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Taking the minister out of ministerial responsibility?

Public servants, parliamentary committees, and the Westminster tradition in Canada, 1995–2021

**Keelan Buck**

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## Abstract

Much evidence points to change in the relationships between top public servants and executive politicians in Westminster systems. The tradition of the responsible minister who bears the brunt of public scrutiny and the loyal bureaucrat who, under the protective veil of anonymity, provides them with neutral but responsive advice appears to face significant challenges on several fronts. Today's public servants are giving high-profile speeches, engaging in policy advocacy, embracing the reach of social media, and publishing their professional experiences. At the same time, they are finding themselves under the spotlights of accountability, including the harshest of them all: Parliament. This paper addresses a comparatively understudied aspect of the evolving public servant–minister relationship by asking whether and how the anonymity and responsibility of public servants and ministers have been changing over time through their simple appearance before parliamentary committees. Using original data collected from a standing committee of Canada's House of Commons between 1995 and 2021, along with a unique exploratory quantitative design, we find that political-administrative change in the parliamentary environment may not be as clear-cut as some authors suggest. While the representation of public servants among committee witnesses steadily increased over more than 20 years, so too did the representation of ministers, such that the ratio between the two has been fluctuating without a clear pattern of change. On the other hand, our results point to fascinating change among public servant witnesses themselves, with increasingly junior officials having to shed their anonymity. Despite important limitations, this study provides a crucial foundation for larger-scale and theoretically informed research on public servants, Parliament, and the future of Westminster around the world.

**Keywords:** public servants, ministers, Westminster, elite relationships, parliamentary committees, change

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On June 21, 2021, what would be one of the final days of business before the dissolution of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, the president of the Public Health Agency of Canada walked through the doors of the House of Commons. Unlike the thousands of people per year who visit Ottawa's iconic Parliament buildings when its chambers are empty, this senior bureaucrat was on no holiday. In fact, he was making history.

Iain Stewart had been summoned by an order of the House to appear before its members and receive an “admonishment” – a sort of formal reprimand dressed in centuries of political tradition – for the federal government's decision to withhold sensitive documents from parliamentary scrutiny. It was an exercise in institutional self-defence that Canada's House of Commons had not performed in relation to a non-parliamentarian in over 100 years, let alone in relation to a public servant who has sworn to serve loyally and impartially the government of the day. While this event surely captured the attentions of many spectators fascinated by its partisan-political implications, it had others expressing concern over the state of the country's public affairs, along with one commentator bluntly asking, “Where's Westminster?” (Salgo, 2021).

Indeed, this historic day only adds to a long list of cases that seem to challenge core tenets of the traditional political-administrative arrangement in Westminster countries. For example, in the throws of the infamous “sponsorship scandal,” a Canadian bureaucrat colluded with their political masters to allow approximately 100 million dollars in fees and commissions to be improperly paid to companies with partisan ties (CBC News, 2006). A decade later, Canada's Chief Statistician felt compelled to resign in defence of their and their agency's reputations after a minister misrepresented their policy advice to the public (Grube & Howard, 2016b). In Northern Ireland, the scandal and ensuing inquiry around the failed Renewable Heat Incentive saw the ire and contempt of legislators, auditors, and the general public rain down not only on elected leaders, but also on the neutral civil service (Smith, 2018; McBride, 2021).

The feeling among many is that elite relationships under Westminster have been changing – that the notion of an expert, merit-based, serially loyal regiment of public officials who serve at the pleasure of an executive government drawn from and responsible before an assembly of duly elected representatives is becoming more myth than material in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has been the goal of academic observers to move beyond such intuition by

discovering, compiling, and organizing reliable evidence of what is actually going on between senior public servants and ministers – and what it means for Westminster as a whole.

We know that today's public servants are giving high-profile speeches, engaging in policy advocacy, embracing the reach of social media, and publishing their professional experiences (Grube, 2013, 2017, 2019; Cooper, 2020b, 2020c). At the same time, they are also finding themselves under the spotlights of accountability, including the harshest of them all: Parliament. Existing research has argued that the presence of public servants before accountability-seeking parliamentarians represents a drastic departure from the Westminster archetypes of the anonymous bureaucrat and the responsible minister, going so far as to consider it evidence of change to the larger tradition altogether (Savoie, 2003; Grube, 2014, 2019). However, there remains a significant oversight in the literature that must be addressed before any such claim can be made. How can we say with any confidence that the types of executive actors appearing before legislators at a given moment has significant implications for Westminster without determining the relative nature of their appearances, whether this has been changing over time, and how? Our paper addresses this gap by asking whether the anonymity of public servants and the responsibility of ministers, as prescribed by Westminster, have been changing through their simple appearance before parliamentary committees.

To answer this question, we ground ourselves in the Canadian federal context and sample original data between 1995 and 2021 from a standing committee of the House of Commons, where parliamentarians gather to scrutinize legislation, government activity, and more. Using exploratory quantitative methods with the goal of drawing descriptive inferences about committees across the Westminster world, we find that the makeup of committee witnesses is changing in several ways. While the representation of public servants among committee witnesses has steadily increased over more than 20 years, so too has the representation of ministers, such that the ratio between the two has been fluctuating without a clear direction of change. On the other hand, our results point to fascinating change among public servant witnesses themselves, with increasingly junior officials having to shed their anonymity.

Overall, we find that public servants have become more visible and less anonymous in light of their growing representation among committee witnesses and their increasingly junior ranks. This adds to a growing stock of evidence that Westminster public servants are no longer

the quiet, faceless figures of the past. Rather, many aspects of their work, parliamentary accountability included, are pushing them into the spotlight. At the same time, we argue that this heightened visibility does not necessarily come at the expense of the responsibility of their ministerial counterparts, who are still appearing before committees as frequently as ever, if not more. The relationships between public servants and politicians are complex, and it does not appear that the responsibility dimension of these relationships is changing quite as rapidly or as significantly as some suggest. This study therefore contributes much-needed empirical weight and a note of caution to a literature that has often been too eager to draw broad and fatalist conclusions about the future of the Westminster tradition. Our study's dataset and design also lay a solid foundation for the theory-informed research that will be needed to identify causal factors and mechanisms behind the patterns of change already uncovered.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In the next chapter, we explore the resurging scholarly interest in elite political-administrative relationships and what they are supposed to resemble under the Westminster tradition. We also chart the different ways that these relationships can change, the implications for anonymity and responsibility in the age of openness, and the significance of the parliamentary environment. Then, having situated our research question within existing knowledge on elite relationships, we use the following chapter to explain our overarching design and concrete methods, with a particular focus on how we sample our data and how we operationalize the concepts of anonymity and responsibility in the parliamentary environment. In the fourth chapter, we present our results, interpret them in relation to our research question, and engage with existing arguments in the literature. The fifth and final chapter summarizes our contributions, acknowledges our limits, and discusses future avenues of inquiry.

## 2. LITERATURE

### 2.1. Elite relationships and the Westminster tradition

The last decade has heard calls for a political turn in the disciplinary orientation of public administration (Peters et al., 2022; Zalmanovitch, 2014; Lodge & Wegrich, 2012). There is renewed interest in a social science which, when stripped of its professional and practical layers, “is inherently about the exercise of power and human relationships” (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012, p. 222). We are reminded that public servants, far from being mechanistic functionaries operating on one side of a neat dichotomy, play important roles in political systems, a position that Dennis C. Grube defends well when he says

Civil servants are political actors. Period. Claims to the contrary are constitutional fictions invented for convenience. Actors who are surrounded by politics, work with and for politicians and implement decisions taken for political reasons cannot – by definition – be apolitical. (2019, p. 28)

In other words, we are reminded that in public administration, the study of politics matters. Likewise, in politics, the study of public servants matters.

Naturally, at the top of this research agenda sits the topic of relationships between elite political-administrative actors. After all, executive politicians, senior bureaucrats, top partisan staffers, and legislators are the faces and voices of their respective cabinets, departments and agencies, political parties, movements, ideologies, and more. These actors are the windows – sometimes shuttered and foggy – into the very realities of politics and administration. To understand what is happening on a higher level within our political-administrative systems, this research agenda has advocated for the systematic and detailed study of these elite relationships (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012, p. 2016). What and whom do they consist of? What are their rules? Do they change, how, and why?

Of course, the answers to these questions all depend on which systems we are talking about. There is significant variation in elite relationships across the political-administrative world. At the same time, we know there are sophisticated patterns uniting certain systems. A well-documented set of patterns can be found across countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, India, Jamaica, Israel, and more. They all share a

political-administrative heritage derived from centuries of British practice and reform, eventually exported around the world through both soft influence and colonial imperialism. This heritage is known by the name of the English medieval palace that hosts the present-day British Parliament: *Westminster*. For us, Westminster is an essential starting point for grasping the basis of many elite relationships around the world. Accordingly, to understand these relationships and what can change within them, we must first understand the Westminster tradition and how it has shaped them.

