

**DOME DISEASES: PARTY COMPETITION, LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT AND  
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN THREE CANADIAN PROVINCES**

by

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## **Abstract**

This project compares the structure and operations of the provincial legislatures of British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario over approximately fifteen years to evaluate the ways in which their effectiveness at holding government accountable is enhanced or diminished by differing systems of party competition. British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario exemplify polarized two-party, single-party dominant and multi-party systems, respectively. To evaluate the effectiveness of the legislatures under study, this project focuses on three areas: the independence of each legislature and its committees from the government, the autonomy of the legislature in managing its affairs and the degree to which it can meaningfully impact public policy. Results are mixed; while party competition appears to have caused significant differences in some measures of legislative effectiveness, others are less clear. Moreover, the differences between legislatures appear to be diminishing over time.

## Acknowledgements

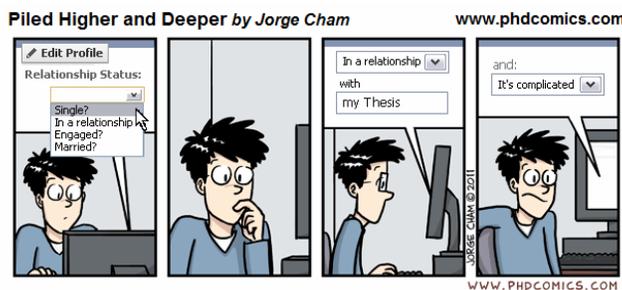
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## Preface

Former Alberta Premier Ralph Klein coined the phrase “dome disease” as part of his pejorative account of those who paid too much attention to the goings-on of the Alberta legislature. To many in Alberta, this phrase succinctly captured the Klein government’s dismissive attitude toward legislative accountability, and the hollowing of democratic institutions that resulted. On the other hand, glib as Klein’s phrase may have been, there is a danger of being too glib in response. Democracy is a fluid, infinitely contestable concept and is not just found in formal representative institutions. Indeed, the growth in recent years of new forms of citizen participation and new means of representation can be taken to suggest that existing institutions matter less than they once did, and too strong a focus on them is an affliction.

This project, however, proceeds from the assumption that legislatures *do* matter and that effective legislative oversight of the executive *is* an essential part of a democratic society. Notwithstanding new understandings of democracy, representation and accountability that have emerged, legislatures that are effective at oversight are essential to achieving accountability in representative democracies. Legislatures play an important substantive role in linking electors with their elected representatives and in connecting governments to citizens. Legislatures, in more than just a symbolic sense, “remain the focal points of democracy” (Docherty 2005: 3). This project assumes that existing representative institutions matter; strong legislatures are still necessary for a strong democracy.

## 1. Introduction

Graham White and Gary Levy call Canada's provincial legislatures a "veritable laboratory of parliamentary government" (1989: 1). However, the laboratory lights are rarely on. Legislatures matter—increasingly so—but there are major gaps in our understanding of Canadian parliamentary democracy. In this project, I consider how the distinct party systems of British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario have shaped those provinces' legislatures' ability to oversee the executive. Does, for instance, what C.B. Macpherson (1962) called the "quasi-party system" of one-party dominance in Alberta produce a legislature less successful at performing accountability functions? Answering questions like these is the beginning of filling some of these empirical gaps in Canadian political science, as well as contributing in a small way to a "democratic audit" of these three provinces. As well, by studying these legislatures over a period of time, it is possible to assess how they are changing.

I approach the question of executive accountability in these three legislatures from an institutional perspective, studying their formal rules and structures rather than the behaviour of individual legislators. I do undertake some discussion of legislator's behaviour in this project. Indeed, all studies of institutions are at a certain level studies of behaviour, as legislative institutions are continually shaped by the legislators that comprise them. However, I neither make primary use of survey research nor formally model individual or party relationships here. This is done partly for practical reasons, but there is a theoretical justification as well: White and Levy found twenty years ago that "members of provincial legislatures tend to know very little about one another's institutions" (1989: 3). Although this may be changing, it is likely to still be largely true

today. Comparisons of institutions as a whole, then, will likely be more fruitful than approaching the question from members' points of view.

Much literature on Canadian legislative institutions consists of speculative solutions to democratic problems; there is no shortage of normative writing that offers lists of particular procedural reforms, for instance. That will not be the focus of this paper. I mean instead to take a step back and attempt a systematic descriptive comparison of these three legislatures' capacity for executive oversight. This is not to argue against reform *per se*. But, as C.E.S. Franks argues, "parliament is more in need of understanding than of change" (1987: 261). Regardless of whether Franks is right about the amount of change required, we need a stronger and more theoretically grounded understanding of our parliamentary institutions. Without this understanding, we will continue to be only tilting at the windmills of parliamentary reform.

Systematic comparisons of legislatures are difficult to undertake. Over thirty years ago, Michael Mezey noted that "while we have been told a great deal about *individual* legislatures, we have been told very little about legislatures" (1979: 21). The situation is certainly somewhat better today, but there remain some existential challenges endemic to this sort of comparison. Data are often hard to come by; many interesting variables are difficult to quantify or impossible to observe. And comparative research is inherently reductionistic, which leaves it open to charges of inappropriate comparisons. In Canada, there is a strong resistance among scholars of the Canadian parliament to compare it to other countries' legislatures, particularly the United States (see e.g. Franks 1987: 30; Smith 2007: 125; Pepall 2010: 6). This "Canadian exceptionalism" may be overstated (cf Malloy 2002), but the challenges Mezey identifies remain prescient.

Canada's provincial and territorial legislatures, however, are ripe for comparative research that avoids most of these pitfalls. They are virtually identical formally, and thus are as close to perfect exemplars of "most similar cases" as are likely to be found for comparative purposes. Subnational legislatures are ideal for comparison and, by focusing on three provinces with distinct party systems we can attempt to find a causal link between party systems and effectiveness at executive oversight. The specific research questions that guide this project are:

1. Are there qualitative differences between the ability of legislatures of British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario to hold the government accountable?
2. Can these differences plausibly be linked to the unique systems of party competition in each province?
3. How are these differences changing over time?

The general hypothesis of this project is that differences in party system *do* make for differences in the effectiveness of a legislature at overseeing the executive.

Legislative oversight is only one dimension of accountability; whether a legislature is able to hold a government accountable is not determinant of that government actually being accountable. Accountability through elections, the role of the media and civil society are important factors as well (Manin 1997; Pelizzo *et al* 2006; Schofield and Ferschau 2007). Nonetheless, legislative accountability is important, and these provincial legislatures offer an opportunity for institutional comparison.

The next section briefly outlines the independent variable of this project: the variation that exists among party systems in Canadian provinces. It offers a justification for focusing on British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, as well as setting the scope of this research. A review of both Canadian and broader comparative literature follows, with a focus on the theoretical links that exist between party systems and legislatures'

performance at oversight functions. Next, I turn to the dependent variable, starting with a general review of government accountability in legislatures as a concept before turning to the specific ways it will be measured in this project. This leads us into the analysis of the three legislatures under study.

## 2. Independent Variable: Provincial Party Systems

There exist numerous typologies of Canadian provincial party systems. Different authors classify party systems according to features such as history, political culture and more. However, as Carty and Stewart suggest, the ground under complex typologies can often be shaky (1996: 78). For the purposes of this project, a fairly simple understanding of party system is used that is concerned mostly with the election outcomes they produce and the relative competitiveness of different parties. The partisan arrangements of the three legislatures under study are the most important feature for our purposes here. Party system dynamics between elections can be quite significant as well (Laver and Benoit 2003), but here party systems will be classified only with reference to general elections.

Using this understanding, British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario exemplify three distinct party systems and are ideal for comparison. To some, provincial party systems are not particularly diverse. Graham White, for instance, claims that “of more immediate significance is the continuing primacy of two-party systems” (2006: 262). But in perhaps the most comprehensive review of existing work, Dunn compares six different major systems of classification and finds rich diversity among the provinces: “[Canadian provincial] party systems differ markedly from one another, and have for some time” (2001: 457).

Using data from 1960 to 1995, Carty and Stewart identify four patterns of party competition in the provinces: one-party dominant, traditional two-party, three-party and polarized. In their analysis, Alberta is the sole consistent example of a single-party dominant system; all of the Atlantic provinces except New Brunswick maintain a traditional two-party system; Manitoba and Ontario have advanced to a three-party

system; and Quebec, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and New Brunswick feature a polarized system (Carty and Stewart 1996: 78-86). As Carty and Stewart point out, however, rapid change can make the systems they describe subject to revision.

Provincial party systems are quite stable, but they can sometimes be altered very quickly.

Stewart and Carty (2006) do conduct a more recent analysis of provincial party systems, finding that, overall, they have remained quite stable, but they do not directly compare their findings with their previous work. It is worth taking a closer look at how their previous analysis might be brought up-to-date.

Table 2.1 illustrates the mean and variance in the effective number of parliamentary parties in all ten provinces, based on the last five general elections in each province. This roughly covers the period since Carty and Stewart’s 1996 work, and allows for a more formal evaluation of the stability of particular party systems since then.

Province	Mean	Std. Dev
British Columbia	1.79	0.37
excluding 2001 election	1.98	0.07
Alberta	1.55	0.24
Saskatchewan	1.85	0.29
Manitoba	2.10	0.15
Ontario	2.09	0.19
Quebec	2.21	0.39
New Brunswick	1.68	0.30
Nova Scotia	2.60	0.24
Prince Edward I.	1.34	0.29
Newfoundland	1.64	0.26

**Table 2.1** Effective number of parties following last five general elections (Chief Electoral Officers’ Websites 2010)

The “effective number of parties” measurement, developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) is the reciprocal of the sum of the squares of each party’s proportion of the vote—in this case, the parliamentary vote inside the legislature. It allows for each party to be weighted according to its relative strength. A legislature evenly divided between two parties, for instance, will effectively have exactly two parties, while an uneven distribution yields a smaller number. These data offer some tentative observations of both the nature and the stability of current patterns of party competition. The Maritimes are not so traditional anymore: Nova Scotia has seen several minority

governments and appears to have developed a multi-party system. Prince Edward Island consistently has a legislature featuring a very large government and small opposition—even more so than previously. And Quebec’s party system has undergone a period of notable instability. With the greatest variance in its effective number of parties of all the provinces, it can no longer be treated confidently as a two-party polarized system. The most stable party systems—that is, those with the least variance in the effective number of parties *and* the most consistency with previous findings—are found in Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta. And, if the exceptional 2001 election is excluded, British Columbia is the most stable of all, very strongly exemplifying a two-party system.

Of course, this measure ignores the qualitative differences that might exist between party systems, and that might be correlated with the effective number of parties or not. Polarization might be a more important measure of party system than the mere number of parties, for instance. Using a one-dimensional measure of party systems is a simplification and is not ended to pre-empt a more comprehensive analysis of provincial party systems; its purpose here is solely to identify that these provinces have distinct party systems that produce distinct partisan arrangements in their legislatures.

