Morals, process and political scandals: the discursive role of the Royal Commission in the Somalia Affair in Canada

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The aim of this study was to describe and understand the communication function of the Royal Commission of Inquiry in the Somalia Affair in Canada. Since its inception as a nation, Canada has frequently employed Royal Commissions of Inquiry to investigate events of political scandal, accidents and mishaps, as well as to research and report on broad areas of policy interest such as healthcare or the status of women in Canada more generally. Also referred to as ‘public inquiries,’ ‘commissions of inquiry’ and ‘task forces,’ a Royal Commission

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is an independent political body, often headed by a judicial chairperson (or chairpersons), usually mandated into existence and form by the government, and tasked with the job of investigating some topic or event, reporting on said topic or event and then making recommendations as to what the government should do next (Pross, Innis & Yogi 1990). Generally, Royal Commissions can be defined as ‘any body that is formally mandated by a government, either on an ad hoc basis or with reference to a specific problem, to conduct a process of fact-finding and to arrive at a body of recommendations’ (Salter 1990: 175).

Historically, a commission is often created in response to a scandal in Canada. This was the case in the ‘Somalia Affair’. In the spring of 1993, the Canadian public learned that a Somali teenager named Shidane Abukar Arone had been brutally tortured to death by a group of Canadian soldiers while they were serving on a peace-enforcement mission in Somalia. Shortly after this revelation hit the media, Major Barry Armstrong, a doctor who served on the Somalia mission, went public with allegations that another Somali, killed on March 4 1993, had been shot in a suspicious manner. Almost two years later, and following the court martial convictions of those involved in the beating and torture of Arone, videotapes of brutal initiation rituals within the Canadian Airborne Regiment (the regiment that made up the majority of soldiers stationed in Somalia) were run on Canadian television stations. This final incident caused an outcry, led by politicians and journalists, and calls to end the aggressive and seemingly racist behavior of the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR). Defence Minister David Collenette responded to the calls and announced on January 23 1995 that the CAR would be disbanded – a first in the history of the Canadian Forces. In addition, Collenette appointed a Federal Commission of Inquiry on March 20, 1995. The commission was ordered to investigate the events as well as the allegations that there was a high-level cover-up around the affair within the Canadian Forces and the Department of National Defence. The commission, which ran until it was forced to produce its final report on June 30 1997, was the first major public inquiry into the Canadian military in response to arguably the largest scandal in Canadian military history to date (Bercuson 2009; Bercuson 1997; Dawson 2007).

This dissertation argues that this political scandal shook the nation, in part, because it marked a moment of moral dissonance in Canada. That is, the Somalia Affair presented serious incongruities between commonly espoused Canadian values – such as peacekeeping, multiculturalism and transparency/accountability – and the actions that the Canadian soldiers undertook in Somalia. The dissertation connects the issue of moral dissonance to the commission in an attempt to answer why the commission was used in response to the moral dissonance caused by the Somalia Affair. The explanation that is presented is based in the theoretical framework from the literature on political
scandals. Just as in scandals more generally, political scandals are understood to challenge the norms, values and morals of a society. Thus, to become a political scandal, some commonly held norm or value in a society must be challenged or transgressed, or a breach of morality must transpire (Neckel 2005; Lowi 1988). In political scandals, however, the moral transgression often has even more consequence as the transgression that occurs is performed by state actors and institutions – those very people and organizations that tend to advocate the moral values or norms in the first place. Since the violation of norms most often occurs by those in power in political scandals, some theorists argue that this creates a deficit of legitimation in the political system (Markovits & Silverstein 1988; Thompson 2000).

To investigate the discursive function of the royal commission on the Somalia Affair, primary documentary sources from the commission itself were utilized and an in-depth discourse analysis was performed on the data (Government of Canada 1997). These sources included the commission documents such as the transcripts of the public hearings, the final report, written submissions, research reports, newspaper articles, and historical and contextual books and articles around the affair and the commission. In all, the documentary sources were many, and totaled close to 50,000 pages of data for analysis. The in-depth textual analysis undertaken on this data set was heavily informed by discourse analysis methodology, and so entailed investigating both the ‘how’s’ and the ‘what’s’ of discourse (Gubrium and Holstein 2003). Thus, this study followed a movement in qualitative inquiry where traditional attempts to document the process by which social reality is constructed, managed and sustained (with the emphasis on investigating how social reality is constructed) is now being met with an interest in ‘what is being accomplished, under what conditions, and out of what resources’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2003: 215). That is, the interest at the detailed textual level as to how meaning is constructed is now being considered in terms of the context in which the text occurs, highlighting the broad cultural and institutional contexts of meaning-making and social order.

The analysis demonstrated that the commission is an appropriate space to deal with the moral dissonance that the Somalia Affair posed for two main reasons. Firstly, it became clear that the commission discourse is certainly a place where ‘moral talk’ is able to occur. That is, the commission allows social values, such as peacekeeping, multiculturalism and accountability and transparency to be defined, debated and often reasserted within its bounds. Also, it was evident that the importance of process and procedure was emphasized, both in terms of a value within the commission discourse, as well as the way that the commission actually operates. The value that was placed on process and procedure in the commission discourse was also often tied to the reaffirmation and sanction of the transgressed values in the discourse, and, interestingly, was
drawn on as a tool to dispel issues of difficulty, such as battles for power, that arose throughout the commission's discourse and operations. In all, this study concludes that it is these two communication features of the commission – as a space for moral discourse to occur within a heavily formal and procedural process – that make the commission an appropriate discursive place to respond to the moral dissonance that occurs in a political scandal like the Somalia Affair. This finding is displayed throughout the study by way of multiple textual excerpts from the commission documents.

References


