Friends of the government: an administrative history of the British Columbia government agents

Anholt, Dennis Munroe

URI: https://dspace.library.uvic.ca//handle/1828/9574
Date: 2018-07-03

Abstract:
The pivotal figures in the district administration of British Columbia have been the Government Agents. For over a century, isolated citizens received the services of the state from their local agent. The tasks they performed changed but, like the British District Officer and the French Prefect, their primary supervisory and controlling roles remained intact. Civil service reform, however, broke the 'contract' between the agent, district and the government, and diminished their effectiveness. By 1958, the agent was less a unifying and more a coordinating figure. The agents evolved from prominent persons acting alone, then collegially with other civil servants, to weak agents with reduced status. As the primary objective of government altered from the maintenance of law and order to economic and social development their behaviours changed. Their prestige was also reduced as politicians replaced them as guardians of the public interest. Improvements in transportation and communication made them less independent. Continuity, however, has been an equal characteristics of the agents. They have exercised central control through three functions: maintenance of law and order, advocating and executing government policies, and representing provincial interests. Since 1858, the agents have embodied the power of the state and fulfilled Victoria's wish to control local events. The 1945 civil service reforms, which emphasized standardized procedures and merit in hiring practices, altered irrevocably the character of the agents. Technical skills, not local prestige and knowledge, became the critical factor in new aspirants. Their relationship with government was de-personalized and they identified more with their organization. These personnel processes and a dramatic growth in bureaucratic structures eroded the agents' power base in their districts and the capital and their ability to act as a trustworthy link between Victoria and the regions. The political advantages that saved the agents for decades were missing and they were forgotten. This study is about government decentralization. It chronicles the evolution of unique Canadian public servants who maintained the bond between the governed and the government from colonial to modern times. Finally, it suggests that contemporary observers must consider carefully the expectations politicians have of district public servants.

Files in this item

Name: Anholt_DennisMunroe.pdf
Size: 9.336Mb
Format: PDF

This item appears in the following Collection(s)

- Theses (Public Administration)
- ETD (Electronic Theses and Dissertations)

This collection contains theses and dissertations submitted in partial fulfillment of graduate degree programs at the University of Victoria.