Having identified this difference, then, a “most similar cases” design requires that there not be significant differences in other independent variables. One important consideration is the size of each province’s legislatures, as legislatures of different sizes may not be directly comparable to one another. White and Levy, for instance, call size “the most important variable in comparing the operation and effectiveness of provincial houses” (1989: 4; see also White 1990). British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario are the largest of all the provincial legislatures (excluding Quebec) and they are likely to be large

enough to be comparable with each other; this measure has been controlled for as well as possible.

Two other independent variables are important to mention, though they will not directly be controlled for here: ideology and political culture. There is some evidence that the particular ideology of government and opposition parties may alter their behaviour and, over time, the institutional realities of the legislature. A longstanding question in Canadian politics is the degree to which the NDP is qualitatively different from the Liberal or Conservative Parties (see e.g. Chandler 1977; Leduc and White 1974), and thus the simple number of competitive parties in a province may matter less than the relative strength of the NDP. Alternatively, the effectiveness of legislative institutions may be diminished under the particular type of conservatism practiced by Premiers Mike Harris in Ontario and Ralph Klein in Alberta (Brownsey 2005). A political cultural explanation of differences between parties, meanwhile, may suggest that the strength of legislative institutions is not informed so much by party dynamics as by its history and values.

As noted above, these two variables will not be systemically controlled for; they are and will remain possible alternative explanations for the features of the legislatures studied here. Indeed, Schofield and Fershau go farther and remind us that the “personality traits and talents of individual members” may be significant for explaining the effectiveness of legislative committees (2007: 365). Still, a focus on party system partially accommodates these other variables. Ideological differences are expressed within the confines of a polity’s party system, and the systems themselves are in part products of a polity’s political culture.

<b>British Columbia</b>	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>Ontario</b>
<b>36<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>1996-2001</b> Premier: Glen Clark (-2000); Ujjal Dosanjh (2000-) Party Standings: 39 NDP; 33 L; 2 Other; 1 Ind	<b>24<sup>th</sup> Legislature</b> <b>1997-2001</b> Premier: Ralph Klein Party Standings: 63 PC; 18 L; 2 NDP	<b>36<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>1995-1999</b> Premier: Mike Harris Party Standings: 82 PC; 30 L; 17 NDP
<b>37<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>2001-2005</b> Premier: Gordon Campbell Party Standings: 77 L; 2 NDP	<b>25<sup>th</sup> Legislature</b> <b>2001-2004</b> Premier: Ralph Klein Party Standings: 74 PC; 9 L; 2 NDP	<b>37<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>1999-2003</b> Premier: Mike Harris (-2002); Ernie Eves (2002-) Party Standings: 59 PC; 35 L; 9 NDP
<b>38<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>2005-2009</b> Premier: Gordon Campbell Party Standings: 46 L; 33 NDP	<b>26<sup>th</sup> Legislature</b> <b>2004-2008</b> Premier: Ralph Klein (-2007); Ed Stelmach (2007-) Party Standings: 62 PC; 16 L; 4 NDP; 1 Other	<b>38<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>2003-2007</b> Premier: Dalton McGuinty Party Standings: 72 L; 24 PC; 7 NDP
<b>39<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>2009</b> Premier: Gordon Campbell Party Standings: 49 L; 35 NDP; 1 Ind	<b>27<sup>th</sup> Legislature</b> <b>2008-2009</b> Premier: Ed Stelmach Party Standings: 72 PC; 9 L; 2 NDP	<b>39<sup>th</sup> Parliament</b> <b>2007-2009</b> Premier: Dalton McGuinty Party Standings: 71 L; 26 PC; 10 NDP

**Table 2.2** Scope of study

(Chief Electoral Officers' Websites 2010; Legislative Assembly Websites 2010; Siaroff 1996. Party standings are immediately following each election; interim Premiers are excluded)

The timeframe for this study is approximately fifteen years. Advances in the level of information made available tend to coincide with new legislatures formed after a general election; as such, the timeframe for each province begins with its fourth-most recent election. Thus, the timeframe is slightly but not significantly different in each province. Table 2.2 details more clearly the scope of the project and the particular compositions of these three legislatures following general elections in the period I examine.

### **3. Literature Review: Assessing the Effect of Party Systems on Legislatures**

#### ***Comparing Canadian Provincial Legislatures***

The first characteristic of Canadian provincial legislative studies is that they are largely non-existent. Robert Vipond observes that, even as Canadian political science is “more deeply engaged with comparative politics, comparativists have not deepened their engagement with Canada” (2008: 14). The intersection of legislative institutions and provincial politics is perhaps the best area of Canadian politics that supports this assessment. Virtually every comparative study of provinces begins with a lament for the dearth of previous work. Progress has been made in the study of provincial politics to the point that Vipond’s observation is not fair as a categorical comment (see e.g. Dunn 2006) but there is still a long way to go. Meanwhile, Jonathan Malloy finds “little sense of an ongoing and robust agenda of positive, empirical research on Canadian legislatures” (2002: 1), and a more recent review declares that “scholars are almost irrelevant to the effort to capture institutional realities” of parliamentary democracy in Canada (Sutherland 2010: 55). The conclusions that have been made about provincial legislatures, lying as they do at the intersection of these two gaps in Canadian political science, must then be understood to be tentative at best.

The research that has been done gives us a contradictory picture. On the one hand, it suggests that provincial legislatures are not substantially different in their abilities to act as scrutinizing institutions and, moreover, provincial institutions are becoming more homogenous as time goes on. Nonetheless, party systems are identified as an important determinant of the effectiveness of legislatures, but the specific effects

are rarely clearly stated and the causal link is neither theoretically nor empirically grounded. Much that is said about provincial legislatures is speculative.

### Different Worlds?

The central problem is summed up succinctly in a contradiction that Graham White identifies in a recent general review of the field:

Two contradictory tendencies are evident from this chapter. On the one hand, Canada's provincial and territorial legislatures exhibit substantial variation on a range of characteristics—size, resource levels, committee operations, and procedural practices...On the other hand, while these and other variations in legislative operations are worth knowing about, such differences in rules and practices do not in the end make for significantly different legislative processes or politics (2006: 272).

In part, this is a matter of perspective; what appears to be significant in a smaller set of comparators becomes less so in a bigger picture. It is difficult to determine what makes for a significant difference between legislatures, as a survey of White's own work indicates. Twenty years ago, he emphasized "the importance of understanding provincial legislatures in their local context," as there was "quite limited" institutional transfer between provinces (White and Levy 1989: 3-4). By 1996, he averred that provincial legislatures are merely small "variations" on common themes (White 1996: 206-209). Above, in 2006, differences between provincial assemblies are interesting but of little consequence. Finally, in 2010, there are "noteworthy mutations" unique to each provincial legislature (White 2010: 42). The intention here is not to castigate Graham White for apparently contradicting himself, but rather to note the acute difficulty that exists in evaluating the significance of differences between provincial institutions.

The question of what makes a difference merely "worth knowing about" versus one that produces significant differences really arises because of the lack of theoretical

grounding for the measurements we use. White notes that “judgements as to provincial legislatures’ effectiveness and their realization of democratic ideals depend very much on the criteria brought to bear” (2006: 255) and, too often, the criteria that are brought to bear are selected rather arbitrarily. To one writer, for instance, the practice in Alberta and Newfoundland of introducing a substantive government bill immediately after the Throne Speech is “a direct attack on parliamentary supremacy and independence” and a significant aberration beyond mere trivial interest (Hicks 2009: 22).

There seems to be an intuitive connection between party systems and the effectiveness of legislatures. Partisan arrangements have an obvious immediate effect on legislatures, simply because parties are such central actors in the Canadian parliamentary system. Franks finds that “the most important determinants of the control and use of power in the Canadian parliamentary system are the political parties” (1989: 35). One study by a parliamentary intern found that substantial procedural changes were achieved in a very short time during the 2004-2006 minority parliament, the first since 1980. This study claims that merely two years of minority government significantly increased oversight and accountability (Thomas 2007). There is disagreement over the direction of change, but there is a broad consensus that minority governments have significantly altered the nature of the contemporary House of Commons.

But we are interested here in somewhat broader effects: how party systems shape institutions over time. Of course different partisan arrangements produce different behaviour, but how do these behavioural changes shape institutions over time? In an echo of Mezey’s note that we know much more about particular legislatures than about legislatures generally, the strongest claim that party systems have a lasting effect on a

legislature's effectiveness at scrutiny is found in non-comparative studies. Indeed, virtually all studies of individual legislatures claim that their object of study is uniquely (in)effective because of its unique party system. One study of Alberta exemplifies both the causal link claimed and the sentence structure found in most single-province studies. "On the face of it, the province of Alberta has a legislature *comme les autres*," the discussion begins, but "the long-standing, overwhelming majority of government over opposition has deprived the Alberta Legislative Assembly of some crucial qualities of legislatures under the Westminster model of responsible government." Alberta has a "quasi-party legislature" uniquely unable to perform its critical oversight functions (Engelmann 1992: 137-138). Another author, focusing on British Columbia, finds that the government's efforts to dominate the legislature "have been hardened by the polarized context of BC political life and an uncompromising approach to party competition both within and outside the Assembly" (Ruff 2010a: 193).

*At first glance, our legislature possesses the same features as others, but a closer look reveals important differences shaped by patterns of party competition.* The semantic contrast of this sort of claim to White's conclusion is a point of interest. A more substantive observation, though, is that the relationship between party and legislative capacity is rarely tested empirically. In single-province studies, legislatures are said to be unique, but they are not compared directly with other legislatures. Instead, writers tend to compare their province of study with an abstraction of what parliamentary government ought to be. Legislative studies of Canadian provinces are too often speculative and anecdotal, rather than empirical and comparative. It is instructive to read a decades-old study of the Ontario legislature which explored the nature of legislative opposition in

what was then a single-party dominant system. This study tentatively found that opposition in a single-party dominant system becomes more cooperative and less competitive, but acknowledged that it was limited by focusing on a single case (Leduc and White 1974). The authors hoped that comparative research would shortly occur to test their findings more rigorously, but that has not happened. Without a stronger theoretical grounding and without a more systemic comparison, we are stuck in the contradiction and speculating in circles.

It may be tempting, then, to defer to Howlett's (1996) argument that Canadian provincial studies too often lose themselves in popular mythology. He is specifically talking about political economy studies, but the point can be applied to institutions as well. The provinces, according to Howlett, are much more similar to each other than most admit; we are too often attracted to images and stereotypes rather than evidence. Perhaps a lack of comparative work is what perpetuates ideas of uniqueness; perhaps we are all stuck in our own provincial worlds, unable to see over the proverbial fence.

### Converging Worlds?

One fundamental principle of Westminster parliaments is that their rules are written by the members themselves. Though heavily bound by systemic convention and historical tradition, legislatures possess a great deal of formal autonomy in how they conduct themselves—and they build upon their own history as much as on external principles. White and Levy's finding in 1989 that, excepting instances of one province being "shamed" into adopting a reform from another, provinces rarely draw institutional inspiration from each other illustrates the point (1989: 3). Legislatures reflect the polity they represent. Years, often decades, of stable yet different patterns of party competition

will be manifest inside the legislature; for instance, a single-party dominant system will produce long-serving government members and short-term opposition members. As these patterns sustain themselves over time, it seems reasonable to expect fairly consistent patterns to emerge in legislative rules, procedures and outcomes. Years of single-party dominance intuitively ought to produce a significantly different legislature than years of government frequently alternating between two parties.

