenomena and experiences, identifying themes, and

interpreting collected data (2014, p. 1295). Hermeneutic phenomenology underpins the use of reflexivity to facilitate the interpretation and discovery of meaning: “Reflexivity describes the process in which researchers are conscious of and reflective about the ways in which their questions, methods and subject position might impact on the data or the knowledge produced in a study (Langdrige 2007)” (2014, p. 1297). This approach is particularly relevant, to the extent that the author of the research works at the same organization as the individuals invited to participate. The researcher's empathy and relevant experience are two vectors that facilitate data analysis and the interpretation of meaning (id.); he re-examines the experiences taken for granted and thus perhaps discovers new or forgotten meanings (Laverty, 2003, p. 22).

Methods and data collection

In order to capture the experience of executives at the TBS, we chose the semi-structured interview method. According to Sloan and Bowe, interviewing is a method favored by qualitative researchers (2014, p. 1297); it allows, through dialogue, to capture the comments' depth. The in-depth interview, which is more appropriate for hermeneutic phenomenology (Creswell, 2007, in 2014, p. 1298), would have allowed us to go further in the analysis, but the circumstances at the time of the research (i.e., days following the 2015 general election) did not allow for such a method. The phenomenon examined here is decision-making in the context of a central agency. An interview guide was prepared in order to respect the heavy workload of the executives to be interviewed. By doing so, we were able to address the topics of interest while keeping the interview time to less than an hour. The interview guide marked the territory to be covered while leaving room to explore the executives' points of view should they bring up topics or situations beyond this scope but relevant to the research subject.

Selection of executives

To reflect the diverse functions for which the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat is responsible, we attempted to identify candidates from each of the 15 sectors³ at the agency. Secondly, we hoped to have an equal number of women and men, on the one hand, and of Francophones and Anglophones,⁴ on the other. Using the Government Electronic Directory Services (GEDS), a website containing the contact information for most federal employees, we selected one or two executives per sector. Those selected received an email invitation to take part in an interview for research on public administration. Seventeen such invitations were sent. Unfortunately, we received only five answers, two of which were negative. This low rate of participation is likely due to timing: the arrival of a new government involves a great deal of transition work at all federal bodies. The governmental transition period is especially busy for central agencies. Three interviews were thus conducted in November 2015, one with an Anglophone man and two with women, one Anglophone and one Francophone. These interviews were held in the executives' workplace. The shortage of candidates and time explains the preliminary and exploratory nature of this research.

³ We have focused on the sectors (9) that contribute to the Secretariat's mandate as a central agency, and have ignored the sectors related to "internal services", i.e. those that ensure the organization's functioning and that are common to most federal organizations.

⁴ For the purposes of this communication, the excerpts from the French interview were converted into English by a professional translator.

Preparation of the interview guide

We prepared an interview guide containing 11 open-ended questions. The first three questions were general ones concerning the role of the manager, his or her day-to-day tasks and the work environment. These gradually broached the topic and aimed to make the executive comfortable with simple questions. Once the rapport was established, we were ready to address the topic of decisions.

Seven questions explored various facets of this theme: the meaning of decision-making, the associated accountability, the factors that come into play, the perceived scope of the decisions, and consciousness of decision-making actions. The final two questions of this segment of the guide were directly related to emotionality in decision-making. The executives were asked how they managed uncertainty and how they felt when faced with difficulties in a decision-making context. This second block made it possible to explore the experience of executives and highlight the emotional and subjective aspects of the phenomenon.

Finally, a last question enabled us to probe the executives for their impressions regarding the TBS. They were asked to express, in their own words, how they viewed the Secretariat as a central agency.

Data collection and coding

The interviews were recorded, then transcribed. In two of the three cases, we used a word processing software to transcribe the interviews word for word; in the third case, the author used a professional online transcription service. The quality of all three transcriptions was controlled using the recordings. Once finalized, the documents containing the interview transcription were processed using the QDA Miner software (free trial version available online). The software was used to create a coding tree and to qualitatively analyze the interviews.

Based on the interview guide, we identified five themes: the manager's role, the characteristics of the decision, factors impacting the decision, the manager's perceptions and attitudes with regard to the decision, and his or her perception of the TBS. These themes were confirmed at the data collection and transcription steps. During the interviews, about 25 sub-themes emerged in respect of the five main themes. Most of these sub-themes were addressed by at least two of the three executives interviewed. The section entitled "Analysis of results" delves into these themes and sub-themes in greater detail.