We frequently associate Westminster with institutional features like first-past-the-post elections, parliamentary sovereignty, strong majority governments, and the fusion of executive and legislative powers (Russell & Serban, 2021; Grube & Howard, 2016a). However, more relevant to our work is a list of guiding principles whose source is often considered the nineteenth-century Northcote-Trevelyan report to the British government, dubbed the “foundation of the modern civil service” (Weller & Haddon, 2016, p. 484). Prescriptive in its own right, but also repeatedly reinterpreted by generations of officials, the report outlined the following vision for a Westminster political-administrative arrangement: *permanent* public servants who would not be swept aside as easily as elected officials; a *merit-based* approach to hiring and firing public servants beyond the partisan whims of Cabinet in order to promote expertise and professionalism; the *impartial* execution of administrative tasks to ensure fair treatment for all; and *politically sensitive* top public servants who could advise their ministers while remaining *neutrally and serially loyal* to the legitimate government-of-the-day (*idem*, p. 485). All these principles contribute to the nature of elite relationships under Westminster, specifically those between ministers and their top bureaucrats.

However, some authors place their thumb on one principle that arguably absorbs all the others. The principle of “ministerial responsibility” provides that “[t]he minister is responsible for everything done in the department, and everything done in the department may be the object of parliamentary scrutiny” (Savoie, 2003, p. 3). Hierarchy is considered “part of the DNA of the Westminster system” (Grube, 2017, p. 92) precisely because it is through hierarchy that ministers can exercise – at least theoretically – the degree of control befitting of their absolute responsibility. Indeed, the principles defined above – from impartiality to loyalty to permanency

– can all be reconciled by the logic that ministers must be able to bear full accountability for their government’s actions before the public, Parliament, and each other.

If, according to Westminster’s version of elite relationships, ministers are above all else *responsible*, then what about public servants? As many authors explain, in order to remain permanent, impartial, politically sensitive, neutral, and professionally managed officials all while allowing accountability to flow vertically and smoothly through Cabinet, public servants should be above all else *anonymous*. That is to say, Westminster public servants exercise their power in “a symbiosis” or as an indivisible “single entity” with their minister (Richards & Smith, 2016, p. 502). They have no personality separate from that of their minister – not in the constitution, not on paper, and certainly not in public (Van Dorpe & Horton, 2011; Savoie, 2003). This dynamic between the anonymity of public servants and the responsibility of ministers is thus the bedrock of elite relationships under the Westminster tradition.

Understanding the prescriptions of Westminster means understanding an idealized baseline for the relationships between political and administrative elites in applicable systems. A growing number of researchers argue that Westminster “is, and always has been, a looser ‘organising perspective’ or ‘sensitising concept’” as opposed to a rigid concept with invariable qualities (Flinders et al., 2022, pp. 353–354). This argument opens to the door to the possibility of an evolving Westminster tradition and, by extension, evolving elite relationships built around anonymity and responsibility that must be tracked, described, and explained. Questions around change in elite relationships and the various theoretical attempts to address them carry us forward into the next section.

## **2.2. Theories of change in elite relationships**

The challenge for researchers seeking to make sense of any type of elite political-administrative relationship and how it may be changing has been to translate isolated, sometimes anecdotal evidence into comprehensive understandings of what is occurring across situations. Such understandings would ideally account for both the *dimensions* of change (i.e., what elements of elite relationships are changing) and the *mechanisms* of change (i.e., how and why these elements are changing). From the literature we can identify three principal theoretical approaches to elite political-administrative relationships. Most of what we know about change in

Westminster elite relationships, specifically, comes from the scattered but informative empirical work inspired by these more general approaches.

First, rationalist theories focus on the interplay among actors, who are assumed to act primarily in pursuit of their own interests, but who also rely on each other to achieve what they cannot achieve alone. The most sophisticated example is the Public Service Bargains (PSBs) framework, which depicts elite relationships as an “explicit or implicit understanding between (senior) public servants and other actors” (Hood, 2000, p. 8). The notion of a bargain implies a sort of exchange between public servants and other actors wherein all parties both give up and gain things of value (Hood & Lodge, 2006) – a logic that gives a subtle nod to the natural state of balance or compromise in any functioning system.

The PSBs framework laid out by Hood and Lodge (2006) argues that the dominant type of bargain in the contemporary political-administrative world is the “agency bargain”: those with political power (principals) bargain with others (agents) to have them carry out their wishes in exchange for value. The minister–public servant relationship under Westminster can be conceptualized as an agency bargain with a single principal (i.e., ministers). The exchange that takes place between the two parties evokes the general doctrine of ministerial responsibility and public servant anonymity that we discussed in the previous section. Namely, public servants give up “an open, public political life and high salaries” for protection against external accountability and meaningful and secure employment (Van Dorpe & Horton, 2011, p. 234). In turn, ministers forego direct power over the composition of the public service and the ability to shift blame onto their bureaucratic agents for the benefits of “loyal service and unconditional policy advice” (*ibid.*; Hood & Lodge, 2006, p. 8). The PSBs framework proposes that elite bargains vary across political-administrative traditions but are also liable to change *within* traditions in response to environmental pressures, new behavioural habits adopted by actors, or deviant or “cheating” behaviour. For example, under Westminster, cheating is a public servant who demonstrates partisanship, or a minister who refuses accountability for decisions made under their watch (Hood & Lodge, 2006, p. 153).

A second major theoretical approach looks beyond the rational calculations of actors and focuses instead on institutions. According to institutionalist theories, the characteristics of political-administrative structures constrain actors’ behaviour, including that of bureaucrats and

politicians involved in elite relationships. Such structures are, by definition, resistant to change, which can make their influence on behaviour rather predictable and reliable; however, when they do change, the consequences can be remarkable as new institutional constraints set in. When analyzing change to Westminster from this perspective, many authors look to the period of intense administrative reform spanning the 1970s onward, with the dominant movement known as New Public Management, or NPM (Hood, 1991). These reforms included both *centralizing* elements to exert better democratic control over public servants and, paradoxically, *decentralizing* elements to empower street-level managers to make government more efficient (Aucoin, 1990; Hood, 1991). We know that managerialist reforms were bringing similar institutional changes to many Westminster governments as well as other democracies, including performance measurement, private outsourcing, disaggregated and horizontal organizational structures, networked governance, and a culture of distrust of administrative autonomy, all in an environment of accelerating technological development, decreasing citizen deference, and increasing media scrutiny (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Rhodes, 2007; Roy, 2008).

One of the most provocative claims as to the effect of managerial reforms on political-administrative relationships under Westminster came from the late Canadian scholar Peter Aucoin. His institutionalist theory argued that centralizing, command-and-control reforms associated with the NPM movement have been corrupted by new pressures in the social and political environment. The collective consequences, which he refers to as “New Political Governance (NPG),” are central government agencies that flirt the line between responsiveness and partisanship, a growing function for partisan staff, and a politicized appointment process for senior public servants, marking a trend “that explicitly runs counter to the public service tradition of impartiality” (Aucoin, 2012, p. 178). If shown to be true, NPG would have dire implications for the future of Westminster, as the traditional norms of elite relationships would be undergoing significant change to the point of unrecognizability.

However, some authors were skeptical of such claims and highlighted a “relative dearth of substantial empirical evidence” supporting them (Grube & Howard, 2016b, p. 2). In fact, early empirical attempts to test these claims have given rise to a new critical approach that sees political-administrative actors as more complex than a set of rationally calculated, self-centred priorities. It also sees the structures influencing their behaviour as more complex and malleable

than institutionalist accounts assume. This third theoretical approach can be referred to as interpretivist. In their study of top bureaucrats from Australia, Canada, and the UK, Grube and Howard (2016b) found that, even in the face of institutional pressures and changing rules of play with their ministerial counterparts, these elite actors demonstrated “independent, reflexive agency” in the type of behaviour they exhibited (p. 14). These findings lend support to an understanding of elite relationships that “focuses on the cognitive and intersubjective processes whereby actors make sense of their worlds, attempt to solve problems and bring coherence and stability to erratic settings and conflictual situations” (p. 4). Likewise, this approach is the most likely to endorse the flexible, fluid, inherently subjective conception of Westminster defended by some authors, as discussed briefly in the previous section (Flinders et al., 2022; Weller & Haddon, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2009).