But, at the same time, the provinces do not exist in isolation from each other. Provincial interdependence is always a live question in studying Canadian federalism, and it is possible that it has increased in recent years. Harrison (2006) finds that, although provinces are not definitively “racing to the bottom” and that local factors still matter, some policy homogenization may be taking place. Regional cooperation is a global trend, and initiatives such as trade agreements among the western provinces may indicate that it is being replicated at a smaller scale. Technological change may increase the extent to which provincial governments are evaluated by their citizens in comparison with other provinces (Harrison 1996: 472). Indeed, in relatively recent review, Dunn finds very tentatively that “provincial institutions are becoming increasingly similar in their structure and operation” (2001: 468). Convergence is a recurrent theme throughout the comparative provincial literature, though again it is not fully developed.

The Canadian literature does not offer a clear escape from the theoretical and empirical circles we find ourselves walking in. We know that provincial party systems are distinct and diverse, but we lack a clear theoretical understanding of what effect this has on provincial legislatures. We have a tentative claim that provinces are becoming

more alike, but we lack rigorous evidence for it. Some focus can be found by going beyond the limited Canadian literature and looking at what is found internationally.

### ***Comparative Perspectives***

There is a broad consensus that parties generally are an important factor in determining accountability relationships, structures and processes in legislatures. However, there is disagreement over the precise nature of this relationship. Mezey, for instance, writes that “the relationship between the legislature and the executive is conditioned *more than anything else* by the nature of the nation’s party system” (1991: 782, emphasis added), but others give parties a more diminished role in favour of other factors (see e.g. Krehbiel 1993). There are also disagreements over how specific features of party systems affect accountability. Do increased polarization and more competition among parties increase or decrease accountability?

Leduc and White (1974), as mentioned above, postulate that in a single party dominant party system, the behaviour of the opposition will become less competitive and more collaborative, using Dahl’s (1963) typology of political oppositions. But the challenge to replicate this finding was not pursued in the Canadian literature, and the consequences for how executive oversight is attained institutionally are not clear. Mattei (2005), however, uses a similar approach to study the evolution of parliamentary scrutiny in the Italian Parliament under different party systems, focusing on opposition scrutiny of delegated legislation. She finds that, indeed, “credible and accomplished alternation in government changes the behaviour and strategies of the parliamentary opposition” (Mattei 2005: 17, emphasis in original); opposition parties’ strategies become more competitive, rather than collaborative, as their electoral competitiveness increases.

More interesting, though, is Mattei's finding that, as a consequence, effective scrutiny *diminishes* in a more competitive legislature. As the party system becomes more polarized, a more competitive opposition is less effective at parliamentary oversight. According to Mattei, "[party system] bipolarization...is the single most important factor in understanding the diminishing effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny of delegated legislation" (2005: 33). The reason, according to Mattei, is that partisan rancour increases as the party system becomes more polarized, impeding effective oversight and accountability. Similar claims are made in Pelizzo *et al*'s study of Public Accounts Committees in Commonwealth countries. They find that "to be successful, PACs should operate in a nonpartisan way" (2006: 786-787); members should put partisan disagreements aside and work collaboratively. Pelizzo *et al* find that moving beyond partisan fighting is one of three critical requisites for Public Accounts Committees to achieve effective oversight of government finances. Like Mattei, they emphasize the importance of collaboration in constructing effective oversight.

On the other side of the argument, Saalfield (2000) and Krehbiel (1991) find that information, an important prerequisite for scrutiny, is more accessible under more competitive party systems. Krehbiel finds that "committee specialists from opposite sides of a policy spectrum are collectively more informative than specialists from only one side of the spectrum" in the United States Congress (1991: 84), and Saalfield expands the finding to Western European parliaments. According to Saalfield, "parliamentarians will have incentives to share information with the voters, if there is public competition between politically opposing forces" (2000: 365). The presence of

the clearly-defined partisan lines that appear as the party system becomes more polarized increases the amount of information available.

More concretely, Wright and Schaffner compare the state legislatures of Kansas and Nebraska, finding that the non-partisan legislature in the former “undermines the possibilities for popular control of government” (2002: 377). Their focus is on the electoral accountability of individual representatives, but their finding that polarization is essential to accountability has broader implications. Without readily apparent partisan cleavages, effective scrutiny, as Wright and Schaffner understand it, is impossible.

In sum, although there is disagreement on the particular effect differing party systems may have on the effectiveness of legislative oversight, there is broad support for the hypothesis that party systems are a significant factor. Saalfeld’s summation that “the nature of a nation’s party system...[shapes] the opportunity structure of executive oversight in parliamentary democracies” is borne out (2000: 357). Understanding the precise nature of this relationship, though, seems to hinge on each author’s understanding of what scrutiny entails and how it is measured. The next section attempts to synthesize a definition of accountability and a set of measures that might be applied to the Canadian legislatures in question.

## 4. Dependent Variable: Legislatures and Oversight

### *Defining Accountability and Oversight*

“Nothing could be simpler than the theory of parliamentary accountability,” notes C.E.S. Franks, “but, as in most areas of politics and government, reality is much more complex and less satisfying than the theory” (1987: 227). Accountability in the form of executive oversight is a central concern in parliamentary systems, but the term is surrounded by a “definitional morass” that makes comparative research difficult (Downs 1999: 88). As seen above, numerous definitions exist that are not easily reconciled.

Let us begin with the abstract, idealized version of accountability. If democracy is associated with “creating a governing system in which the popular will is translated into workable government” (Holzhacker 2005: 429), then accountability is concerned with maintaining and upholding institutions’ link to that popular will. Electors, having given power to governments, must have means to “control” them and to administer sanctions if governments fail to uphold the popular will (Brown 1983: 632). Responsiveness of governments to people is the key measure of accountability (Carey 2003: 191).

In parliamentary systems, of course, this relationship is indirect (Strøm 2000: 272). Popular control of the government occurs through representatives in a legislature, to which the executive is responsible. This arrangement is easily idealized, but quickly runs up against its limits. While we may wish for a supreme legislature that controls government on behalf of “the people,” the reality is different. There is an ongoing divide “between the parliament-centred rhetoric and the executive-centred reality” (Franks 1987: 29).

McKay and Johnson observe that it has been apparent for a long time “that government was too complex, debate too blunt an instrument, and party politics too intrusive for...exercise of the scrutiny function in its traditional form, holding government to account” (2010: 308). Representation in an assembly is an imperfect link between government and governed (Manin 1997: 184), and party government makes the link even less simple (Rhodes *et al* 2009: 61). Specifically in Canada, “the hallmark of the Westminster system is...overwhelming cabinet dominance” (White 2005: 15), and this dominance has been even more overwhelming in Canada’s provincial legislatures (Dunn 1990). Contemporary democracy is too complex to enable a supreme legislature that exercises executive oversight in an idealized form.

Given that, Brown’s claim that accountability cannot be incrementalized or measured in degrees is questionable. Accountability is always incremental, not an “absolute constitutional dictum,” as Brown puts it (1983: 632-633). We will not find the idealized version of accountability, but we do not need to discard the concept entirely, as Brown suggests. We can identify institutional differences that promote more or less accountability. There are different ways in which legislatures assert themselves relative to their executives, and these differences *are* matters of degree.

### ***Measuring Accountability and Oversight***

How, then, can we assess whether one legislature is more successful at executive scrutiny than another? Commensurate with the “rediscovery” of institutions in politics, attempts at benchmarking legislative institutions are prevalent but, as we will see, no unified standard of legislative independence or effectiveness yet exists. From the benchmarks that exist, however, we can piece together a method for assessing legislatures’

effectiveness in holding governments accountable. Accountability is too complex and slippery a concept to measure directly, but we can attempt to synthesize a robust set of measures that might serve as surrogates for some of its important dimensions.

For the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, a parliament is effective at executive oversight when it possesses “mechanisms to obtain information...sufficient to exercise its oversight function in a meaningful way.” More concretely, it must possess institutions that enable “meaningful oversight of state owned enterprises”; it must be granted “a reasonable amount of time in which to review the proposed national budget”; and there must be “meaningful opportunities for minority or opposition parties to engage in effective oversight of government expenditures” (2006: 8-9). It must have a strong and extensively used committee system; “the Legislature will refer legislation to a committee, and any exceptions must be transparent, narrowly-defined, and extraordinary in nature,” and committees shall have access to external expertise (2006: 5). The CPA guidelines’ use of words such as “meaningful” and “reasonable” makes them rather vague, but they offer a general statement of what an effective legislature might look like.

Fish and Kroenig, meanwhile, offer a more concrete “parliamentary powers index” by which legislatures may be judged (Fish 2006). Most of the content of their index, though, concerns constitutional design rather than the comparative institutional practices we are considering. As such, many of their measures are not applicable to Canadian political realities (cf. Joseph 2010). Nonetheless, some measures are applicable to this study. In particular, Fish and Kroenig suggest that a stronger legislature is one that meets regularly, controls its own finances and provides legislators sufficient resources to exercise the oversight function (Fish 2006: 8).

Arter attempts to move away from a set of particular benchmarks in favour of a broader set of questions. He seeks to “[analyze] the performance of legislatures in the totality of the legislative process” rather than individual measures in isolation (2006: 463), offering a number of questions that might be asked to achieve this analysis in different areas. Unfortunately, the “oversight” section of his article is the shortest and vaguest, and the questions he offers are merely whether the legislature “[has] the institutional capacity to oversee the work of the executive” and whether “legislators attach much importance” to the job (2006: 476-477). However, the questions he develops in other areas are more salient and can be applied to oversight as it is understood in Canada. These questions include whether legislative committees are able to act autonomously (466), whether the legislature is convened regularly (471), the extent to which the legislature controls the legislative agenda (472), and whether permanent specialist committees review legislation and act independently of the executive (473-474).

Using Arter’s interrogatory approach to comparing legislatures, and synthesizing the benchmarks used in the other works, three questions suggest themselves as appropriate for evaluating the effective oversight exercised by each legislature:

- Are a sufficient number of legislators sufficiently *independent* of the executive to hold it accountable?
- Do the legislature and its committees manage their affairs *autonomously*?
- Is the legislature convened often enough and is sufficient time allotted for the legislature’s deliberations to be *meaningful*?

These questions are only surrogates for broader questions of accountability; the answers may indeed be separate from that of the larger question. We have not solved the conceptual problem that plagues discussions of accountability. But independence,

autonomy and meaningfulness of debate are certainly important pre-requisites for parliamentary accountability, and narrowing the focus to these questions allows for specific measures to be developed to facilitate a direct comparison between provinces.