Analysis of results

Although few in number, the executive interviews revealed highly relevant, extremely rich thoughts and comments. Enthusiastic at the idea of contributing to research on public administration, the executives were candid in their participation, providing frank and thoughtful responses. Although some of them were more conventional and staid, others were surprising, original and fascinating. The latter avenues are the ones we will follow up on and attempt to examine more deeply in subsequent research. This section gives an overview of each theme addressed and focuses on the participants' statements.

Role of executives

All three executives described their role in their division or sector using common terms. There were three in all: human resource management, conveying information to upper management or to employees, and problem-solving. All executives emphasized the importance of human resource management.

One regularly used combat as a metaphor for personnel, which we took a closer look at:

[TRANSLATION:]

“[...] I find it a good metaphor. That's also how I see myself with them [her team], they're my boys, it's my troops, but I am out in the field with them too. From time to time, I have to climb higher up on the mountain to see, so as not to send them, so that everyone doesn't get killed [...] It's a mission, and we've been given the mission bag, and we have to get that bag elsewhere, [...] Except sometimes in the bag, there's a hidden bomb, and you're the one who's carrying it. [...] Sometimes we would get political calls, then it's like the mountain gets pulled out from under our feet, and your general has to intervene, and that's really how it is.”

The executive draws a connection between the combat metaphor and the broader political context, when a government is at the end of its mandate:

[TRANSLATION:]

“Now, I would say that... I should use it [the metaphor] less because it's a lot more relaxed than it was in the spring, but I like the idea of having a mission. And I like the idea of esprit de corps, and tactics, a combination of tactics and strategy, that's how I see it.”

This excerpt alludes to the significant degree to which the political context influences the manager's work, as far as his or her role as personnel manager. We will revisit the political context later on. Executives also serve as intermediaries between their superiors and their employees, a role that is not always easy:

“I also act as a liaison between my team and senior management, so to make that messages are passed back and forth adequately without burning either of them, it's an important cushion role I think [...] One of my goals is to protect senior management from as many of those as I can, solve the problems myself so that they only get the ones I cannot deal with, particularly because I report directly to the ADM [Assistant Deputy Minister],

I do not have a DG so I think it's incumbent on me to try to fill up as much of that space myself to protect them. But the truth is it's also the other way too, there's a lot of pressure that comes down on the team via senior management; I gotta protect them from that too... there's no mileage in stressing your team out.” (Participant A)

Problem-solving also reveals the complexity of the manager's job: “[...] a lot of my time is spent just solving little problems to make the course of action relatively clear. So usually, what I get is

a mess of confusion and I gotta turn that into some action items for people that work on my team, so that they have some idea of what to do.” (Participant A)

Thus, all three executives describe the strong information vector associated with this role, which involves them conveying information to their superiors, translating the information intended for their employees, and synthesizing information from various sources to define a problem and come up with a solution.

Characteristics of the decision

When questioned about decision-making, the executives first described its nature. In all three cases, the decision entails an opinion or recommendation to upper management, to another area of the agency or to another federal body.

“I mean, this is a department that serves a Cabinet committee and so I think this is common knowledge, levels of advice and recommendations filter through, I mean, all of program sectors is developing advice for Cabinet too, and the decision there is also, what are we going to recommend to the Board, but the decision itself remains with the Board.” (Participant A)

However, not all decisions are equal. The executives were able to discern how their decisions affected their organization and to nuance the importance of their role in this regard. A manager's perception of his or her decisions' impact varied depending on where he or she worked in a policy or a program sector:

“I would say that there was a big impact internally. But a very low risk, low impact externally.” (Participant C)

“Scope of decisions that I get to make is pretty small. It's huh... usually what I say is not what goes, usually what I say is what goes to, you know, whatever next decision body is in place.” (Participant A)

[TRANSLATION:]

“I find that at the Secretariat, at a central agency, the scope of decisions is very broad. It doesn't look like it, it looks like plumbing, but that is not the case. So when something makes it to the Treasury Board, and we say no, we've just killed something. Conversely, when we say yes, and it's a big mess, you just launched something that's a mess. It's gonna have a whole lot of negative effects, because we never said 'Watch out for that!' I find that a lot of our decisions have pretty strong impacts. [...] Yes, it's my impression that we really do have a lot of power.” (Participant B)

The executives who work in sectors where management policy is developed and implemented appeared better able to nuance the impact of their decisions, whereas the executive from a program sector, who works more directly with the Treasury Board, perceived the impact of the decisions as considerable. Decision-making appeared to hold significant meaning for the executives:

“[...] the kind of thing that makes work exciting. I would give up if I were only keeping the machine going. It would just not be worthwhile.” (Participant A)

“It's very empowering. [...] the liberty to make decisions within that scope was very ... like I was very comfortable doing that.” (Participant C)

However, they are well aware of the responsibilities that come with decision-making. The theme of accountability arose several times with each of the executives, and none seemed to underestimate its importance:

“[...] I'm fully accountable for all those things, whatever my staff do, I'm accountable for all that, even if they're responsible for undertaking some of these things, the work itself, I mean ultimately it's me that's got to answer to those things. [...] I would never turn around and blame an employee for a recommendation that was poorly received.” (Participant A)

The executives interviewed conceive of decisions in terms of opinions or recommendations. They recognize the potential importance of their decisions, since these may affect as much senior public servants as ministers who sit on the Treasury Board. Making decisions is an exciting aspect of the executives' work, one that motivates and empowers them. This power is inseparable from accountability, however, which none of the executives take lightly.

Decision factors

The executives consider numerous factors when making a decision. Three of these were shared: the political context, the operational environment, and the expertise of analysts.

Political context

Since the Secretariat is the administrative body of a parliamentary committee, the Treasury Board, the executives emphasized that this proximity to the political world was a key consideration in the decision-making process:

“[...] there's the political environment that we're navigating, right, that changes all the time, we've got to take our cues from what's acceptable to the current government... Even the priorities that are flowing; everyday we're seeing new priorities flowing out through the press, through a minister. We have to pay attention to those, and we adjust our advice based on what are really hard to identify and quantify impulses and directions and so on, so... certainly the political environment.” (Participant A)

Operational environment

The executives must also factor in other groups at the Secretariat. These groups, which have a wide array of sometimes diverging interests, can play a critical role in the decision to be made. Being unfamiliar with the interests of another group may lead to failure of an action or a project the executive has decided on: “We would never put something out there in the organization outside of [participant's sector] that we weren't 60% sure would be digestible by other [...] You wanna make sure that you know, those types of things don't come as a surprise to people.” (Participant C)

Expertise

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat is mainly a policy advice provider. As stated by the executives, decisions take the form of opinions, advice or recommendations. In order for these

to be relevant and timely, executives at the Secretariat must consider the expertise that the analysts on their team contribute:

“They [the analysts] do have some [decision-making power], because they are experts, and also I trust their recommendations when they make them, we have options, and there is a course of action that we're looking at, those that have experience with these files, I'll listen to what they have to say, what seems to work, or what never worked, or what's worth exploring, so...” (Participant A)

Certain executives cited other factors, such as risks or upper management's style. The executives also mentioned two factors that surprised us: the government's access to information mechanism as well as the common good. We deem them significant enough to elaborate further.

Access to information and privacy (ATIP)

Two executives admitted to having reservations about the government's access to information and privacy mechanism. Because the public might get access to the contents of their emails, briefing notes and recommendations, these executives feel pushed to adjust such communications, stemming the candour and straightforwardness of exchanges among specialists:

[TRANSLATION:]

“As a public servant, you're always walking a tightrope, because you always have to ask yourself whether this particular decision, which was taken in isolation, if someone at the *Ottawa Sun* reads it, how will it be perceived? [...] In a way, that's not good, because it colours your decision to a degree, because you want to know how John Doe will react to it. And that shouldn't really be a criterion, but it becomes one, because I've seen too many problems with that. So I think there is a little problem with that, because it makes us less transparent amongst ourselves, out of fear that the public will find out and misinterpret it.” (Participant B)

The government's access to information mechanism would thus seem to hamper this manager's discussions “among experts.” For another, managing the access to information requests is a source of stress: “I would say on things like ATIP, I was responsible for signing off on access to information requests before they went to the ADM's office... It was a learning curve for me. It's not always a comfortable space...” (Participant C)

Common good

Two of the three executives mentioned the importance they attribute to the common good and that they take into account the benefits to Canada and to Canadians in the decisions they make:

[TRANSLATION:]

“[...] What's best for Canada? We often find ourselves asking ‘What can I do that will be the most useful to fix the situation in the long-term? In the short term, it would be fun to do this, but will it help in the long term?’ ... We are often pondering this: what's the most ethical approach for the country? What's worthwhile?” (Participant B)

“[...] you know, you get to improve the way the world is going if you can change the way the government is actually working, ultimately to the good of Canadians, I think that's huh... That is the point of the whole exercise.” (Participant A)

In addition to the political context, the operational environment and the availability of information (i.e., expertise), the executives cited a factor that is far more removed from them as executives at a central agency—the common good. Moreover, surprisingly, access to information, a mechanism introduced to facilitate transparency and the sharing of government documents, affects how they formulate the advice, opinions and recommendations at the heart of decisions.