Whereas incentives are the stuff of rationalist theories of change like PSBs, and structures are the stuff of institutionalist theories of change like NPG, the stuff of the interpretivist approach are the ideas and narratives which define actors’ understandings of their relationships as well as the language and discourse by which these ideas and narratives are conveyed. This is why we can also refer to the interpretivist theoretical approach as *discursive*. The role played by discourse in the behaviour of public servants and in public servant–politician relationships has been historically neglected. After all, according to the Westminster tenets discussed earlier, the dutiful, neutral public servant does not adopt a vocal personality separate from that of their responsible minister, from whom they are constitutionally “indivisible” (Savoie, 2003; Richards & Smith, 2016). However, we are reminded that “politics is a persuasion business” (Grube, 2019, p. 45), meaning public servants, as political actors, have always used language to shape the truths of their work. What is changing is that “[p]rofessionals who once exercised persuasive techniques in smoke-filled backrooms have to recalibrate those skills for a much more public audience” (*ibid.*).

The importance of discourse turns the literature’s and our attentions towards a crucial environmental piece in the puzzle of elite relationships and change in Westminster. In the age of openness, transparency, 24/7 news coverage, and instant networking, what happens to the working conditions of all political-administrative actors, but especially of bureaucrats who once kept to those same “backrooms” mentioned above? There is an important string of research

focusing on the changing environment in which the anonymous public servants and responsible ministers of Westminster are being forced to operate. A closer review will help us identify contexts of interest to our research question.

### **2.3. Anonymity and responsibility in the age of openness**

If public servants providing advice to executive politicians in relative secrecy and serving the government in near-total anonymity is a key condition of elite relationships under Westminster, then evidence suggests that this condition has been under strain on multiple fronts and for some time. The logical hypothesis in the face of such evidence is that the complementary dimension of the relationship – ministerial responsibility – is also suffering. What kind of evidence are we talking about?

It is worth beginning with some contexts over which, in the words of Donald J. Savoie in his classic book on elite relationships, government simply “has no control” (2003, p. 213). These include the openness and transparency craze that ultimately led to the adoption of access to information laws, tools with which any member of the public can become privy to the inherently sensitive thoughts, advice, and work of neutral public servants. These also include the strategies adopted by news media in response to increasing transparency that essentially allow them to “be all over the place”, including in direct communication with public servants (*ibid.*).

Scholars eventually began distinguishing and studying these contexts more systematically. Early research looked at public speeches delivered by top bureaucrats in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. While the nature of these speeches varied widely across jurisdictions, Canadian evidence pointed to “something of a middle road between independent policy advocacy and quiet anonymity” (Grube, 2013, p. 19). Trends in information and communications technology have provided another interesting context. Social media have radically transformed how people connect and communicate, and the literature on Westminster has approached this transformation from two angles. The first is the use of social media by public servants in their official capacities. Governments are encouraging public servants to be “entrepreneurial communicators” via the speed and reach of social media platforms (Grube, 2017, p. 96). In other words, social media enable any public servant to become a visible and easily accessible spokesperson for the government.

The second angle is the use of social media by public servants in their personal lives. Cooper (2020c) asked to what extent the expression of political opinions online by Canadian public employees could be affecting their neutrality. He found that, statistically, unionized public employees showed restraint in acting politically online when compared to others. Follow-up research in Australia shows that this correlation is even stronger for more senior public servants and for activity that is electoral or partisan in nature (Cooper, 2020b). Despite such restraint, social media use clearly represents significant change as far as the online visibility of public employees is concerned.

Where else are public servants becoming more visible as they carry out their functions? In his book on the future of elite relationships and Westminster, Dennis C. Grube discusses the overall “reconceptualisation of public bureaucratic leadership” (2019, p. 29) and the rise of what he calls “rhetorical bureaucracy” (*idem*, p. 49). He compiles several contexts of declining public servant anonymity, which, in addition to the public speaking, media scrutiny, and social media use already mentioned, also include policy advocacy and leadership, the publishing of written material, and, of crucial importance, increasingly public forms of accountability.

This last context in particular brings us back around to the question of whether ministerial responsibility is also being affected amid such drastic changes to public servant anonymity. There is evidence from as early as the 1980s that ministers had begun to “turn on their public servants [...] by publicly singling them out” as it was considered “no longer appropriate to hold ministers responsible for their departments and allow public servants, who commit errors, to go unpunished publicly” (Savoie, 2019, p. 292). If there are some contexts where heightened bureaucratic visibility was truly inevitable, then here is one very much within the government’s control, yet politicians still appear to be consciously removing the veil of anonymity to which their public servants were entitled by tradition if not necessity.

While public accountability exercises take place in various fora, there can be no doubt that the most serious are in the institution where the law itself is crafted and popular representatives wield near-unfettered power to scrutinize government activity. Here, we are talking about Parliament. At first glance, the rules and customs of Westminster parliaments would appear to preserve the doctrine of ministerial responsibility insofar as the right to be heard in these institutions is restricted to sitting members, which, when it comes to the executive,

means ministers themselves. However, a fuller study of how contemporary legislatures go about their business in the age of openness reveals that even in Parliament, the tradition of the anonymous bureaucrat and the responsible minister may be up for negotiation.

#### **2.4. Anonymity and responsibility in Parliament: The importance of committees**

There have long been signs, some more scientific and some more intuitive, that the parliamentary environment in Westminster systems has been changing in ways that would affect the larger question of political-administrative relationships. In the UK, persistent concerns in the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century over the imbalance of power between the executive and the legislative, along with skepticism over the old brand of ministerial responsibility, led the House of Commons to increase its proactive scrutiny of government, whether that be ministers or their bureaucratic officials (Flinders, 2002). Likewise, by the 1980s, Australian legislators had determined that their oversight of government required “senior administrators to be answerable not only to ministers but also to parliament for their management of public policies” (Dixon et al., 1996, p. 4). In Canada, reforms as early as the 1970s saw public servants shedding their professional anonymity as witnesses before committees of the House of Commons, especially on financial matters like departmental estimates (Kernaghan, 1979, p. 391). A few decades later, the chief administrators of public organizations would even gain the title of “accounting officer” and take on the responsibility, enshrined in law, to appear before parliamentarians and account for their organization’s management of public funds (Savoie, 2019, pp. 272–273).

As the above examples suggest, the special context that has fuelled the intersecting study of public servants, ministers, and Parliament is *committees*. We know that the legislative committee is far from unique to Westminster parliamentary systems and can be broadly defined as “an internal subunit of the legislature comprised of legislators and enjoying certain delegated authority” (Martin, 2014, p. 352). In the American congressional system, theories propose that committees allow legislators to acquire benefits for their constituents, share information more efficiently, consolidate partisan influence, or even maximize financial gain from lobbyists (*idem*, pp. 353–359). Meanwhile, parliamentary committees under Westminster have tended to focus on scrutinizing legislation in greater detail, holding government bodies to account, and studying issues that matter to the public (Smith, 2011; Geddes, 2016).

That said, the most important aspect of Westminster parliamentary committees to the question of elite relationships, public servant anonymity, and ministerial responsibility is their gathering of “evidence” from non-parliamentarians as a way of informing their studies on bills and other matters. This practice is bolstered by a long-standing power to demand the delivery of documents or the appearance of individuals before the committee (Geddes, 2016, p. 13). Moreover, despite some arguments that news media have turned their back on the work of Parliament (Kubala, 2011), there are other evidence and arguments that committees in particular have become heavily mediatized environments in which ruthless partisan tactics, political scandals, and dramatized blame games are played out (Dunleavy & Muir, 2013; Smith, 2011; Grube, 2014). This is likely the environment awaiting any public servant and any minister – still bound by customs of anonymity and responsibility – who has been invited to testify. The volatility of such an environment should pique the interest of any scholar determined to understand whether and how elite Westminster relationships are on the move.

That said, parliamentary committees have received some attention in the public administration literature. For instance, many studies have focused on the impact of committees’ substantive work, be it on legislative outcomes (Mallory & Smith, 1972), government policy more generally (Stilborn, 2014), or the representation of marginalized voices (Tremblay & Mullen, 2007). Others have taken interest in the ways committees operate and the types of information and knowledge that they mobilize (Thompson, 2014; Geddes, 2019, 2021). There has also been an important overlap with the public accountability research agenda, where studies have looked at the ability, or lack thereof, of committees to foster learning-type accountability (Grube, 2014), the use of committees as complementary or supplementary venues for holding first ministers accountable (Kelso et al., 2016), and the emerging role of committees in the oversight of appointments to executive government positions (Matthews & Flinders, 2015; Matthews, 2020).

Still, it is troubling that the question of public servants and ministers appearing before parliamentarians at committee – not as a dimension of executive accountability more generally but rather as a key metric of the relationship between these two actors – has not been addressed more explicitly. The obvious first question in this line of inquiry would be whether and to what extent they are appearing as committee witnesses in the first place. We know a little about the

makeup of witnesses thanks to some recent studies, a couple of which suggest that public employees represent more than one third of witnesses before committees of the UK's House of Commons and House of Lords (Berry & Kippin, 2014, p. 4; Geddes, 2018, p. 12). Others focused instead on the demographic diversity of all witnesses (Bochel & Berthier, 2021) and the types of policy stakeholders who are most likely to access the parliamentary environment (Pedersen et al., 2015).

