
Top Secret Canada: Understanding the Canadian Intelligence and National Security Community

Stephanie Carvin, Thomas Juneau, and Craig Forcece (eds.) (University of Toronto: 2020), 317 pages, graphics, index

Reviewed by Joseph W. Gartin

For many US intelligence officers, the workings of the Canadian intelligence system are at once familiar and foreign. Despite the depth and breadth of ties between Canadian and US agencies since the mid-20th century, not to mention proximity and at least one (mostly) common language, important differences abound. How has the Canadian intelligence community evolved, especially since 2001, and under what authorities? What is the Privy Council Office and how does it differ from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)? What are the responsibilities of the national intelligence and security adviser? How are responsibilities divided between the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Communications Security Establishment (CSE)? How does parliament oversee intelligence activities, who protects the border, and what is the intelligence role of Public Safety Canada? Where do the Canadian armed forces fit in?

To answer these and many other questions, the Institute of Public Administration of Canada has sponsored the preparation of *Top Secret Canada: Understanding the Canadian Intelligence and National Security Community*. The institute is the country's largest professional organization focused on promoting good government at the local, provincial, and federal levels. The work's three editors have approached the topic organizationally rather than thematically, which makes the book a more readily usable reference; most of the 15 chapters focus on key offices and departments, from the PMO (29) to the, at least superficially familiar, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and finally to oversight and the Canadian IC's relationship with the media.

That *Top Secret Canada* is the first comprehensive look at the Canadian IC is remarkable in itself, compared to warehouses of books written on US spy agencies. As Carvin et al. note, the "lack of literature on Canadian intelligence and national security is puzzling. Although Canada is often described as a 'middle power,' when it comes to intelligence, the story is more complicated." (3) After all, Canada is a Five Eyes member, the "most

elite intelligence-sharing arrangement in the world," (3) with bilateral and multilateral security obligations. For example, the signals intelligence agency CSE was founded in 1946 and, like our National Security Agency, has grown to have responsibilities for signals collection and for information technology security. (73)

And yet the capabilities and ambitions of the Canadian IC remain modest. Some of these limitations are down to small scale (Canada's population is about a 12th of the US population), reliance on British and then US capabilities, and what might be thought of as Canada's cultural identity in the 21st century: an emphasis on privacy and human rights, misgivings about federal powers, and skepticism about the use of force. Like the US IC, the Canadian IC has ridden a roller coaster of fluctuating budgets and public attitudes, from post-Cold War slump (often referred to as the "decade of darkness" under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien) (204) to post-9/11 investments in programs to prevent terrorism, violent extremism, cyber attacks, and most recently malign foreign influence.

Top Secret Canada explores how the growth of the intelligence apparatus since 9/11 led to concerns over government infringements on free speech and privacy (including for financial transactions [115]), as in other democracies, but also to innovations like the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence, aimed at anti-radicalization efforts. (181) Post-9/11 investments likewise revived Canada's defense intelligence function (known today by the unwieldy acronym CFINTCOM), which editor Thomas Juneau characterizes as having been "insular, operationally focused, dominated by the military, and beset by internal problems." (214–15) Plus-ups in one area often mean cuts in others, however, and Global Affairs Canada—the entity responsible for diplomatic, consular, and international trade issues—is grappling with mission creep and difficulty recruiting, developing, and retaining staff in a competitive economy. (228)

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Carvin et al. keep the focus on Canada, but threaded throughout are connections to the US IC. Some highlight areas of cooperation, but *Top Secret Canada* also captures some of the sources of friction. Trafficking of drugs (north to south) and guns (south to north) (159) are long-standing challenges for the Canada Border Services Agency; in the post-9/11 environment, the need to cooperate with the United States on counterterrorism butted up against civil liberties protections, while under the Trump administration disagreements emerged over how to handle asylum seekers. (158)

The closing chapters on the media and oversight offer other lessons on similarities and differences. Contributor and journalist Alex Boutilier acknowledges the tension between the free press and intelligence services, but he cites 2018 polling to argue that trust in Canadian intelligence agencies is high, as is confidence in the media to report fairly and accurately. Boutilier notes trust in both directions is essential. “The security and intelligence community needs the public’s confidence for their findings and threat assessments to be taken serious—not dismissed as politically motivated hit jobs or nefarious ‘deep state’ puppet mastery.” (280) Such an argument seems likely to resonate with many US readers.

Ottawa’s approach to oversight and review of intelligence activities will be less familiar, however. There is no prominent role for Parliament akin to the congressional oversight in the United States that grew out of Watergate; “until very recently, oversight in Canada was almost entirely a function of the executive branch.” (258) Review bodies like the Security Intelligence Review Committee (SIRC), created in 1984 along with CSIS, have struggled to keep pace with changes in the pace and scope of intelligence activities. Contributor Leah West cites the SIRC’s annual report in 2012 that warned that “preventing and investigating threats to national security in the globalized digital age demanded swift information-sharing between Canadian agencies and their foreign partners.” (259) Similarly, she observes, “Review of the RCMP’s national security mandate had been, in practice, almost non-existent.” (261)

Top Secret Canada is a thorough and serious treatment of Canada’s multifaceted intelligence community and a significant contribution to the intelligence literature. It deserves a spot on the bookshelf of every scholar focused on Canadian defense and national security issues as well as the broader field of intelligence.



The reviewer: Joseph Gartin had been a career CIA intelligence analyst and senior manager. He led the CIA’s Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis. He retired as CIA’s chief learning officer. He recently became this journal’s managing editor.