Perceptions and attitudes

The purpose of the executive interviews was to discover their attitudes and perceptions on decision-making. The interview questions on this topic questioned the executives directly on the emotional aspects of decision-making. This led the executives to discuss the conscious aspect of decision-making, uncertainty management, and the feelings associated with decision-making problems, including stress.

Consciousness of decisions

In the first place, a decision is not always a tangible, well-defined topic, according to one of the executives interviewed:

“So sometimes it's not actually clear that what is ultimately a decision is a decision at the time that it's being made. I know it seems crazy but, sometimes it's clear, [...] I'm thinking about clear decision I know I'll be accountable for what it is. Cool. But that's not always how it works. Sometimes the decisions are the last time you got input for something and it takes hold in some way, and it actually... it takes the same weight as a decision that was made consciously.” (Participant A)

The participant suggested that he is not always fully in control of the decision being shaped. The decision is crystallized elsewhere in the organization, even though the executive did not believe it to be timely. This reminds us of Brunsson's view, who sees a decision as a step in a broader process of organizational action.

For another participant, consciousness of decisions was associated with risks as well as the related materiality. In these cases, there is indeed a conscious decision-making process. Otherwise, the decision is made “automatically.” For another, a non-decision is also a decision: [TRANSLATION:] “The time I spend, or don't spend, on something, these are decisions, and I think I'm not conscious of that enough, I should be more aware of it” (Participant C).

The consciousness of decisions appears to be linked to the decision's salience, according to the executives, but there are situations in which the decision is out of the hands of the executive who is initially in charge of making it. It also happens that the executive does not realize that his or her inactivity with respect to a file generates a decision, which then eludes him or her and remains unconscious.

Uncertainty, decision-making challenges and stress

As the executives see it, uncertainty is one variable in the equation that cannot be ignored. One participant distinguished internal uncertainty, tied to lack of knowledge on a subject and which he or she can therefore remedy himself, from the uncertainty of the environment, which is tied to decisions made elsewhere, often by upper management, and of which he or she has not necessarily been informed. In these cases, the executive must be strategic in order to gather information:

“You gotta keep your ear to the ground, pay attention to what else is going on, because you are gonna get signals from other parts of the department. I have a network, I use the network to pull information that helps to address some of that, my environmental uncertainty.” (Participant A)

Timing also leads to much uncertainty and, when not well managed or not anticipated with a Plan B, can derail a project. In the political context, timing is also key. “At that highest level, there's so much uncertainty when it comes to political timing and the direction of decision-making there, we just have to accept the uncertainty” (Participant A).

Although it limited the scope of our research, the government transition period turned out to be relevant, as it gave us an opportunity to explore that pivotal moment when uncertainty is omnipresent for all executives at a central agency. The same participant admitted to feeling the pressure resulting from the uncertainty surrounding the arrival of a new government:

“Totally. It [the uncertainty] is a big source of stress for me. And not just to have the uncertainty existing, but it's sort of my job to make most of it go away. [...] Usually, I'm pretty good at keeping work and the rest of my life separate, but on occasion there's incursion there, just from stress. I'm not so worried about that some big bad things are gonna happen, but I do worry about burning my staff out, with the stress they are experiencing.” (Participant A)

Another participant asserted that she was unaffected by the uncertainty related to Treasury Board submissions:

[TRANSLATION:]

“For content files, what's fun at the Treasury Board is that we can write down the uncertainty. [...] you know, I learned to transpose, or transfer, that risk. [...] I'm going to transfer it like this, and we'll see what the ministers will say, after doing all the work to try to eliminate that uncertainty. But of course I try to eliminate any uncertainty.” (Participant B)

For this manager, rather, uncertainty arises in relation to human resource management. Being aware of staff turnover, the executive shared her concerns in this regard:

[TRANSLATION:]

“I find that more difficult in terms of human resources. [...] there are always a number of parts moving in the team. [...] I want my team to be well-rounded, so that's what keeps me up at night.” (Participant B)

Similarly, the third executive interviewed connected uncertainty more generally to human resource matters with a direct impact on the human aspect:

“I only get anxious or stressed when I make decisions about people; that, I'm not sure about. When I make decisions on files, I'm telling you, I never had anxiety or stress about decisions I make on files. [...] People go home and they take things from work home with them. I never want to be that person who's responsible for people taking negative feelings from work home with them. So I'm very conscientious about that; I spend a lot of time making sure that I'm making the right decisions.” (Participant C)

Uncertainty surrounding decisions is a source of stress, particularly in a broader context, that of a new government. Situations that involve managing employees or the human factor generally tend to induce stress among some of the interview participants. Faced with uncertainty, the executives use a range of strategies to offset it: they learn what they need to know, use their network of contacts to keep their ear to the ground, document uncertainty, and proceed more cautiously in decision-making.