What is still missing, then, is an exploratory yet structured investigation into how both public servants and ministers figure in comparison to each other – and within the larger set of witnesses – before parliamentary committees. After all, when authors claim that observed cases of public servants being held accountable to parliamentarians represent a significant break from tradition and therefore evidence of drastic change to Westminster norms (e.g., Savoie, 2003; Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2019), they seem to have skipped the empirical prerequisite of determining whether this phenomenon has actually been changing over time and whether, as a consequence, parliamentary committees may actually represent a site of declining public servant anonymity and ministerial responsibility. Our study takes this crucial empirical step and addresses this important gap in the literature so that theoretical work can continue to document and model causes and mechanisms of change. We therefore formulate a specific research question that will lead us towards whatever evidence of change over time that may exist: Are the relationships between public servants and ministers in Westminster systems, specifically the core dimensions of anonymity and responsibility, changing through these actors' simple appearance before parliamentary committees? And if so, how?

The next chapter of this paper sets out the research design and methods that we use to answer this question, including where we collect our data and how we operationalize the concepts of anonymity and responsibility to produce valid empirical results.

### 3. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Descriptive inference through quantitative exploration

At the risk of returning to the very basics of systematic research, it is worth recalling that knowledge on any topic accumulates through progressively more informative types of inquiry and discovery. Simple description, comparative description, the description of relationships, the explanation of conditionality in relationships, and the explanation of causality in relationships are cumulative and equally important steps, none of which can be forgone in the long process of knowledge generation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, pp. 4–5). This is relevant to the gap that we identified in the previous chapter and the research design that we adopt. After all, we are setting out to revisit and shore up the lower levels of knowledge around a topic area that has enjoyed ample theoretical discussion (i.e., attempts at explanation) but insufficient empirical scrutiny at the most basic steps of description.

Specifically, we are seeking to describe the anonymity and responsibility of public servants and ministers in Westminster political-administrative systems through their appearances over time before parliamentary committees. Before research can seek to understand how and why the relationships between these actors change in Westminster systems, we need to ascertain whether there are patterns of change in the first place and what they look like. As outlined by Collier and colleagues (2010), such description, like all scientific work, should be founded on *inference*, or “drawing larger conclusions on the basis of specific observations” (p. 2). In particular, *descriptive inference* – which is a prerequisite for *causal inference* – asks us to make two leaps of faith, albeit informed ones: 1) to apply what we observe in a chosen case to all cases of which it is reasonably representative; 2) to link the concrete phenomena that we observe to abstract concepts found in the literature (*idem*, p. 3; Gerring, 2004, p. 347). Accordingly, to examine the appearance of witnesses before parliamentary committees using descriptive inference, we must choose a sample that is representative of all committees in a given system and, perhaps to a lesser degree, in all Westminster systems. Then we must identify relevant indicators through which we can operationalize our core concepts of ministerial responsibility and public servant anonymity.

We provide details on case sampling, data, and indicators in the sections to follow, but first we should discuss the specific methods through which we carry out this descriptive

inferential design. Qualitative methods like the content analysis of transcribed proceedings or interviews with elite actors have dominated studies of parliamentary committees that look specifically at the public servant–politician relationship (e.g., Grube, 2014, 2019). We suggest that this approach, while quite effective at identifying and classifying the values and behaviour of actors in a given case, is not appropriate for answering the question we ask about system-level patterns of change over time. The discourse of public servants is an essential ingredient to understanding how and why their relationships with their ministerial counterparts evolve, but the questions of anonymity and responsibility are less interested in what actors have to say and more interested in which actors are present to say it. Essentially, we are seeking the same basic type of information as Geddes (2018), Pedersen and colleagues (2015), and Berry and Kippin (2014): who gives evidence at committees? The answers they found have tended to lie in statistics on the types of people who appear as witnesses and how they compare. It thus follows that we would take inspiration from this quantitative approach and apply it to the context of elite relationships and Westminster.

Quantitative methods are heavily oriented towards deductive, theory-informed, hypothesis-testing research designs, whereas ours remains decidedly descriptive. That said, we listen to Brady and colleagues when they assert that “mainstream quantitative researchers are sometimes too quick in dismissing the contribution to scholarly knowledge of inductive analysis” (2010, p. 10). We agree that quantitative approaches like descriptive statistical analysis have a key role to play in exploratory studies like ours, not only for their ability to generate important knowledge in advance of theoretical testing, but also as part of a larger methodological agenda to normalize the coexistence of qualitative and quantitative approaches in social science. As such, we seek to achieve descriptive inference through the quantitative exploration of witnesses before parliamentary committees. The next section presents the case chosen for our study and the nature of the collected data.

### **3.2. The case: Context and data**

As a country of Westminster heritage, Canada has been the object of study for related research on public servant speeches, loyalty, and social media use (Grube, 2013; Grube & Howard, 2016b; Cooper, 2020b, 2020c), while British and Australian cases have made up the bulk of work on public servants and parliamentary committees (Grube, 2014, 2019; Geddes,

2016, 2018). We choose the Canadian federal landscape for our study to help round off the literature, among other reasons to follow. Canada has a federal public service of more than 300,000 employees directed and overseen by a federal Cabinet that ranges in size from about 25 to 35 ministers (Government of Canada, 2021; Library of Parliament, 2021). The Parliament of Canada is composed of the Crown and two legislative assemblies – the Senate and the House of Commons. While both houses of Parliament have sophisticated committee systems, we focus on the House of Commons because it is the higher-profile organization, ministers are almost always members of the Commons (MPs), and, accordingly, it has the more important role in holding government accountable.

Committees of the House of Commons have existed for well over a century, but the form in which they are studied here and elsewhere is the result of relatively recent institutional change. In the 1960s, the list of “standing” committees – that is, committees with specific mandates automatically constituted from one parliamentary session to the next – were given the authority to examine the government’s financial estimates and all relevant bills once adopted at the second reading stage (Smith, 2011, p. 3; Bosc & Gagnon, 2017). It was not until the mid-1980s that the standing committees were reshuffled to correspond with federal government departments and agencies and given the key authority to study any topic relevant to their mandate. Finally, the 1990s saw the beginning of live broadcasts of committee meetings, a practice that was adopted for Chamber proceedings more than a decade earlier and that would bring increased media coverage and public attention to committee business (*idem*).

The House’s present-day committee system consists of 25 standing committees, two standing joint committees composed of MPs *and* Senators, and a fluctuating number of special, special joint, and legislative committees (House of Commons, 2022). As is the norm for Westminster parliaments, the House’s committees are empowered to compel the appearance of witnesses, including public servants, under threat of being declared guilty of contempt of Parliament. As for ministers, there is a slight nuance in that sitting parliamentarians cannot be compelled to appear. However, this distinction has minimal effect on our study given that most witnesses appear willingly when asked (Bosc & Gagnon, 2017). As the permanent bodies tasked with overseeing a sector of government and empowered to initiate and conduct a broad range of studies, standing committees are our population of interest.

We choose to apply our research design and methods described in the previous section to the House's Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM). Several characteristics make it appropriate for observing our phenomena of interest as well as suitably representative of all standing committees of Canada's House of Commons. It is charged with examining most matters under the responsibility of the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, along with federal multiculturalism policy (House of Commons, 2022). Like for most committees, this means it oversees the work of the relevant line department (Department of Citizenship and Immigration). However, it also oversees the Immigration and Refugee Board (an administrative tribunal) and frequently hears from witnesses from other public organizations just beyond its mandate, such as the Canada Border Services Agency and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. CIMM is structured like the majority of standing committees: its chair is a government MP, its two vice-chairs are opposition MPs, all three chairs are elected by its membership, and its partisan makeup reflects that of the entire House (*idem*; Bosc & Gagnon, 2017). Accordingly, our choice reflects a non-random sampling strategy focused on collecting data from the Canadian House of Commons committee system that are reasonably representative of that system's average characteristics.

We collect our data on CIMM between 1995 and 2021. This period covers the 71<sup>st</sup> meeting of the committee during the first session of the 35<sup>th</sup> Parliament through to the 38<sup>th</sup> meeting of the committee during the second session of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament. This 27-year time period provides sufficient room for observing change while also reflecting important factors related to data availability and context (see section 3.4. for further details). Using the publicly available *Minutes of Proceedings* – the official records of the committee's business prepared after each meeting – we collect quantitative data from every meeting of CIMM within the chosen time period at which at least one witness appears. Each witness at each meeting represents one observation. We now turn to the important matter of how we operationalize our concepts through indicators in the data.

