Preface

In 2006, Michael Fenn,[1] chair of the research committee of the Institute for Public Administration of Canada (IPAC), approached me to write a book about government transitions in Canada. At that point, I had been teaching graduate courses in public policy, governance, and public management since the 1970s and had had some practical experience as the head of the Chrétien transitions in 1993, 1997, and 2000. As well, I had served as assistant secretary to the Cabinet (program review and machinery of government) at the Privy Council Office in Ottawa and had also worked in the Treasury Board Secretariat and Statistics Canada during an earlier stage in my career. While my background gave me some preparation for a book in this area, I was not yet convinced that there was enough material available for a broad discussion of best practices for transition planning.

Two recent political events prompted me to propose to the Research Committee that we dust off the original idea. The first was the swearing-in of the minority Harper government in 2008. Surrounded by political neophytes without any practical experience in governing, Harper took the reins of power with ease and a sense of purpose. The smoothness of the transition was hardly noticed by the media, but to government watchers it was a sign that this was a government that had a clear agenda and knew where it was headed. As Canadians subsequently learned, the successful transition was managed by a professional team under the direction of Derek Burney and with the strong support of the Privy Council Office, at that time led by Alex Himelfarb.

The second recent example of effective transition planning took place across the Atlantic, where, as a result of the May 2010 election, David Cameron and Nick Clegg were locked in a battle for the political

leadership of the United Kingdom. Given the prospects of a hung Parliament, the two negotiated for a remarkable five-day period until an agreement was reached. Their deliberations, with the support of the Cabinet office, led to the fashioning of a most improbable coalition government and further demonstrated the importance of government transitions to a well-functioning democracy.

With these two independent events serving as useful illustrations, it seemed a propitious time to explore the question of how transition planning is done in Canada and whether there are best practices to be championed and issues to be resolved in order to improve on current ways of managing governmental transitions. As a consequence, I have written this book.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Bill Neville and to the memory of Jean Pelletier – two individuals who worked in the rough-and-tumble world of partisan politics but always in the more important pursuit of good government and integrity in public life. The book is also dedicated to the public servants who have made their contribution to good government by preparing newly elected governments for the unknown challenges each one of them has faced in taking over the reins of government.

I first met Neville in the early 1990s. He was already an icon in the government-relations industry in the early 1990s. He had established a reputation for honesty and integrity and provided mentoring to many of the former political staffers who were entering the government-relations sector at that time.

I knew Neville only by his reputation. Thankfully, when I confided in Torrance Wylie, a well-respected government relations expert and former advisor to Prime Minister Pearson, that I was doing some work on the Chrétien transition, he suggested that I visit Neville, whom he knew well. Neville welcomed me into his impressive office, which was filled with political memorabilia and photos of some of Canada's most illustrious politicians.

After closing his door to the outer offices, Neville reached into his drawer, pulled out a massive three-ring binder, and handed it to me with the following observation: "This is the book that I prepared for Brian Mulroney in 1984 and it should give you a good appreciation of what we had in mind when the transition was done for Brian's first government. While we didn't implement everything in it, it was the basis for all that happened in the early months of his mandate."[2]

With that, he proceeded to describe the mechanics of transition planning and the need for precise preparation and anticipation. Our

conversation continued throughout the morning. As the lunch hour approached, he suggested that I would benefit from reading his transition materials more carefully, rather than simply skimming them, as we had been doing during our meeting.

The transition book for the newly elected Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in 1984 begins with encouraging words: "Congratulations. Now the real fun begins."[3] Mulroney had just won a bruising and mean-spirited general election against John Turner, who himself had been recently crowned leader of the Liberal party and successor to Pierre Trudeau. The tide of blue-tinged victories across the country produced more than two hundred Conservative seats in the House of Commons and secured more than 50 per cent of the popular vote. The election catapulted the ambitious Mulroney into the Prime Minister's Office without his having had any parliamentary experience and reduced Turner's once-dominating Liberals to a rump party of only forty dispirited members of Parliament.

However, Neville's welcoming words also contain an ironic twist. Knowing Mulroney's scant experience as a parliamentarian and as a political leader, Neville, with tongue firmly in cheek, knew that Mulroney would have little appreciation of how much "fun" he was about to have. Fortunately for Mulroney and for all who have been involved in transition planning since that time, Neville was about to launch a transition exercise that would smoothly guide the newly elected Conservative party into the Langevin Block, the home of the Prime Minister's Office, and into 24 Sussex with a level of sophistication and professionalism that had never before been experienced in Ottawa. In his choice of Neville as the head of his transition team Mulroney was most prescient.