Perception of the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

Finally, the three executives were asked to explain, in their own words, how they see their organization. This very open question produced similar responses, involving excellence, working “in silos,” and a very interesting comparison with the two other central agencies, i.e., the PCO and the Department of Finance.

The participants were unanimously effusive in their praise for the general quality of the analysts and executives at every level of the Secretariat:

“Very skilled, very smart people I have to say, like in general, that's my experience, having worked within a line-department and coming here. Often, they're very experienced, but often they're very creative thinkers too like, in a way that sort of surprised me, when I came here [...]” (Participant A)

[TRANSLATION:]

“Ah, I find it fantastic. I'm still in my honeymoon phase. I've been at the Secretariat for a year and a half now, and I find it exceptional. [...] The culture is very clear, there is a culture of excellence, of values and ethics, of asking the right questions, of supporting the young analysts who, every day—and I'll use my metaphor—who are out on the frontlines.” (Participant B)

“So I keep coming back to Treasury Board Secretariat because I feel as though the professionalism at TBS has not been replicated in the departments that I've been in. There's just a different standard and in my own words, I truly believe that the best and the brightest people work at TBS. Sitting in senior management meetings at TBS... there's so much brain power in those rooms. [...] it's kind of an elite group.” (Participant C)

The response from all three executives is unequivocal: the Secretariat stands out by virtue of its culture of excellence, which they have not necessarily observed as clearly at other federal bodies.

Working “in silos”

Nonetheless, the Secretariat is not a perfect organization. The executives emphasized working in silos as an obstacle to decision-making:

“It is a very large agency, for a central agency, and that leads to some siloing, there are many organizational cultures in different parts of the Secretariat, especially those parts that were brought in more recently.⁵ There's still some cultural barriers there that make it difficult to work as one central agency.” (Participant A)

A second executive deplored the lack of support for certain groups at the agency:

[TRANSLATION:]

“[...] We are not the ones with the knowledge and the science of these laws and these things. It's the policy centres that are behind us, and we need to rely on them, and sometimes, they are not very clear, or they do not support us formally, and they put nothing in writing!” (Participant B)

According to all three executives, a certain lack of understanding of each directorate's roles or at least their associated expectations leads to the creation of silos within their own sector as well as among sectors. One participant suggested there was a relationship between silos and risk aversion, which he believes to be an unfortunate characteristic at the Secretariat:

“TBS is largely made up of specialists in particular policy areas. And if you are dealing with an area of management, you're thinking about managing risk [...]. There's no overall sort of assessment of the risk that we are managing through the entire policy suite through our management approach. So that risk aversion actually translates into a sort of red-tape heavy culture across government [...], and you know the expression ‘if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail’...” (Participant A)

Thus, since most sectors at the Secretariat hinge on one or several policies linked to a management component, the employees tend to see their work as a function of this component alone, creating silos and a lack of coherence in the organizational risks.

⁵ Although the participant did not clarify his thought, he could have been referring to the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer (OCHRO), created on March 2nd, 2009, following a horizontal strategic review which focused on the central human resources management function. As a result of this review, the Canada Public Service Agency was consolidated with existing functions within TBS. See the TBS 2008–09 Departmental Performance Report : <https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr/2008-2009/inst/tbd/tbd-eng.pdf>.