### **3.3. Operationalizing our research design**

First, given that our research question seeks to explore change in the relationship between public servants and ministers over almost three decades, we need appropriate indicators for time. We collect data on both “real time” and “parliamentary time.” That is, for each observation, we

note the year, month, and day as well as the Parliament, session, and meeting number. While this study primarily uses the real time indicators, the parliamentary time indicators offer an alternative way of organizing the data for future research questions. To map change over time, we divide the 27 years of real time into five increments of five or six years. There is no theoretical basis to these increments; rather, for the purposes of describing broad patterns of change in committee witnesses, we decided that five roughly equal increments would be analytically convenient and reasonably valid.

Turning now to the substantive matters of anonymity and responsibility, we devise several specific indicators that work together to paint a more general picture of those dimensions of the public servant–minister relationship. To start, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the most basic understanding of whether a public servant is anonymous or visible is whether and when they present themselves in a public venue. As such, for each witness appearing before the committee, our first indicator measures which type of actor they represent. Other studies interested in the broad distribution of witnesses have assigned several categories to this indicator including public sector, private sector, higher education, non-profit, professional association, multinational business, etc. (Berry & Kippin, 2014; Geddes, 2016, 2018). Given our narrower scope, we are only interested in whether a witness is 1) a public servant, 2) a minister or their parliamentary secretary<sup>1</sup>, or 3) simply anyone else who is neither of the previous two (e.g., a business owner, a consultant, a university professor, etc.). We therefore use three binary indicators for whether a witness is a member of each of those three categories. This allows us to easily calculate the frequency and proportion of all witnesses for each type of actor. We only count federal ministers/parliamentary secretaries and federal public servants. While politicians and officials from other levels of Canadian government or foreign governments may appear before the committee, these actors are not constitutionally responsible to the Parliament of Canada; accordingly, their appearance does not reflect the same phenomenon.

However, we know that public servants are not a monolithic type of actor. Because tenets of the Westminster tradition hold that certain public servants ought to be more anonymous than others, we must also explore internal variation among public servant witnesses in order to

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada and other Westminster systems, parliamentary secretaries are MPs who are assigned to a minister to help them carry out their mandate and fulfill their parliamentary obligations. When they appear before committees on behalf of their minister, they serve essentially the same function.

understand whether and how their anonymity is changing. We first look at their rank. Elite relationships under Westminster are particular to the most senior officials who work closely with ministers on behalf of their organizations and who are expected to be closer to the arena of public accountability than any of their subordinates. The rank of bureaucrats has been an important factor in other studies identified in the literature (e.g., Cooper, 2020b). We devise a five-category ordinal indicator as shown in Table 1, in order of most junior to most senior.

**Table 1: Categories for the rank of public servant witnesses and common examples**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Common examples</b>
1. Non-executive	Policy analyst, legal counsel, researcher, team lead
2. Junior executive	Director, Senior Director, Director-General
3. Senior executive	(Associate) Assistant Deputy Minister Vice-Chair, Vice-President
4. Chief administrator	(Associate) Deputy Minister, Chair, President
5. Clerk of the Privy Council	Clerk of the Privy Council (head of the public service)

The categorization of public servant witnesses by rank proved relatively straightforward, and we addressed any unusual position titles by researching the position and noting any revealing details such as pay scale, classification, or reporting structure.

Second, we look at the type of organization for which the public servant witness works. Federal public-sector organizations in Canada have varying relationships of independence and accountability vis-à-vis ministers. For instance, while ministers are expected to have reasonable knowledge of and control over the major undertakings of their departments, it may be more understandable for an official to appear on behalf of an arm's-length body alongside or instead of the minister, even under Westminster customs. We arrange types of organizations along an ordinal indicator from least to most independent, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Categories for the organization of public servant witnesses and common examples**

Rank	Common position titles
1. Central agency	Privy Council Office, Treasury Board Secretariat
2. Line department	Department of Citizenship and Immigration, Department of Public Safety
3. Agency	Canada Border Services Agency, Statistics Canada
4. Arm's length organization	Immigration and Refugee Board, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canadian Security Intelligence Service
5. Crown corporation	Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

This categorization process was also relatively straightforward, but given the diversity of federal public organizations, there were some ambiguous cases, especially between the agency and arm's-length organization categories. To distinguish these two types of non-departmental bodies, our guiding principle is the reporting and directing relationship between the body and the relevant minister. For example, the Immigration and Refugee Board is a tribunal that makes quasi-judicial decisions that can be appealed through the federal court system. The nature of this work gives it greater autonomy from Cabinet than the Canada Border Services Agency, which carries out a specific part of the mandate of the Minister of Public Safety (i.e., border security and immigration enforcement). In rare cases where further clarification was needed, we consulted relevant sections of Canada's *Financial Administration Act*, which lays out the legal structure of Canada's federal public service.

The concept of responsibility manifests as a potential consequence of reduced anonymity. As discussed in the previous chapter, authors suggest that when one type of actor in the public servant–minister relationship is more or less visible than the other, they may be held more or less responsible in accountability-seeking contexts. Accordingly, in order to understand change in the responsibility of our actors over time, we measure their *comparative* levels of anonymity. Our first comparative indicator is calculated as the ratio of the proportion of public servant witnesses to the proportion of minister witnesses. The value of this indicator tells us, in proportional terms, how much more one type of witness appears than the other. For example, a value of 10.33 would tell us that public servants appear over 10 times more than ministers. If the values of this ratio

increased over time, it could suggest that ministers are becoming less responsible before parliamentary committees.

Inter-actor comparison can also take place at a more microscopic level by looking at the relative presence of public servant and minister witnesses within an individual committee meeting. We use two indicators in this regard. First, with a binary indicator, we note whether the minister/parliamentary secretary to whom a public servant witness reports appears alongside them. When a minister appears before the committee, they would be expected to take the brunt of questioning, whereas public servants without their minister would be forced to address all questions themselves. To be clear, the minister in appearance must be responsible for the public servant witness's organization to be counted. The second indicator is simply the inverse of the first one: whether at least one public servant who reports to the minister witness appears alongside them. Likewise, this binary indicator is sensitive to whether the public servant in question actually falls within the responsibility of the minister. This tells us to what extent responsible ministers are accompanied by bureaucratic actors with whom they could share their burden of public accountability.

For complete details on our indicators and the coding protocol used to process our data, see the codebook included in the Appendix.<sup>2</sup>

### **3.4. Limitations**

We believe that our study's design and methodology are subject to two main limitations. The first relates to the generalizability of our findings. The Westminster tradition is the foundation of more than a dozen political-administrative systems around the world, across which we know there is significant variation despite the features that unite them. The examination of one committee from one system's national legislature may not be reliably representative of parliamentary committees across systems. Furthermore, the lack of comparative research in this area leaves us with little awareness of *how* committees of Canada's House of Commons may differ from or reflect those of its Westminster relatives. That said, as Brady and colleagues

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<sup>2</sup> As shown in our codebook, we created other indicators that are not immediately relevant to our research question but that are easy to record and could prove useful for future studies. These include the correspondence between the committee at which a minister appears and that minister's mandate, as well as a suite of indicators associated with the political context in which witnesses appear at committee: type of Parliament (majority or minority), government party, and official opposition party. To be clear, these indicators do not feature in this study's design.

(2010) remind us, “research design involves fundamental trade-offs” (p. 10), and we stand by the utility of our selected case. As explained earlier, CIMM is a well-selected sample of the House of Commons’ standing committees, and we have no reason to believe that any observed patterns regarding its witnesses would be remarkably deviant from the average of all standing committees. As such, while our study may not necessarily speak to the Westminster tradition in general, we have designed it to at least speak to the Westminster tradition in Canada.

The second limitation relates to the selected time period. It could be argued that observing potential change over time would require a longer period than 27 years. Indeed, some longitudinal research has examined political-administrative change in Canada over nearly 100 years (e.g., Cooper, 2020a). We acknowledge that our narrower window is likely to show us a smaller picture of whatever change may have been occurring. However, again in the spirit of inherent trade-offs, we assert that this smaller picture should be forgiven on account of its greater likelihood of validity. As mentioned above, the Canadian House’s committee system did not assume some of the most important features of its current form until as late as the 1990s. It would have been difficult to examine older committee proceedings while measuring the same indicators given that they did not undertake as diverse studies and did not have all of their present-day powers. With our approach, we know that CIMM in 1995 is structurally the same as CIMM in 2021. This justification is further reinforced by data availability. Digital copies of CIMM’s *Minutes of Proceedings* are only available as of 1995, whereas the scanned copies of older volumes from the parliamentary archives do not consistently provide the necessary information for all our indicators of interest, such as public servant rank.

