

## **Legislative Control of Cabinet Appointments to the Public Service: a Canadian Case-study in the Political Limits to Parliamentary Reform**

### **Abstract**

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A staple of campaigns for parliamentary reform in Westminster style legislatures is strengthening the capacity of committees to scrutinize the executive. Yet to the extent that committees simply become another arena for the partisan party battle, the potential of reforms based on the premise that the legislature has a corporate existence apart from the executive is compromised.

Despite the importance of committees as an accountability mechanism there are surprisingly few empirical studies of parliamentary committees in action. This paper analyzes the track record of the Ontario Legislature's Standing Committee on Government Agencies in interviewing cabinet appointments to arm's length agencies, boards and commission (ABCs), which are a major policy instrument at both the federal and provincial levels in Canada. The Committee was assigned this task on the assumption that partisan Members could agree on the appropriate criteria for questioning witnesses about their qualifications; and that the government would be willing to withdraw candidates exposed as inadequate. This speaks to the historic role of the legislature as a check on the executive. However, at the same time the governing party has retained the discretion to appoint its own supporters to positions on ABCs. Not surprisingly, a close examination of how the Committee conducts interviews reveals a tension between how Members discharge their responsibility to hold the executive accountable, and their identities as partisan politicians. In large part, the Committee has become a forum for debates on the appropriate limits of patronage in political appointments to public bodies.