The Secretariat and other central agencies

Two of the three executives cited a certain ambiguity in the “existential” aspect of their organization, a particularly interesting topic. A first executive began by asserting that the Secretariat was definitely last, in terms of power, among of the three central agencies:⁶

“[...] as a central agency, TBS knows its place among the central agencies. It is definitely the sort of third place central agency, in the hierarchy. Yeah, so Treasury Board is essential in making spending and policy decisions, management policy decisions, but at the same time, everybody knows where the real power lies and it's not here. It's just not here. [...] We provide support, and we implement, but I think PCO and Finance are making all the big decisions.” (Participant A)

This assertion, unexpected and fascinating, was echoed by another manager, who explained these comments in greater detail, without being expressly invited to do so:

[TRANSLATION:]

“[...] I was referring to the role of the central agency, what makes me sad is that PCO and Finance are very comfortable with their role as a central agency, ‘unapologetic’ as we say. They make no apologies. The departments ask them questions, and they'll say ‘No, that doesn't work.’ [...] Here, it seems we have trouble with our status as a central agency, and every time we are about to say no, we're always afraid that something will happen, that someone above us will backtrack and say ‘Well, you know...,’ and I'm not sure yet why that is.” (Participant B)

This existential malaise and organizational ambivalence at the Secretariat, as it emerges from the interviews, would merit a closer examination, notably in light of the rapports among Canada's three federal central agencies.

Back at Kafka's castle

Among the other themes of interest that arose during the interviews, the public reputation of the Secretariat also caught our attention.

At the end of each interview, the executives were asked to comment on the public's little knowledge of central agencies like the Secretariat. The executives spoke of confusion among levels of government, the oversimplification of the agency's mandate (“We count the money, you know, the bean-counters”), and even a complete ignorance of its existence. The general population does not know the central agencies:

“I mean central agencies have always had kind of a mysterious cloak around them, right? [...] Like, ‘We are the ivory tower of the Government of Canada.’ And as much as we try to break our backs to communicate and enable and you know, with the community, it's still like, ‘People don't know what goes on really in TBS or PCO or Finance.’” (Participant C)

It seems that 40 years later, the words of A.W. Johnson have not aged a day.

⁶ In 2005 Kelly and Lindquist produced an analysis of the shifting balance of power between PCO, FIN and TBS, as part of a study of the Canadian federal budgetary environment and system.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore how certain executives at the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat perceive their role, decision-making and organization.

Decision-making, in its subjective and emotional aspects, has given us a glimpse inside a central agency through the experience of executives who work there. The initial objective was therefore twofold.

Firstly, we hoped to continue developing knowledge on decision-making by insisting on the “irrational” nature and fundamental influence of emotionality and by leaving the door open to other conceptualizations beyond the individualistic cognitive one. This aspect of the research raised our own reflexivity as a researcher; we attempted to suspend our own preconceptions and allow the executives to explain theirs.

Secondly, we aimed to broaden the rather narrow horizon of knowledge about Canada's federal central agencies—and of the Secretariat in particular—again by relying on the experience of those pursuing their careers there.

This phenomenological approach proved to be highly relevant and generated a wealth of interview material on the role of executives, the characteristics of decision-making and related factors, the perceptions and attitudes of executives in this regard, as well as their perception of the Secretariat as a central agency.

Among the most relevant comments are those concerning the crucial influence of the political context on decisions that executives make. As one of the participants remarked, ultimately the decision falls to the key stakeholders: the President of the Treasury Board, the ministers who sit on the Board, and, beyond the agency, the government of the day. This delicate relationship between the public service and politicians appeared to take on its full meaning when described by the Secretariat executives who were interviewed.

In addition, their ambiguous rapport with the government's access to information mechanism warrants, in our view, a closer examination, as their comments in this regard seemed to suggest a contradiction between the desire for transparency associated with such mechanisms and their perverse effects on public servants when documenting their decision-making process.

Another fascinating aspect is the sometimes enigmatic nature of decisions, unexpectedly crystallizing and “taking on a life of their own,” as one participant described. The haziness of the decision-making process and the complexity of the interactions and the associated information represent a rational and emotional challenge for the executives.

Finally, the perception of the Secretariat as a central agency has elicited much interest and adds many opportunities to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. We believe that three potential areas, in particular, warrant attention: the authority of the Secretariat over other departments, the ambivalent nature of the organization's role as a central agency, and the relationship between all three federal central agencies.

The limitations of this research are many, starting with the limited number of interview participants, a situation we could neither predict nor mitigate. That is why the interview findings

we relate here represent potential avenues for future research in the area of public administration, rather than conclusive findings.

Further, additional methods of data collection (e.g., analysis of official documents) could have augmented the research, while opening the door to a triangulation of information. Finally, this research could have been extended to the two other central agencies to provide a more comprehensive, though preliminary, picture of the phenomenon studied and to add more dimensions and credibility to the results. This exploratory research has nonetheless revealed valuable avenues that, if properly pursued, will greatly enrich our understanding of the emotional aspects of decision-making and knowledge about the fascinating organizations that are central agencies.

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