### ***Specific Measures and Hypotheses***

#### **Independence and Executive Size**

Size, in different forms, matters in Canadian politics. Franks observes that “the most severe problem in Canadian parliamentary government is the shortage of competent manpower” (1987: 262). Docherty devotes an entire chapter of his contribution to the *Canadian Democratic Audit* series to the theme of “scrutiny and size” in legislatures, reflecting on the need for a “critical mass” of legislators to hold government accountable (2005: 136). It is an obvious but important point that, in order for members of a legislature to hold a government to account, there must be enough of them to undertake the work of scrutinizing a government. While the political executive—both cabinet ministers and the staff they are accountable for—has expanded, legislatures in many provinces have shrunk (Docherty 2005: 119). An effective legislature must have a critical mass of members who retain a degree of freedom from the government.

As a specific benchmark, Docherty suggests that the cabinet should make up no more than one-fourth of the total assembly; that is, there should be three times as many private members as ministers (2005: 182). There is a qualitative difference between ministers and private members in terms of their ability to hold the government accountable. Those that *are* the government cannot and will not exercise the scrutiny function to the same degree as private members.

But the question does not end here, because the relative size of the executive and the legislature is not just manifest in the number of ministers in the house. In fact, the number of members independent of government is smaller than just those who are not sworn into cabinet. Many governments appoint parliamentary secretaries, tasked with steering government legislation, representing the government's interests on committees and—occasionally—answering questions on behalf of their ministers. Docherty observes that, “while parliamentary secretaries serve important functions...they serve executive and not legislative responsibilities” (Docherty 2005: 67). In setting out a qualitative distinction between “executive” and “legislative” members, parliamentary secretaries find themselves on the same side of the fence as ministers.

And, furthermore, different governments involve private members of the governing party quite differently in government decisions, potentially to the point of undermining their ability to scrutinize government. Some may make private members part of cabinet committees; others may assign particular pieces of government policy to them. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these actions, but the impact on legislative scrutiny is likely to be negative. White, even as he argues for more participation of backbenchers in cabinet processes, admits that “it is indeed an open question whether (presumably) enhanced backbench participation in cabinet processes will come at the cost of emasculating legislative committees...and of inhibiting private members from criticizing their government in other public venues” (White 2005: 125).

The real problem, as Franks, Docherty and others point out, is that merely being a legislator is not seen as being a rewarding, prestigious or meaningful career. Docherty's study of legislators establishes that to be “merely” a member of the legislature is to be “at

the bottom of the Commons' career ladder" (1997: 97). There is thus always a "profound inequality" in legislatures between government and opposition; "it is likely that at some point in his [sic] career an MP belonging to the dominant party will participate in the exercise of power," while the rewards of being in opposition are both fewer in number and less likely to be attained (Franks 1987: 44-45). Chairing the public accounts committee, perhaps one of the more prestigious positions open to members of the opposition, is a small reward compared to being finance minister.

The link between this measure and party systems is found by considering how the dynamics of this inequality varies according to how often parties change places between government and opposition. "If there were frequent alternations of government," Franks points out, "the imbalance of power between government and opposition would be redressed over time" (1987: 44). If there are not frequent alternations of government, power is not only chronically imbalanced but *expected* to be imbalanced. If, in an election, it is already known which party will form the government, candidates already know which side of the legislature they will find themselves on should they win. This changes the dynamics of the campaign and the expectations of legislative representation.

In the particular case of Alberta, Mark Lisac describes how voter choice is not about selecting a candidate from the party most fit to form government; it is instead about "whether to vote for a voice in government or a voice in opposition" (2004: 9).

Progressive Conservative candidates campaign explicitly on this theme. One candidate from the 2008 election promised in large, bold print on her campaign blog that a vote for her will "make sure the voters of Edmonton-Glenora regain a seat at the government table in the next Alberta legislature" (Klimchuk 2008), and virtually all of her fellow

candidates made similar promises. When expectations are so high, rewards will need to be commensurate; a backbench full of members who have promised their electors “a voice in government” will need to be sated.

It may be seen as tautological that a legislature with a larger government party caucus will have more members who find themselves on the “executive” side of the fence. But there is no theoretical reason why the size of the executive should be positively correlated with the size of the government caucus. The realities of political representation in Canada mean that there will be some correlation (White 2001: 18-19). In theory, however, the structure of cabinet and the amount of business governments have to accomplish should not depend on the number of members of the governing party elected. Indeed, White hopefully writes that a larger caucus should yield a better, not bigger, executive (1990: 529).

Thus, a focus on the chronic imbalance of power between the parties in the legislature under a less competitive party system is appropriate. It is a reasonable hypothesis that more frequent changes in government should reduce the size of the executive and increase the number of members independent from it.

**Hypothesis 1:** A legislature in a province with a less competitive party system will have fewer members with sufficient independence from the executive to effectively scrutinize the government.

### Autonomy and the Speakership

In the Westminster parliamentary tradition, legislatures possess a formal autonomy in the form of parliamentary privilege: legislatures have certain legal powers, legislators are immune from prosecution for speech inside the chamber and so on (Heard 1991: 77).

Parliamentary privilege, once established, cannot be struck down by the courts

(McLachlin 2004). But this formal and legal autonomy masks variance in a legislature's autonomy and independence from governments.

Many features of parliamentary autonomy now taken for granted are actually quite recent innovations: until 1985, for instance, Speakers of the House of Commons and all provincial legislatures were selected explicitly by the Prime Minister or Premier (Levy 1998: 7). A legislature that is effective at performing the scrutiny function must have a degree of procedural autonomy from the executive. A legislature must be able to set its own agenda and exercise control over its own affairs, and one measure is how its presiding officers are chosen.

In 1987—immediately after the first Speaker elections in the House of Commons—Franks wrote that “the Canadian House is not noted for either its respect for the chair or its knowledge of rules and parliamentary procedures” (1987: 123). Have reforms since then changed this? Docherty writes that changes to the speakership “have been nothing short of dramatic and positive for legislatures in Canada” (Docherty 2005: 54-55), but though he does note that the provinces have advanced at different rates, he does not comprehensively assess the selection of the Speaker in provincial assemblies.

This is worth taking a closer look at, though, as White writes that “the practical consequences of...growing administrative independence [depend] heavily on how truly independent the Speaker is” (2006: 265). Formal autonomy and procedural freedom are given shape by those who preside. Accordingly, legislatures' methods of electing Speakers will be assessed for the degree to which they support an independent Speaker. In doing so, Levy's (1998) survey of the disposition of Speakers when they are no longer in the chair will be updated.

How might this relate to variations in party systems? Franks suggests that autonomy may vary according to the degree to which parties are willing to defer to the legislature's authority as an independent entity. This deference is affected by patterns of party competition. Franks again identifies the chronic power imbalances that arise from infrequent changes in government as a major factor in impeding the speaker's role as a manifestation of the autonomous power of the legislature (1987: 124).

**Hypothesis 2:** A legislature in a province with a less competitive party system will have a less independent process for selecting a Speaker and other presiding officers.

### Autonomy and Committees

Legislative committees can be another indicator of autonomy, though it is important not to load them with excessive expectations. Committees receive a great deal of attention in proposals for legislative reform, and not all of it is warranted (Franks 1987: 160-162).

They are expected to be much more than they can be. In 1985, the House of Commons' Special Committee on Reform wrote that a "vigorous standing committee system" could "result in the growth of committee influence over government policy" (Parliament of Canada 1985: 16). Hopes were high; the report's discussion of the committee system opened with one MP calling for an "imaginative application of democracy to the committee system, where opposition views are supported by powers as well" (1985: 14).

Committee reforms are often suggested as antidotes for the various toxins of parliamentary malaise. Reform advocates want them to be less acrimonious and more focused on improving public policy than on partisan posturing. The former leader of the Official Opposition in Alberta suggested that a more robust committee system might ignite "the spirit of improving policy through open debate on competing points of view" rather than "unchallenged partisan opinion" (Taft 2007: 53). Indeed, Alberta's

long-standing lack of legislative committees does make for a problem, and a mature committee system does contribute to a better democracy, but it is important again not to load committees with unreasonable expectations. Smith's dismissal of the "predictable content" of suggested committee reforms is somewhat justified (2007: 124). White reminds us that "the primal reality of legislative committees is that they are composed of party politicians engaged in political work" (White 1989: 182).

Still, some specific features of committees are worth studying comparatively for the level of autonomy they demonstrate from the executive. Franks argues that "among the most important constraints working against more effective committees is the limitation of manpower" (1987: 185), so it is worth examining to what extent members of committees have time to devote to them. Following the legislative benchmarks literature, it is also important to consider what ability committees have to set their own agenda.

At issue in assessing a legislature's autonomy is the degree to which the legislature itself possesses an authority that is acknowledged to be legitimate and separate from the government—or, indeed, from any political party. Under the conditions Franks describes, with few members present that have sat on both sides of the aisle, committees are unable to develop.

**Hypothesis 3:** A legislature in a province with a less competitive party system will have a less professionalized and permanent committee system.

### Meaningful Deliberation: Sitting Days and Legislative Workload

Finally, perhaps the most important question to ask about a legislature's scrutiny of a government is whether any of it matters. Assessing whether a legislature makes a meaningful contribution to public policy is not a straightforward task but, following established benchmarks, two measures present themselves. The first is simply how much

time the legislature is given to scrutinize the government. This is a common measure of a legislature's professionalism (Squire 1992: 71) and appears regularly in lists of legislative benchmarks. Even legislatures with a fixed parliamentary calendar may find that governments are unwilling to stick to them. A related question is how much legislation the government expects the legislature to pass each session. A barrage of bills is unlikely to receive the necessary scrutiny simply because members lack time to research them.

These measures have a fairly clear theoretical connection to party systems. White uses the Liberal-NDP accord following the 1985 Ontario election to illustrate how the necessity of cooperation in a minority parliament served as a significant advancement toward the "transformative" side of his institutional scale (1989: 11). Minority governments are not present in any of the cases studied here, but the possibility of their occurrence in a multiparty system may be a factor in a legislature's development.

Franks again offers a more general explanation of how party competition may impact how seriously debate is taken and how meaningful its contribution is:

With a long-lived government facing a perpetual opposition...the government's concern is to get its business through, not to do what it would consider fair if it were in opposition; while the opposition's concern is to delay and oppose, not to accept what it would consider reasonable if it were government (Franks 1987: 124).

The critical relationship is between the competitiveness of a party system and what role members of the government and opposition play. Do parties perform in a strictly competitive manner or is there more collaboration? The comparative literature identifies a relationship between the party system and parties' strategies within the legislature, but there is disagreement on the direction of the effects. On balance, given Franks' assessment, we will hypothesize that a critical mass of members who have found themselves on both sides of the argument may be a key ingredient to making meaningful

debate happen—that is, a legislature operating in a province with a more competitive party system will meet more often and will make a greater contribution to legislating.

**Hypothesis 4:** The legislature in a province with a less competitive party system will have fewer opportunities for meaningful, transformative debate.