These limitations and their justifications should be kept in mind as we present, interpret, and discuss our results in the next chapter.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Overview

Our study uses a descriptive quantitative approach to explore change in the anonymity and responsibility of public servants and ministers by looking at a specific House of Commons committee in the Canadian federal context. All this is part of an effort to learn whether and how the relationship between these types of Westminster actors is changing. This chapter presents and pieces together the evidence uncovered in our study to offer answers to this crucial question.

We do this in two steps. First, the next few sections describe the results of our analysis using all the indicators outlined in the previous chapter. Our study yielded data on 4,108 witnesses who appeared before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) from 1995 to 2021. On the matter of anonymity, we begin by looking at the representation of public servants among all witnesses before turning to the types of public servants who appear – that is, by rank and organization type. Then, moving on to the matter of responsibility, we consider the relative representation of public servants and ministers among all witnesses using our chosen metrics: the public servant–minister ratio and the rates of public servant–minister and minister–public servant accompaniment. In each section, we consider both average results across the entire time period as well as change-over-time results by comparing the average results between increments.

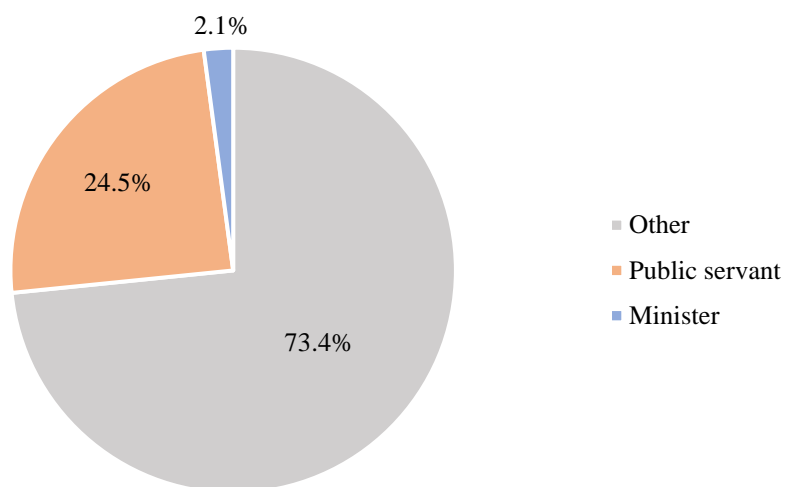
All that said, the second step is to bring these results together and, from a more global perspective, state our findings in relation to our research question. In the final section of this chapter, we articulate an answer to our question and engage with the literature to determine where it falls in relation to other research.

### 4.2. Anonymity: Types of witnesses

In terms of the average distribution of all witnesses, as shown in Figure 1, we are not surprised to find that witnesses who are neither public servants nor ministers appeared most often. After all, this is a large, heterogenous group of people from the private and non-profit sectors, academia, special interest groups, subnational and foreign governments, and many other places. We are more interested to learn that, on average, public servants accounted for about one of every four witnesses (24.5%), while ministers accounted for only about one of every 50

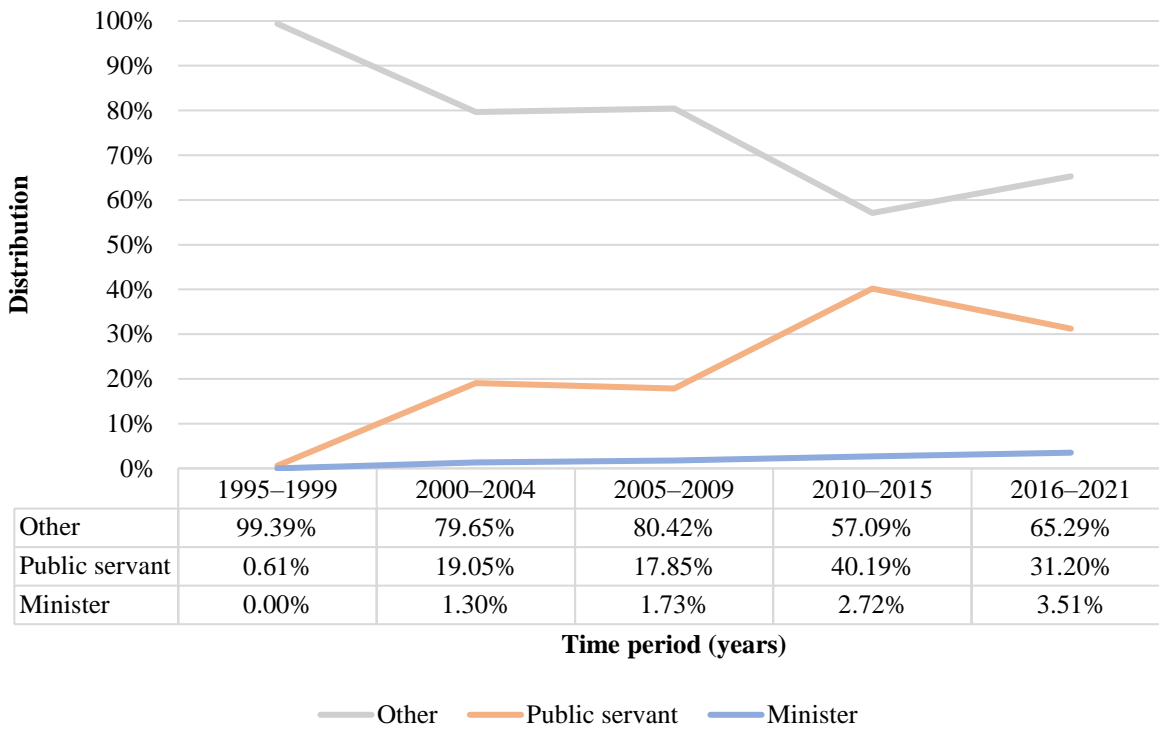
witnesses (2.1%). As such, on average, public servants are appearing before the committee almost 12 times more frequently than their ministerial counterparts.

**Figure 1: Distribution of all witnesses by type, 1995–2021**



It is interesting to compare these findings with what we know about committee witnesses in other Westminster jurisdictions. It seems that Canadian federal public servants are appearing in roughly the same proportions as British central public servants as reported by Berry and Kippin (2014, pp. 5–6) and Geddes (2016, pp. 202–204) – approximately 29% and 27%, respectively. On the other hand, Canadian federal ministers make up a far smaller proportion of witnesses than British central ministers and secretaries of state – 16% according to Berry and Kippin (2014, p. 6) and 15% according to Geddes (2016, p. 204).

That said, what these British studies cannot tell us, and what our study primarily aims to learn, is whether and how the appearance of public servants and ministers among committee witnesses has changed over time. Figure 2 shows the distribution of all our witness types across the five time increments. Between 1995 and 2015, the proportion of witnesses that were public servants increased steadily from less than 1% to about 40%. This trend closely mirrors that of miscellaneous witnesses, whose representation steadily declined from about 99% to about 57%. As for ministers, their representation also increased, although at a considerably lower rate than public servants, going from virtually no representation to about 3.5% of witnesses.

**Figure 2: Distribution of all witnesses by type, change over time**

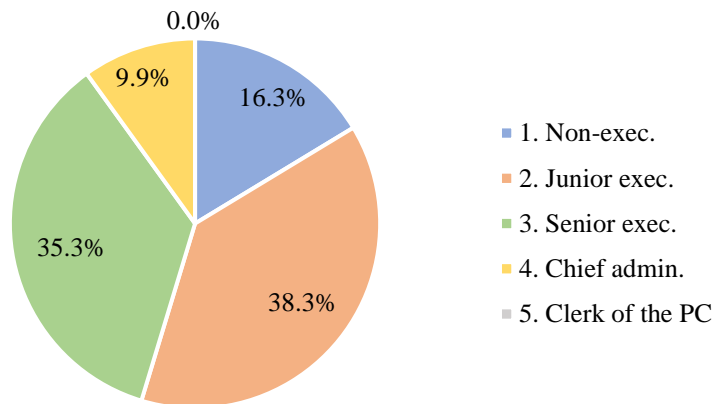
The glaring point that must be addressed is what occurs during the final time period between 2016 and 2021. While the upward trend of minister witnesses continues, the upward trend of public servant witnesses and the downward trend of other witnesses seem to change direction. Without further data, it is hard to say whether this indicates a gradual reversal of the trends from the 1995–2015 period that will extend over another 20 or so years, or whether some extraordinary factor presented itself during the 2016–2021 interval. While we do not intend to venture into explanatory analysis in this paper, there are certainly candidates for such a factor, like the highly disruptive COVID-19 pandemic, for instance.