While Neville was well known in Ottawa as an effective lobbyist and background speechwriter, he had also been responsible for Joe Clark's 1979 transition to power in a minority government. From this experience, he learned how little newly elected prime ministers know about governing, even when they may have had previous experience as ministers in another Cabinet or as long-standing MPs. Neville also appreciated the importance of planning and the need to understand the character of the person he was preparing to become prime minister of the country.

Ten years before leading the transition exercise for Mulroney, Neville had witnessed a Conservative electoral loss and afterwards saw the transition material that had never been put into use. "I went

into Stanfield's office after the '74 election and I saw what had been prepared for him. It was about six pages. I mean, I remember laughingly saying, 'Thank God you didn't win! You'd be in deep doo-doo'!"[4] Neville recognized the need for and the importance of a structured, disciplined approach to the transition exercise. Possibly unknown to subsequent transition planners working in the political arena or in the public services of Canada, they have all modelled their work on the templates that he established in 1984.

In the winter of 1993, Jean Pelletier asked me to take on the responsibility for preparing Chrétien to become Canada's twentieth prime minister. While my appointment as head of the transition team came as a surprise to many when it became publicly known after the election, it was, for those who knew better, a typical Chrétien decision. I had studied, taught, and written about public management since the mid-1970s; however, the prospect of leading a transition team was daunting – I had little practical experience in the field and no partisan political leanings. Moreover, at that time there was only a very short list of published material on transition planning in Canada. This problem was quickly remedied when I met with Bill Neville.

While Jean Chrétien was best known as a wily political player and a master tactician, he was not particularly known for his interest in management and governance. However, those who had worked for him at any point during his eight ministerial portfolios in the Pearson and Trudeau era were well aware of his particular interest in good management and strong working relationships between his political staff and the public service. As a result, it wasn't particularly difficult in early 1992 for his chief of staff, Jean Pelletier, to kick-start planning for a government transition that was more than a year away.

Typically, political leaders are suspicious of any formal process that prepares them to govern. Those competing to become prime minister have resisted setting a transition team in place because they fear being perceived by the public as arrogant if it becomes known that they are overtly preparing to take office. Moreover, they are also sufficiently superstitious about "challenging the election gods" by appearing to take victory for granted in advance of actually winning the election. Despite the usual reticence of prime-ministerial hopefuls, Chrétien knew that preparedness was crucial.

In the early 1980s I was working in the Privy Council Office in support of the Cabinet Committee on Communications. In the course of

my work I interacted with Chrétien on a number of occasions around Cabinet committee work and had a number of conversations with him about the state of the country in a post-1980 referendum context. While I had no political experience, he was always interested in chatting with the public servants around the committee table. Coincidentally, at that time, Chrétien was looking for a new policy advisor, and he was intrigued by my interest in public opinion research, in my experiences teaching public policy at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, and work reorganizing the Cabinet office of the British Columbia government. Coming from British Columbia, I was especially impressed with his pan-Canadian views and also his passionate articulation of Canadian values, so when invited by him I left the PCO for a stint in the minister's office.

We worked well together. Equally important, I also worked well with Eddie Goldenberg, who had recently rejoined the office after spending some time as a private-sector lawyer. He and I were able to share the policy work and to establish a most agreeable working relationship. After a few very pleasant years working in the minister's office and having experienced the exhilaration and emotional roller coaster of a leadership campaign, I returned to university life in 1984 by joining the public management group in the business faculty at the University of Ottawa.

Over the years I stayed in touch with my former colleagues on the Hill and I took on a number of organizational tasks, notably managing the policy process, during Chrétien's 1990 leadership campaign. After that, I returned to the university, where I continued to work with him on organizational issues, including the restructuring of the Office of the Official Opposition and the recruitment of his chief of staff, Jean Pelletier.

Pelletier's arrival signalled a new way of doing things in the Office of the Official Opposition. Pelletier was disciplined, a gifted manager, and a man deeply committed to Canada. He also was very systematic in his approach to his duties as the person quarterbacking, with Eddie Goldenberg, and John Rae, Chrétien's bid to become prime minister one day. At a point in 1991, after consulting with Chrétien, he asked me to plan the transition for a Chrétien government.

The writing of this book has been a particularly enjoyable experience. It has given me the opportunity to interview (and to interact with) a wide range of political players and public servants who have, to various

degrees, participated in federal transitions since 1984. As mentioned earlier in this preface, this work has also given me the opportunity to highlight the contributions of Bill Neville and Jean Pelletier, who recognized the importance of transitions in good governance and were prepared to commit themselves to ensuring that this important link in the democratic process was done as well as possible.