## 5. Analysis

Various sources of data are used to test these hypotheses. In addition to each legislature's *Hansard* transcripts and procedural rules, a database was created consisting of all elected members in the three legislatures for the period under study. This information was compiled primarily from each assembly's website, with gaps filled by each province's elections agency, *Hansard*, orders-in-council and Siaroff's (2006) overview of provincial electoral data. Some 591 different individuals served as members of these three legislatures in the period studied here, and it proves surprisingly difficult to find authoritative records of their existence and the roles they have played. Legislatures matter, but it certainly is difficult to prove it sometimes.

### ***Evidence of Party System Impacts***

Before testing the specific hypotheses in question, it is worth reviewing some straightforward indicators of the effect that party systems have on the composition of a legislature, to explore the causal mechanisms that might be at play. Table 5.1 outlines the average (continuous)

<b>British Columbia</b>			
Election	Party	MLAs	Years Elected
1996	NDP	39	4.44
	Liberal	33	1.45
	Other	3	6.33
	<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>3.20</b>
2001	Liberal	77	2.00
	NDP	2	7.32
	<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>2.33</b>
2005	Liberal	46	5.08
	NDP	33	0.29
	<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>3.08</b>
2009	Liberal	49	5.90
	NDP	35	3.37
	Other	1	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>4.79</b>
<b>Alberta</b>			
Election	Party	MLAs	Years Elected
1997	PC	63	4.86
	Liberal	18	2.97
	NDP	2	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>4.33</b>
2001	PC	74	5.37
	Liberal	7	5.03
	NDP	2	2.38
	<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>5.27</b>
2004	PC	62	7.14
	Liberal	16	1.19
	NDP	4	3.04
	Other	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>5.71</b>	
2008	PC	72	5.08
	Liberal	9	4.67
	NDP	2	3.86
	<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>5.00</b>
<b>Ontario</b>			
Election	Party	MPPs	Years Elected
1995	PC	82	2.01
	Liberal	30	5.26
	NDP	17	8.76
	Other	1	4.75
	<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>3.66</b>
1999	PC	59	5.67
	Liberal	35	6.29
	NDP	9	9.61
	<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>6.23</b>
2003	Liberal	72	4.34
	PC	24	10.37
	NDP	7	12.61
	<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>6.30</b>
2007	Liberal	72	6.59
	PC	25	10.52
	NDP	10	8.53
	<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>7.69</b>

Table 5.1 Members' Elected Experience by Party

parliamentary experience of members elected or re-elected in each of the general elections under study. While four elections are not a sufficient timeframe from which to make any definitive conclusions, a number of interesting observations can be made here. The first is simply to confirm Franks' observation that Canadian legislative careers are short. Of the three, British Columbia is the legislature with the least experienced members overall, perhaps showing how a polarized and highly competitive electoral system shortens careers by making very few seats safe. Unfortunately, the effects of the 2001 election are too pronounced and persistent to make any observations about the relative experience of government and opposition members. In Alberta, a single-party dominant system results in the governing Progressive Conservative Party always having a more experienced caucus. Interestingly, though, the difference is not always great, suggesting that it is possible for a determined opposition member to carve out a personal voting base. Excluding the "revolutionary" 1995 election that gave rise to the Harris government, Ontario tends to have the most experienced legislature overall. Significantly, the parties in opposition are consistently able to re-elect experienced members.

Table 5.2, meanwhile, presents a consolidated picture of where members' experience lies. As expected, Alberta's single-party dominant system means that there are very few members who have been members of both government and opposition. By 1997 there were no longer any members who had been elected prior to the Progressive Conservative Party forming government. The only Alberta MLAs with experience on both sides of the house are floor-crossers; otherwise, government and opposition are rigidly separated. British Columbia shows substantially more overlap, with 22% of

members having both government and opposition experience, and in Ontario nearly 100 MPPs—from all three major parties—have experienced life on both sides of the chamber.

	British Columbia 1996-2009	Alberta 1997-2009	Ontario 1995-2009
Members	194	171	226
Government	147 (76%)	129 (75%)	202 (89%)
Opposition	94 (48%)	44 (26%)	116 (51%)
Both	42 (22%)	2 (1%)	92 (41%)

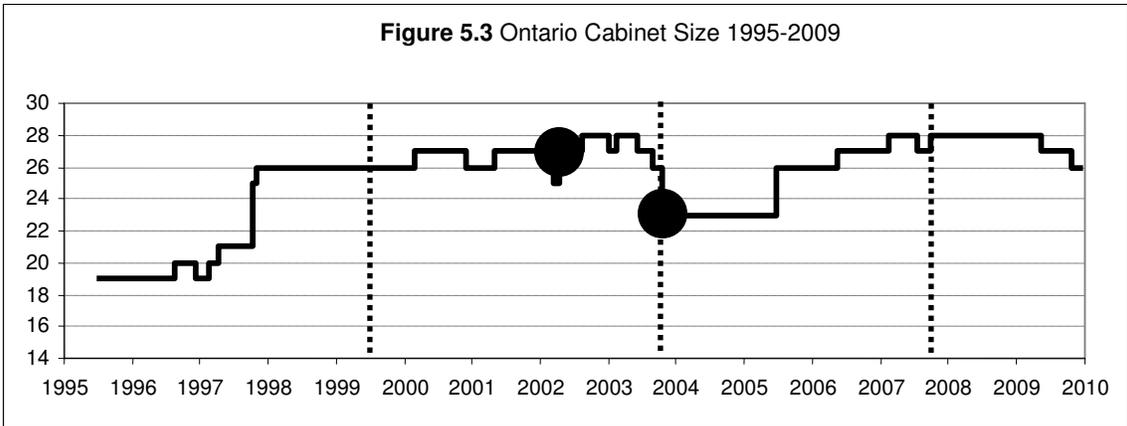
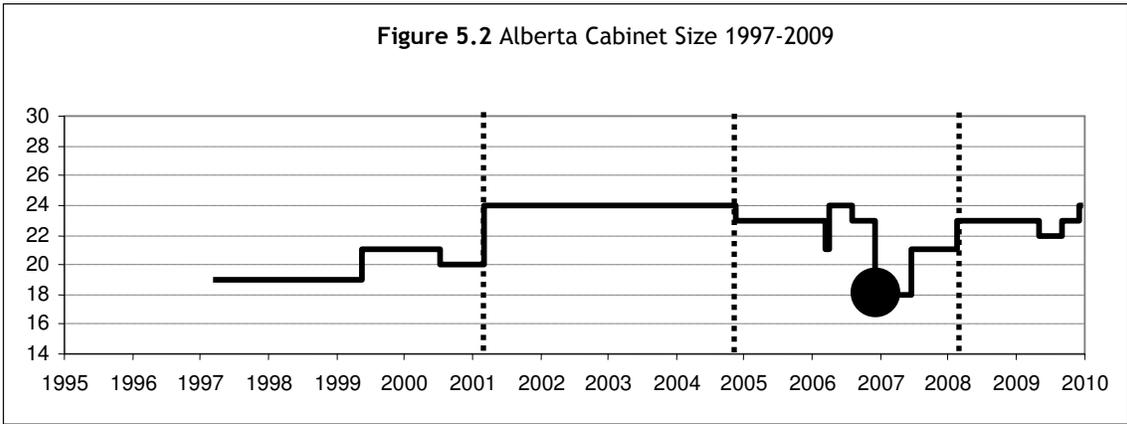
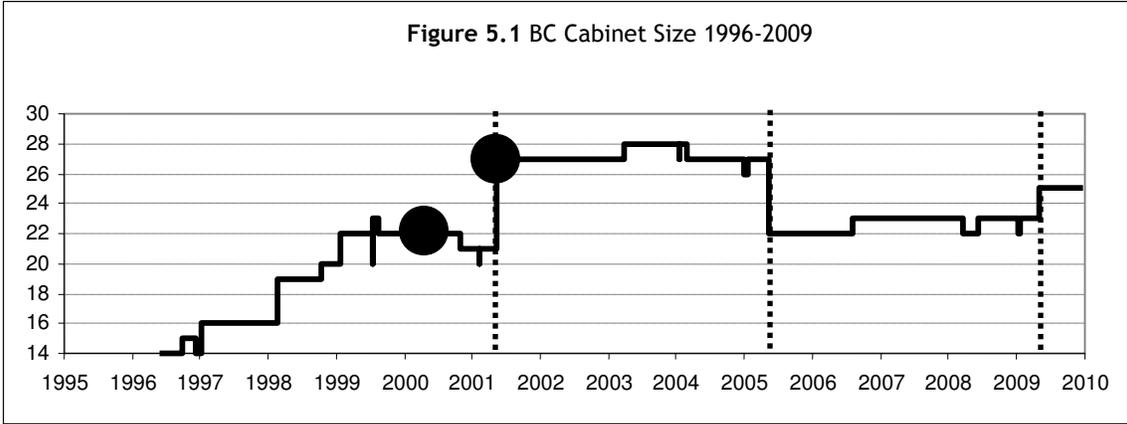
**Table 5.2** Members' Experience in Government and Opposition

A critical mass of members who have served on both sides is, according to Franks, critical to compensating for power inequalities between government and opposition. If that is to be the mechanism by which patterns of party competition give rise to institutional effectiveness, then it seems that a competitive party system should be more conducive to a legislature holding government to account. Let us proceed, then, to more specific questions of what might result.

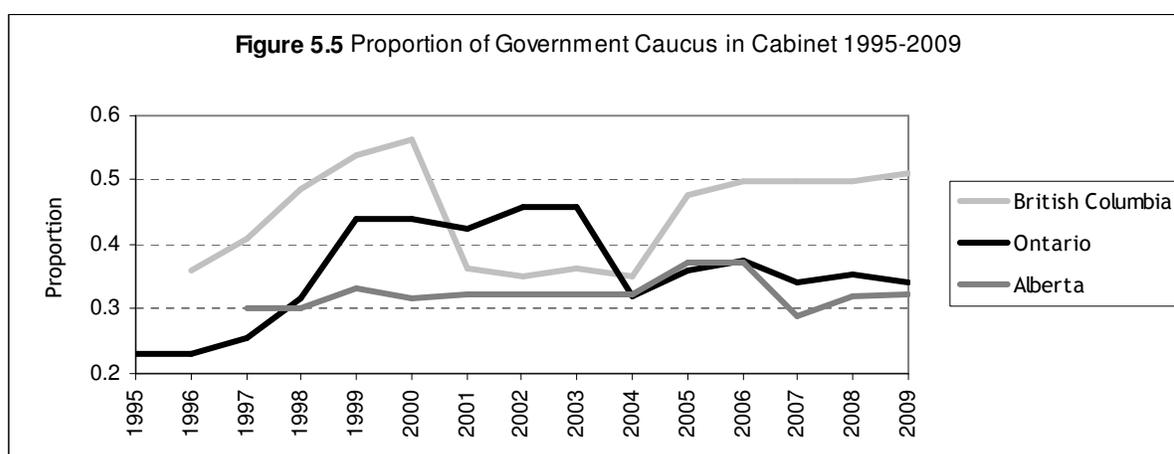
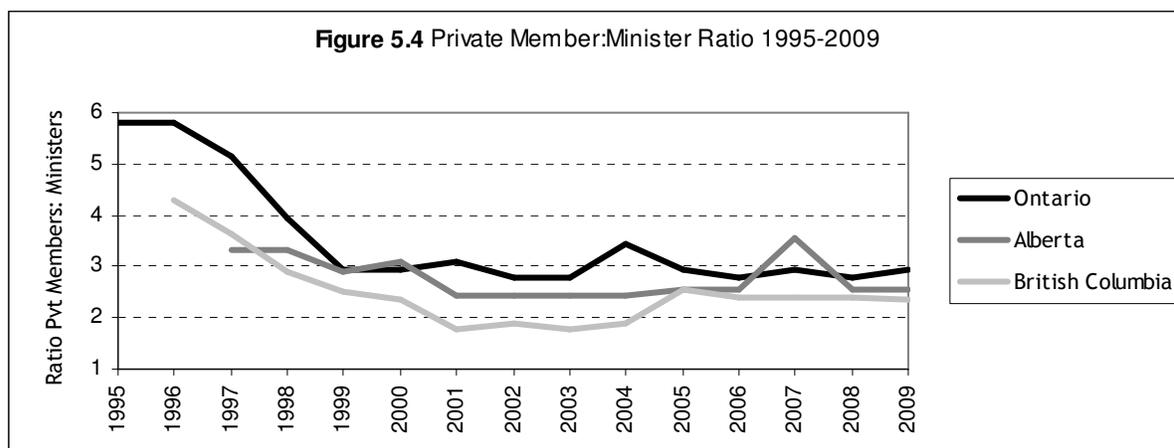
### ***Measuring Effective Oversight***