All that said, the key takeaway from the overall distribution of witnesses over time is that, for a period of 20 years, both public servants and ministers appeared before the committee at an increasing rate, with public servants seeing the more significant overall rise. Accordingly, in the context of parliamentary committees, public servants as a collective appear to be losing the anonymity which they traditionally enjoyed.

### 4.3. Anonymity: Variation among public servant witnesses

By recalling that the bureaucracy cannot be treated as a homogenous group of actors when it comes to their relationships with the political executive, we are pushed to explore the characteristics of public servant committee witnesses in finer detail. In other words, we want to learn how the overall decrease in anonymity found in the previous section plays out across different kinds of public servants in order to better describe the patterns of change targeted by our research question. The first breakdown of public servant witnesses is by rank. Indeed, according to the Westminster tradition, higher-ranking bureaucrats generally take on a greater degree of public accountability and are more likely to work directly with ministers and their offices. Figure 3 shows the average distribution of public servant witnesses by rank across the chosen time period.

**Figure 3: Public servant witnesses by rank, 1995–2021**

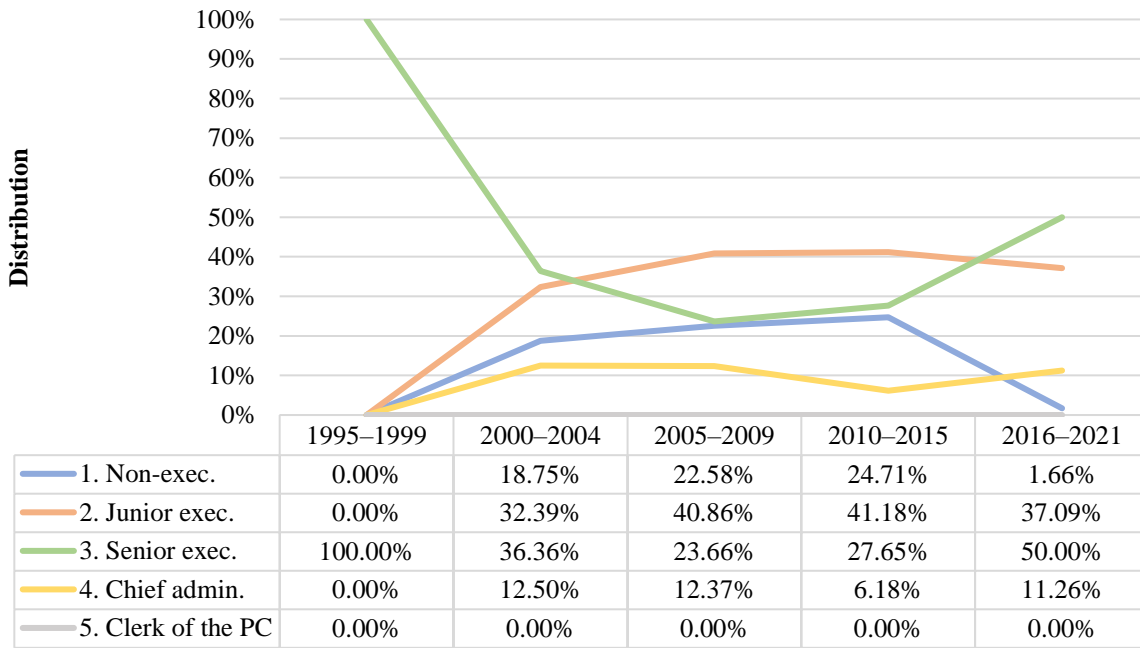


It is notable that the majority (54.6%) of public servant witnesses are actually below the level of senior executive, usually meaning below the level of (Associate) Assistant Deputy Minister and equivalents. Among this majority are the remarkable 16.3% of officials who are not even part of the executive cadre: these include low-level analysts, scientists, legal counsel, and program officers, among others. While they may be experts in particular policy and administrative files, they work under complex hierarchies of managers who give them their marching orders and, supposedly, take responsibility for their results. It is therefore significant that these employees are appearing with any frequency under the bright lights of Parliament. As for the chief administrators of government bodies who report directly to Cabinet, namely

(Associate) Deputy Ministers and their equivalents, they account for barely one in 10 public servant witnesses.

Figure 4 shows how these findings play out over time. We identify a few interesting patterns that speak to change among public servant witnesses.

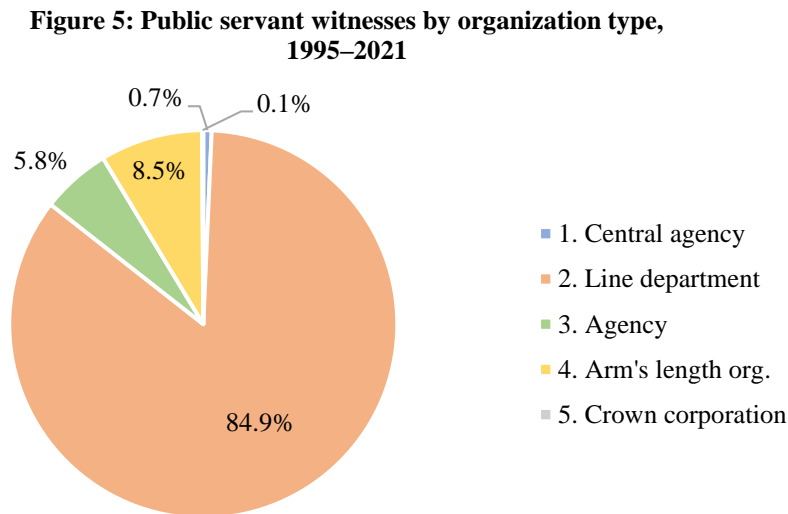
**Figure 4: Public servant witnesses by rank, change over time**



Between 2000 and 2015, the representation of junior executives and non-executives steadily increased at the expense of that of chief administrators and, to a lesser degree, senior executives. We can say that this 15-year period marked a significant shift in the visibility of lower-level public servants through their participation in the parliamentary environment. Interestingly, the period between 2016 and 2021 once again disrupts these patterns and marks the beginning of change in the opposite direction: chief administrators and senior executives appear more frequently while junior executives and non-executives go on the decline. From these limited data, it appears that variation and change in public servant witnesses’ ranks could share something in common with variation and change across all witness types given their similar patterns of change during the 2016–2021 period.

The second breakdown of public servant witnesses is by the types of organizations that they represent. Again, understanding the varying relevance of decreasing anonymity across public servants employed by different types of public bodies provides a far more nuanced understanding of how the public servant–minister relationship is changing. After all, as mentioned already, different organizations have different statutory and practical accountability relationships with Cabinet.

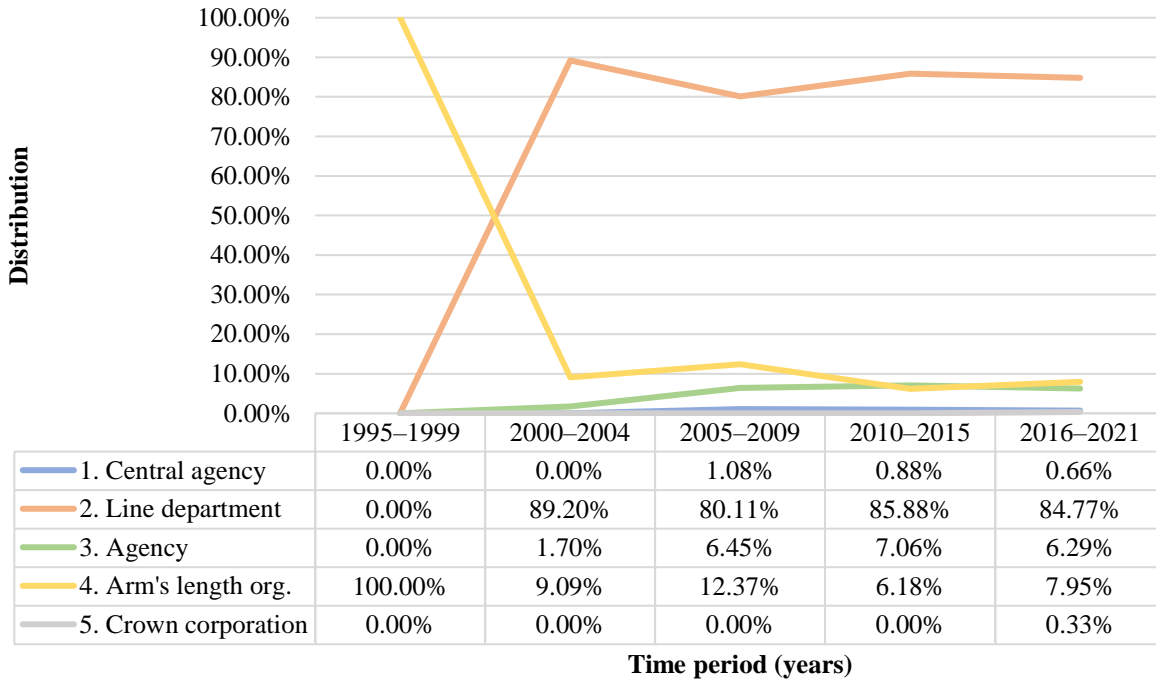
As shown in Figure 5, we see a far simpler but no less significant picture. The vast majority (84.9%) of officials appearing before the committee come from a line department, be it the Department of Citizenship and Immigration or one of the many others. Arm’s-length bodies and government agencies together account for another 14.3%, while central agencies like the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board Secretariat make up less than 1%. Only one employee appeared from a federal Crown corporation over the 27 years studied, but we should treat the generalizability of this finding with caution given that CIMM’s mandate does not directly include any Crown corporations, while the mandates of some other standing committees do.