#### **Executive Size**

The first measure of executive size is simply the size of cabinet. Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 begin by illustrating the absolute size of each province's cabinet over the years under study. Cabinet changes following elections are marked with dashed vertical lines, and new Premiers are marked with a filled circle.



Figures 5.4 and 5.5, meanwhile, compare the relative size of these cabinets by plotting the ratio of non-ministers (excluding the Speaker) to ministers, and the proportion of the government party caucus who find themselves in cabinet. For clarity, an annual modal value is used for the size of cabinet rather than tracking all changes.



Some conclusions can be drawn from these data about the determinants of cabinet size. However, none of them are strong indications of a direct structural relationship to the provinces' differing party systems. Overall, cabinets have increased in size in all provinces, both in absolute terms and in relation to the size of the legislature. The provinces begin this dataset in the expected positions, with Ontario having the relatively largest number of members outside of cabinet and Alberta having the smallest. However, all three provinces very quickly converge, and by the end of the dataset differences are small enough that they relate more to the overall size of the legislature than any other factor. Reductions of legislature size in Ontario were not matched by reductions in cabinet size; the large increase in cabinet size during British Columbia's NDP

administration has not been undone by the Liberal government; and, excepting the brief period immediately after Ed Stelmach became Premier, Alberta's cabinet has remained at a fairly constant size. Interestingly, all three provinces end up with a ratio of ministers to private members at or close to Docherty's suggested value of 3:1.

The largest reductions in cabinet size occur with new premiers. Both Ed Stelmach in Alberta and Dalton McGuinty in Ontario experimented with smaller government upon taking power, but the experiment was in both cases short-lived. Mike Harris' government in Ontario is another example of this phenomenon: prior to the Conservatives' victory in 1995 the Ontario cabinet numbered some 27 members (Dunn 2006c: 224). If there is a connection between size and the ideology of the government in power, it is unclear. The McGuinty Liberals in Ontario, the Campbell Liberals in British Columbia and the Harris Conservatives represent quite a broad ideological spectrum and, as mentioned, their smaller cabinets quickly grew in all three cases. The absolute smallest cabinet belonged to the BC NDP, but it too did not last for long.

These data suggest that caucus size drives cabinet size to an extent, as both Alberta's and British Columbia's cabinets increased with large government majorities in 2001. Moreover, once cabinet sizes relative to the legislature converge in 1999-2000, the proportion of the government caucus in cabinet does show a pattern. Excepting the very large government caucus of 2001-2005, British Columbia consistently has a cabinet approximately half the size of the government caucus. Alberta seems to have settled consistently on a cabinet made up of one-third of caucus. And, as the Harris government's decision to reduce the size of the legislature is slowly being undone, Ontario cabinets approach a fairly constant size of 35% of the government caucus.

However, executive size is not just the number of full-fledged ministers. Table 5.3 presents the number of parliamentary assistants or parliamentary secretaries in each province during the study period. As these appointments are even more fluid than those of full cabinet ministers (Docherty 2005: 65), an annual modal value for the number of ministers and secretaries is presented rather than graphing all changes.

Year	British Columbia				Alberta				Ontario			
	Cab Min	PS	Neither	Ratio	Cab Min	PA	Neither	Ratio	Cab Min	PA	Neither	Ratio
1995									19	25	85	1.9
1996	14	8	52	2.4					19	26	84	1.9
1997	16	7	51	2.2	19	0	63	3.3	21	34	74	1.3
1998	19	7	48	1.8	19	0	63	3.3	26	31	72	1.3
1999	21	10	43	1.4	21	0	61	2.9	26	17	59	1.4
2000	22	10	42	1.3	20	0	62	3.1	26	20	56	1.2
2001	28	0	50	1.8	24	0	58	2.4	25	20	57	1.3
2002	27	0	51	1.9	24	0	58	2.4	27	22	53	1.1
2003	28	0	50	1.8	24	0	58	2.4	27	21	54	1.1
2004	27	1	50	1.8	24	0	58	2.4	23	29	50	1.0
2005	22	2	54	2.3	23	0	59	2.6	26	30	46	0.8
2006	23	3	52	2.0	23	0	59	2.6	27	35	40	0.6
2007	23	4	51	1.9	18	0	64	3.6	27	33	46	0.8
2008	23	4	51	1.9	23	10	49	1.5	28	34	44	0.7
2009	25	6	53	1.7	23	10	49	1.5	27	34	45	0.7

Cab Min=Cabinet Ministers; PS/PA=Parliamentary Secretaries/Assistants; Neither=Remaining MLAs/MPPs, excluding Speaker; Ratio=Neither:(Cab Min+PS/PA)

**Table 5.3 Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentary Assistants/Secretaries, 1995-2009**

If Docherty is right to classify parliamentary secretaries and assistants as “arms of the executive” as far as accountability is concerned, then the ratio of those members that can scrutinize the government to those that comprise it is even more dismal than before. In all three provinces, the number of members in latter category is consistently increasing. Even more interestingly, the relative position of the three provinces is the opposite of expectations. Although it has the largest legislature and a competitive multi-party system, Ontario consistently has the fewest members formally able to effectively scrutinize the government. Since 2004, fewer members have been “outside” the executive than “in”. Alberta, by contrast, consistently had the most members “out” until its introduction of Parliamentary Assistants following the 2008 election.

But this is not yet the end of the story of executive size and its consequences for legislative scrutiny. All three of these legislatures now feature the active participation of private members of the government caucus in the cabinet committee system. “The most radical method yet devised in Canada for involving private government members in cabinet processes is the caucus committee favoured in Alberta, British Columbia, and most recently, Ontario” (White 1995: 178). White likens this system to “an expansion of cabinet through the addition of a tier of (very) junior ministers” (1995: 179) and hopes that it might lead to more inclusive and participatory executive decision-making.

An increase in the effective size of the executive decreases in the number of legislators that can hold it accountable. White acknowledges this, but notes that “given the quiescence of the typical Canadian government backbencher, this is not much of a loss” (1995: 178). Nonetheless, it is worth taking a closer look at the numerical consequences of this level of executive involvement. Unfortunately, historical data on government committee membership is all but non-existent; current membership is posted on each provincial government’s website, and occasionally a news release or other document reveals some information, but no more authoritative data exists. However, using data from a 1998 survey of cabinet decision-making conducted by the federal Privy Council Office, it is possible to make a comparison with the present day. The picture is not complete, but we can at least see the end result of twelve years’ worth of change.

Year	British Columbia					Alberta					Ontario				
	Min	PS	Cmte	None	Ratio	Min	PA	Cmte	None	Ratio	Min	PA	Cmte	None	Ratio
1998	19	7	9	39	1.1	19	0	43	20	0.3	26	31	0	72	1.3
2010	25	6	7	45	1.2	23	10	36	13	0.2	27	34	6	39	0.6

Min=Cabinet Ministers; PS/PA=Parliamentary Secretaries/Assistants; Cmte=Member of Exec Committee  
None=Remaining MLAs/MPPs, excluding Speaker; Ratio=Neither:(Min+PS/PA+Cmte)

**Table 5.4 Cabinet Committee Membership by Private Members, 1998 and 2010**  
(Privy Council Office 1998; Government Websites 2010)

If a backbencher appointed to a cabinet committee becomes “another tier of minister,” then table 5.4 illustrates just how large the executive has become in these three provinces. In both 1998 and 2010, all members of the Alberta government caucus were on at least one government committee. Ontario in 1998 had cabinet committees made up of only ministers and the occasional parliamentary assistant, but today, as in Alberta, virtually all members of the government party are at least nominal participants in government decisions. The curiosity is British Columbia; it was, as noted by both White (1995: 178) and Dunn (2006c: 239), an “early adopter” of involving private members in government business, but this reform lasted only as long as the abnormally large government caucus of 2001-2005. As a result, in both of the data points noted here, BC’s is the only one of the three legislatures in which a (slim) majority of members do not take part in cabinet decisions at some level. In Alberta and Ontario, only opposition members maintain unequivocal independence from the executive.

Answering a question about energy policy from an opposition member earlier this year, Alberta Premier Stelmach took more issue with the member’s preamble about what advice his backbench had given him than with the substance of the question: “Mr. Speaker, first of all, I don’t have any backbenchers. They’re government members. I actually find that term quite offensive” (*Alberta Hansard* 2010: 9). Perhaps Alberta’s

dissolution of the distinction between caucus and cabinet was a result of Alberta's party system—"the need to keep idle hands busy," as Dunn puts it (2006b: 239).

However, expanding the size of the executive in this way no longer seems to be an effect of patterns of party competition. The first Throne Speech of the McGuinty government in Ontario sounds a great deal like the line from Alberta: giving more cabinet responsibility to government private members is part of "[opening] up government and its agencies, [bringing] the voices of Ontarians to Queen's Park...[giving] all members an opportunity to do more on behalf of their constituents" (Legislative Assembly of Ontario 2003: 10). But this spirit of cooperation is a potential problem for democratic accountability. Merely serving on a cabinet committee does not completely eliminate a member's capacity to scrutinize government decisions. But blurring the lines between cabinet and government caucus does mean that accountability is less defined and more fraught than before, and the problem of size is exacerbated. If legislatures overall are too small, then certainly opposition caucuses are too small to shoulder the work of holding such massive governments accountable.

In the end, a connection between executive size and party competition is not clearly observed, and the hypothesis that less competitive party systems institutionalize larger executives is not borne out. It may have been somewhat supported fifteen years ago, but the evidence here is that cabinets are increasingly large and the government caucus is increasingly involved in cabinet decisions regardless of level and patterns of party competition. All three legislatures thus face a similar problem of having their effectiveness at scrutiny subsumed by an expanding executive.

## Speakership

The finding that the number of members independent of the executive is so small may render the question of the legislature's autonomy from the executive rather irrelevant. Nonetheless, it is worth exploring independence procedurally to see what this would mean for legislatures' independence were they to achieve a larger mass of such members.

If the autonomy of a legislature is, as White argues, intimately related to the independence of the Speaker, surveying the men and women that have served in the position is an important start. Table 5.5 lists the twelve individuals that have held the position in the study period, along with the dates of their election and their disposition following their term. One indicator suggested by Levy (1998) is the length of a Speaker's tenure. While Levy's survey suggested at the time that the trend was for shorter terms, the opposite has been seen in these three provinces since then. The Speakership in Ontario and British Columbia was certainly a temporary job in the late 1990s and, in many cases, a stepping-stone to a cabinet position. But no Speaker has stepped down in favour of a cabinet appointment for over a decade, and the position overall seems to be a more permanent one.

British Columbia			Alberta			Ontario		
Speaker	Party	Elected	Speaker	Party	Elected	Speaker	Party	Elected
<b>D Lovick</b> <i>To Cabinet</i>	NDP	Jun 25, 1996	<b>K Kowalski</b> <i>Incumbent</i>	PC	Apr 14, 1997	<b>A McLean</b> <i>Remained MLA</i>	PC	Sept 26, 1995
<b>G Brewin</b> <i>To Cabinet</i>	NDP	Mar 26, 1998				<b>E Doyle</b> <i>Remained MLA</i>	PC	Sept 26, 1996
<b>W Hartley</b> <i>Defeated</i>	NDP	Mar 15, 2000				<b>C Stockwell</b> <i>To Cabinet</i>	PC	Oct 3, 1996
<b>C Richmond</b> <i>Retired</i>	L	Jun 19, 2001			Apr 9, 2001	<b>G Carr</b> <i>Retired</i>	PC	Oct 20, 1999
<b>B Barisoff</b> <i>Incumbent</i>	L	Sept 12, 2005			Mar 1, 2005	<b>A Curling</b> <i>Diplomatic Apt</i>	L	Nov 19, 2003
		Aug 25, 2009			Apr 14, 2008	<b>M Brown</b> <i>Not re-elected</i>	L	Oct 11, 2005
<b>Speakers/Legislatures: 1.25</b>			<b>Speakers/Legislatures: 0.25</b>			<b>Speakers/Legislatures: 1.75</b>		

**Table 5.5** Election and Disposition of Speakers of the Legislative Assembly, 1995-2009.

Solid horizontal lines indicate new legislatures following a general election.

(Adapted and updated from Levy 1998)

These are indicators of the increasing professionalization and prestige of the Speakership and, to an extent, its independence. But a closer look at the selection of the Speaker may reveal a possible link to party systems. While all provinces elect a Speaker by secret ballot, and follow a similar run-off procedure for counting votes, there are differences in procedure. Table 5.6 summarizes the key features of Speaker elections in each province, identifying some key points of similarity and difference.

	<b>British Columbia</b>	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>Ontario</b>
<b>Nominations</b>	No; members remove themselves from list	Yes	Yes
<b>Restrictions on Candidacy</b>	Cannot be minister	No	Cannot be minister or party leader
<b>Restrictions on Nomination</b>	N/A	No	Cannot be minister or party leader

**Table 5.6** Features of Speaker Elections

The most recent Speaker selections in all three provinces are illustrative. Alberta's practice of unrestricted nominations has not made always for Speaker elections that are expressions of the legislature's autonomy and independence from the executive. The current Speaker was most recently nominated for re-election by a cabinet minister, whose lengthy and effusive nomination speech does not build confidence in the independence of the Speaker or of the legislature (*Alberta Hansard* 2008: 1). While previous elections have been less overt, the process is still not ideal for expressing the legislature's independence from the government. In Ontario, the practice of inviting nominations also runs the risk of reducing independence, but it is mitigated by the provision that ministers and party leaders may not put names forward. The fact that the most recent election required a fourth ballot suggests that the process is not pre-ordained by the government.

British Columbia formally has the best process for assuring an autonomous Speakership, in that all members are assumed to be candidates unless they themselves advise otherwise. The same procedure is followed in the House of Commons to prevent Speakers from being partial to those that nominated them. However, the best formal procedure does not necessarily give rise to the best practice: in the same news release that announced a new cabinet after the most recent election, the BC Premier’s Office announced, well in advance of his actual election, that the current Speaker “will be the Government Caucus nominee for Speaker” (2009).

Unquestionably, Speakers are becoming more formally independent once in office, and the Speakership is no longer seen as subordinate to a cabinet appointment. But there is still evidence of overt executive involvement in two of these three provinces. Electing a Speaker will never be purely unplanned and unrehearsed. It is unlikely that a majority government will elect a member of an opposition to be a Speaker. Ontario appears to be the closest of the three legislatures to achieving the legislature’s autonomy in this way. For this specific indicator, then, the hypothesis is tentatively supported. Further support is found in studying the appointment of the legislature’s other presiding officers. Table 5.7 summarizes these positions and how they are chosen.

British Columbia	Alberta	Ontario
<b>Deputy Speaker</b> Appointed by motion	<b>Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committees</b> Elected similarly to Speaker	<b>Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committee of the Whole</b> Appointed by motion
<b>Deputy Chairperson</b> Appointed by motion	<b>Deputy Chair of Committees</b> Elected similarly to Speaker	<b>Deputy Chairs of Committee of the Whole</b> Three appointed by motion
<b>Assistant Deputy Speaker</b> Opposition member, appointed by motion		Note: three of five officers may be opposition members

**Table 5.7** Additional Presiding Officers and Method of Selection

There is a conflict here in assessing each legislature's autonomy. On the one hand, Alberta's practice of electing additional presiding officers is an expression of the will of the assembly; on the other, the result is that the Deputy Speaker and the Deputy Chair are always members of the government caucus. On balance, the practical value of including the opposition in these positions exceeds the nominal value of electing them. An autonomous and independent legislature is helped by ensuring that, at least some of the time, it will be presided over by a member from each party. Thus, again, there appears to be tentative support for the hypothesis that more party competition leads to a more autonomous legislature in terms of its method of selecting presiding officers.

### Committees

Another essential part of an autonomous legislature is an effective committee system. Here the picture is of gradual reform in all provinces, with some variation. Direct comparisons of committee systems are quite difficult, as what happens formally may not be matched in practice. Some standing committees may have members appointed but never meet; others may meet but strictly for *pro forma* purposes. Indeed, the growth of private government participation in cabinet committees may in some cases lead to a decrease in legislative committee activity.

Graham White's summary of legislative committees (2006: 268-271) captures the basics of each province's committee structure, although there have been some changes since. The overall picture is that, in the early 2000s, Ontario had a reasonably robust and autonomous policy committee system while Alberta and British Columbia did not. Ontario is the only province of the three that regularly refers bills to standing committees; Alberta and British Columbia, with rare exceptions, debate bills in a committee of the

whole. Ontario’s committee system has maintained relatively stable since White’s assessment. Alberta has introduced standing legislative policy committees, and British Columbia has registered marginally more committee activity. Ontario’s committees have regularly scheduled meeting times, while Alberta and British Columbia’s are more irregular. And, although changes to the standing orders give Alberta’s new policy committees broad powers to set their own agendas, they have not exercised these powers to date. A few presentations from members of the public mark the only business conducted to date that has not been directed by the assembly or requested by a government minister. Again, the presence of power does not guarantee its exercise. As noted in White’s survey, Alberta committees have long had the formal power to set their own agenda. Today, Alberta’s committee system has matured to the point where its autonomy exceeds British Columbia’s, but not to the extent that it can be called a feature of an effectively autonomous and independent legislature.

Several features of committees can be directly compared. One is simply their members’ workloads. Table 5.8 illustrates the average number of active standing committees a private member would be appointed to during the first session of each legislature following an election. Committees that did not meet are excluded from the numerator, and the Speaker and members of cabinet are excluded from the denominator.

British Columbia		Alberta		Ontario	
Year	Appts	Year	Appts	Year	Appts
1997	1.63	1997	1.73	1995	2.01
2001	2.35	2001	1.94	1999	2.03
2005	2.17	2005	1.90	2003	1.76
2009	2.49	2008	3.19	2007	1.95

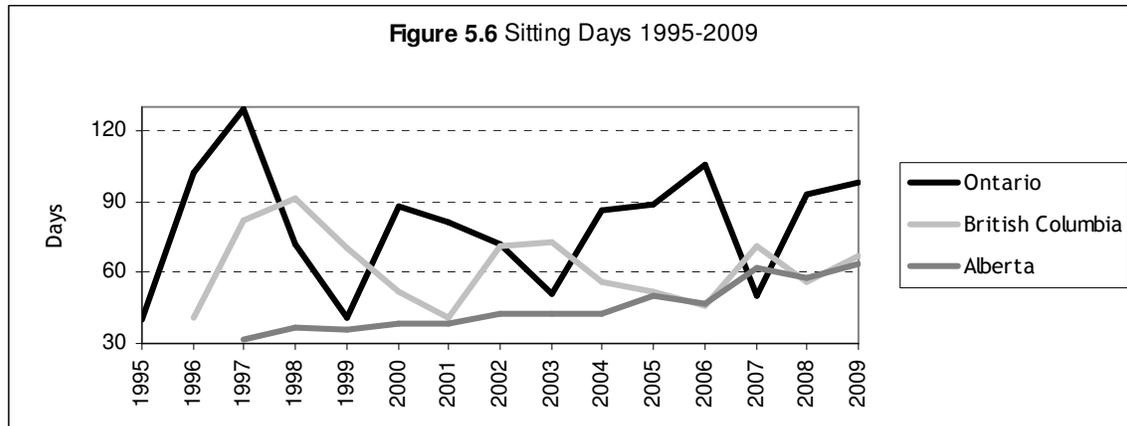
**Table 5.8** Average Number of Appointments to Active Standing Committees per Private Member, Selected Years

This figure is the outcome of several features, including the overall size of the legislature, the number of committees and their size. The big picture here is that workloads are high; the legacy of years of inactive committees in British Columbia and Alberta is that a number of standing committees are very large. The addition of more committee work in recent years in those provinces risks leaving members unable to fulfill their responsibilities, especially for small caucuses. In Alberta, the two-member NDP caucus has resigned from a number of committees (*Alberta Hansard* 2009: 52), and committee meetings to review government bills have taken place with no opposition representatives present (*Alberta Hansard* 2008: PS-47).

The overall picture from committees does support the hypothesis that more party competition is related to a more autonomous and effective committee systems. Convergence is evident as Alberta and British Columbia develop more powerful committees, but the “scars” of previous years remain. Ontario remains a more autonomous legislature for now in terms of having a professionalized and robust committee system.

### Sitting Days and Legislative Workload

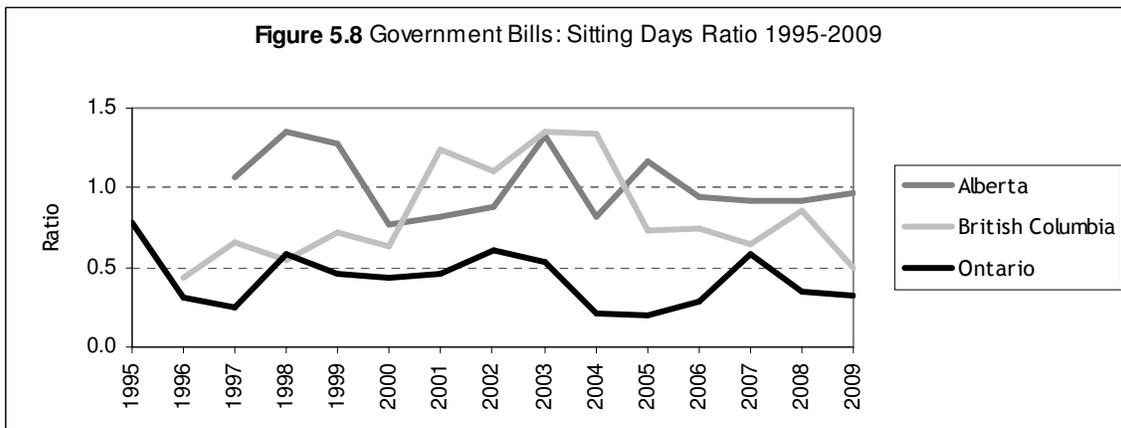
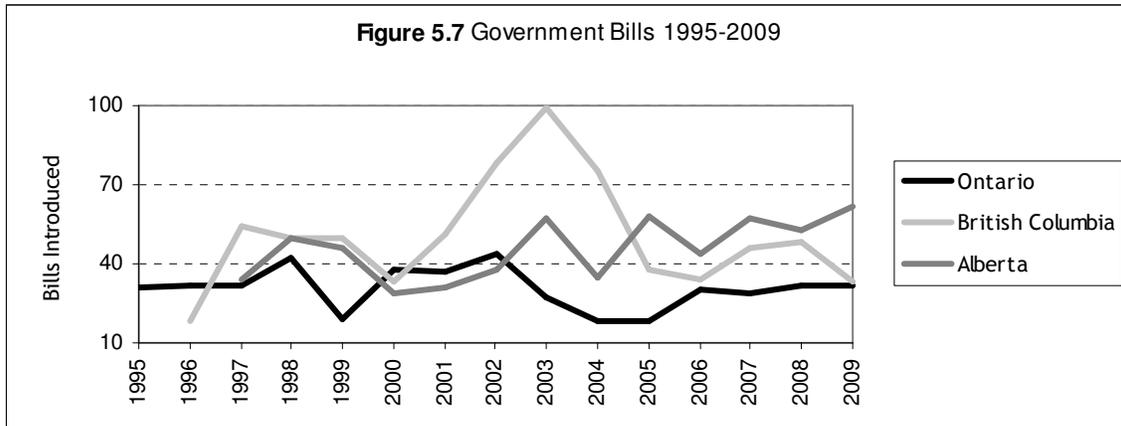
Does the legislature’s contribution to public policy-making actually matter? The first indication to test is whether there it meets often enough to be given the opportunity for a meaningful contribution. Figure 5.6 illustrates the number of sitting days in each legislature during each calendar year.



There is a clear division here between the provinces, but the differences are shrinking over time. Ontario’s legislature is generally the most active, with British Columbia next and Alberta’s legislature meeting the least each year. Both British Columbia and Ontario follow a distinctive pattern of much shorter legislative sessions during election years. Elections in Alberta, however, do not seem to affect sitting length, likely because of the amount of empty space on its parliamentary calendar—the short time given to legislate can easily be moved for an election. As Alberta’s legislature begins to sit for longer sessions, this may change.

The number of sitting days directly affects the ability of the legislature to scrutinize government. Forty question periods in a year mean 325 days on which the government is not questioned. But question period is not the only reason why sitting length matters. An effective, transformative legislature needs adequate time to transform the legislation before it, but the intensity of some of these legislative sessions does not satisfy this requirement. Figure 5.7 presents the number of government bills introduced each year, while figure 5.8 juxtaposes that figure with the number of sitting days to determine the intensity of activity in each legislature. As legislative sessions do not

always line up with calendar years, bills introduced in a session that spans two or more calendar years have been divided proportionally for easier comparison.



The pattern that emerges is clear: Alberta tends to expect its legislature to debate the greatest amount of legislation in the shortest amount of time. Convergence is evident in the number of sitting days, but the Alberta government has compensated for that by maintaining a very high intensity to its legislative agenda. Under such circumstances, meaningful debate is unlikely. A typical session in Alberta sees the equivalent of a new government bill every day. As of 2009, Alberta effectively allots half as many days for debate as British Columbia, and less than half as much time as Ontario. This appears to support the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between levels of party

competition and the amount of time given for debate. The very high number of bills introduced in British Columbia between 2001 and 2004 corroborates the connection. The B.C. government's exceptionally large majority allowed it to take the legislature for granted and, although this made for very efficient legislating, seventy-five days is clearly not enough time to debate ninety-nine pieces of legislation meaningfully or effectively.

These data suggest that the Ontario legislature does, as hypothesized, have the greatest capacity for meaningful debate and Alberta the least. But there are also signs that legislatures are converging.

## 6. Conclusion

### *Answering the Research Questions*

Table 6.1 summarizes the findings based on the specific measures used to evaluate these three legislatures.

	<b>British Columbia</b>	<b>Alberta</b>	<b>Ontario</b>
<b>Size and Independence</b>	Relatively most members independent of executive	Relatively fewest members independent of executive	Fewer members independent of executive over time
<b>Speakership</b>	Formally most autonomous	Least autonomous	Most autonomous in practice
<b>Committee System</b>	Minimal	Minimal, but slow progress over time	Permanent and professionalized
<b>Sitting Days and Workload</b>	Between Alberta and Ontario, but decreasing over time	Least time for debate, but increasing over time	Most time for debate

**Table 6.1** Summary of Specific Findings

These measures, though, are surrogates for the larger research questions set out in the introduction. Synthesizing these findings allows for some answers to be attempted:

### Differences between Legislatures

There are significant differences in these legislatures' capacities to scrutinize the executive, but what form these differences take depends on the specific measure of effectiveness is being considered. British Columbia retains a larger corps of members unconnected to the executive than do Alberta and Ontario, but it also retains the least effective committee system of the three provinces. Alberta's process for electing a speaker is not conducive to legislative autonomy from the executive, but its development of legislative policy committees shows promise, even if it has yet to be achieved. Although Ontario possesses a history of greater independence and autonomy for its legislature, it is potentially undermining those features by reducing the number of

members able to take advantage of them. It is difficult to assess whether any of these legislatures is more successful overall than the others at exercising the scrutiny function.

### Relationship to Provincial Party Systems

The results of some measures appear to be informed by the province's party system but, again, an overall relationship is difficult to find. To review in terms of the three guiding questions developed earlier:

- The number of legislators who are independent of the executive is no longer clearly predicted by a party system. There is a short-term effect of partisan arrangements that drives governments with larger caucuses to enlarge the executive, but broader trends do not appear to be confined to particular party systems. As the answer to the third question explains, there appear to be pressures driving governments to increase the size of the executive and to reduce the distinction between cabinet and caucus that are independent of patterns of party competition.
- Legislative autonomy, in terms of presiding officers and a committee system, appears to be weakly related to party competition. Ontario's committee system is stronger than that of either of the other two provinces throughout the period studied here. But Alberta's committee system is modernizing more quickly than British Columbia's.
- There does appear to be a relationship between patterns of party competition and the opportunities accorded for meaningful debate in these legislatures. Ontario seems to give debate more opportunity to affect public policy than do Alberta and British Columbia.

## Changes over Time

Perhaps the strongest finding here is that institutional convergence is evident in these three legislatures. Legislative institutions in these three provinces appear to be becoming more similar as time goes on. Fifteen years ago, much clearer support would be found for all three hypotheses; today, the answer is more ambiguous. Twenty years ago, White and Levy observed very little institutional transfer between provinces (1989: 3), but the evidence here suggests that provinces are increasingly borrowing other provinces' institutional innovations. Communication across the federation has increased, and the nature of the relationships between provinces appears to be changing as well. The provinces see increasingly formalized communication with each other, interprovincial economic agreements result in increased cooperation across provinces, and technology makes it easier for citizens of different provinces to find out what is going on elsewhere. Provincial governments and provincial legislatures are paying more attention to each other than previously, and it is likely that institutional convergence will continue.

## ***Overall Assessment***

Patterns of party competition, it seems, can tell us a great deal about how legislatures have developed institutionally. Alberta's innovative use of caucus committees was a clear result of Alberta's unique party system. Minority governments in Ontario brought on by a multiparty system have given rise to reforms as well. But party systems may not tell us much about where legislatures are going. As provinces change, the impacts of party competition appear to be less predictable.

One additional trend is that legislatures may not be converging in the direction of more effective legislatures. Increasingly dispersed executive power has the potential to

enhance participatory democracy on one level, but it comes with a potential cost to democratic accountability. Smith is somewhat derisive toward the ever-increasing focus on accountability (2007: 118-119), and he is right that many criticisms of Canadian legislatures have been grounded in false expectations of the Canadian parliamentary system. But this does not mean that accountability is not important, and it does not mean that a legislature more effective at delivering accountability is an unworthy goal.

### ***Possible Future Directions***

Since 2009, when the data for this study was collected, it has been a time of rapid change in all three provinces. The Premiers and Leaders of the Official Opposition in both British Columbia and Alberta have resigned. In British Columbia, the Liberal Party's coalition of support has largely been held together on the strength of its leader; it remains to be seen if its next leader can continue this accomplishment. Alberta has seen the emergence of what appears to be a credible challenger to the Progressive Conservatives' hold on power. At the same time, established parties continue to fracture and lose support; Alberta now has a legislature with representatives from five different parties, as well as an independent member. There is the possibility of new party systems developing in both British Columbia and Alberta. At the same time, the continued decline of the NDP in Ontario and the election of a far-right quasi-populist mayor in Toronto may alter party dynamics in that province.

What might this mean for legislative institutions? It is possible that change, rather than the particular configuration of a party system, is a key explanatory variable. Writing about the federal "coalition crisis" of 2008, Graham White writes that the establishment of a coalition government would have been the path to institutional reform that promotes

greater accountability, as it would have demonstrated that real change is possible in parliamentary democracy (2009: 155-156). Docherty has made a similar point, claiming that “the willingness to engage in the exercise of institutional reform and related changes is in itself a recognition of the responsiveness of governments to the citizens they are charged with representing” (2003: 236).

Legislatures matter. They are, as Smith says, the only authoritative voice of the people that elect their members and they are, as Docherty says, the heart of Canadian democracy. Provincial legislatures in particular are an understudied but essential part of Canadian politics, and it is worth exploring how and why their effectiveness at government oversight is changing. This project has focused on one explanatory factor, and one dimension of accountability, but there is substantially more work to be done.

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