Unlike for their rank, we find no remarkable patterns of change over time in the organizations of public servant witnesses. As shown in Figure 6, apart from the dramatic shift between 1995–1999 and 2000–2004 due to an unrepresentative number of public servant

witnesses in that first period, the distribution of organization types reflected in Figure 5 remains relatively steady over three decades.

**Figure 6: Public servant witnesses by organization type, change over time**



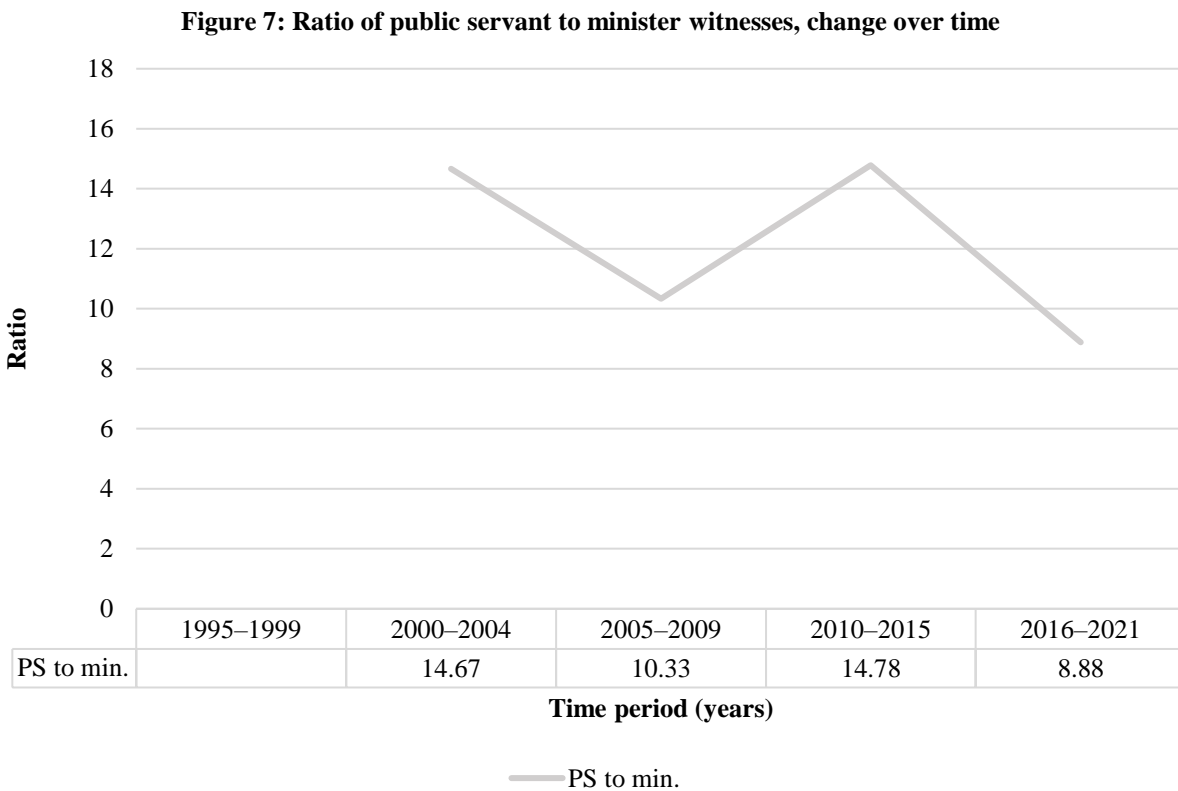
Despite having the most direct internal accountability relationship with their minister, public servants from line departments are still about 10 times more likely to appear before the committee than public servants from any other organization. In other words, even though agencies like Statistics Canada, and especially arm’s-length organizations like the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, are expected to maintain a little more distance from Cabinet and be held more directly accountable to legislators, officials from these types of organizations are remaining far more anonymous in the parliamentary environment compared to their colleagues from line departments. That said, there has been little to no change in this distribution over the last two decades.

Overall, we find through our internal examination of public servant witnesses that the larger trend of decreasing anonymity is especially applicable to junior officials who have traditionally remained far from public audiences. Meanwhile it seems that officials from line departments continue to face the greatest challenge to their anonymity compared to officials

from various non-departmental organizations. These findings certainly qualify our understanding of the way anonymity is changing in the public servant–minister relationship.

**4.4. Responsibility: Public servant and minister witnesses in comparison**

To understand what our patterns of change mean for elite political-administrative relationships under Westminster, we cannot analyze the committee appearances of public servants in isolation from the committee appearances of their ministerial counterparts. We know that appearances from both types of witnesses generally increased, but, given they did so at different rates, we are interested in how their *relative* representation changed over time. As explained in the previous chapter, it is through this comparative perspective that we can gain insight into whether and how a decrease in public servant *anonymity* also means a decrease in minister *responsibility*. Our first approach is to calculate the ratio between the proportions of witnesses reflected by each type of actor – that is, how many more times public servants appeared in comparison to ministers. Figure 7 shows how this ratio changes over the 27-year period.



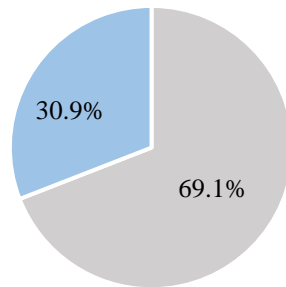
Here we observe a more complex pattern of change. The ratio of public servant to minister witnesses fluctuates up and down in intervals of about five years. Although a longer time period and more data would be needed to verify this pattern, we could also suggest that the relationship operates over a 10-year cycle, given that public servants appear about 15 times more than ministers in 2000–2004, down to about 10 times more in 2005–2009, and then back up again to almost exactly the same level in 2010–2015. In the period from 2016 to 2021, the ratio goes from a slightly greater height to an even lower dip (8.9), suggesting that the relationship may have begun fluctuating even more drastically over shorter time intervals. Alternatively, as discussed in the previous section, this period may represent a unique break in the pattern due to some unknown temporary factors. Note that there is no value for 1995–1999 because no ministers appeared before the committee during that time increment.

These results are particularly important. They suggest that the upwards trends in both public servant and minister committee appearances, as shown in Figure 2, can be deceptive and must be carefully interpreted. What they do tell us is that, in isolation from any other witnesses, public servants have indeed been shedding their anonymity before the committee in greater proportions over the last three decades. What they *do not* tell us, however, is that this increased visibility is necessarily associated with ministers who have abandoned their traditional duty of responsibility. Rather, as shown in Figure 7, the relative presence of public servants and ministers before the committee has constantly fluctuated and reveals no clear direction of change over the same three decades. Another way of putting it is that government representatives in general – both ministers and their bureaucrats – are making up an increasingly large portion of the committee’s witnesses.

As explained in the previous chapter, the ratio of public servant to minister witnesses offers a macroscopic comparison – that is to say, how the appearances of these witness types compare across multiple meetings and entire parliamentary sessions. We are also interested in how this relationship plays out in the context of individual committee meetings where multiple witnesses appear. This alternative indicator acknowledges that the act of responsibility occurs in a given moment in a given setting, whereas the previous ratio indicator treats responsibility on an aggregate level across moments. Figure 8 breaks down the appearances of public servants by whether the appropriate minister was present at the same meeting, and Figure 9 breaks down the

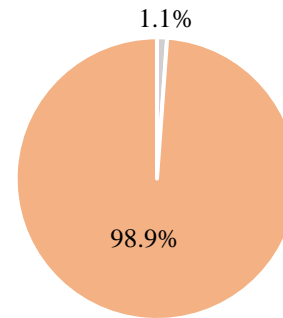
appearances of ministers by whether one or more of their public servants were present at the same meeting.

**Figure 8: Public servant witnesses by presence of minister, 1995–2021**



■ Minister is absent ■ Minister is present

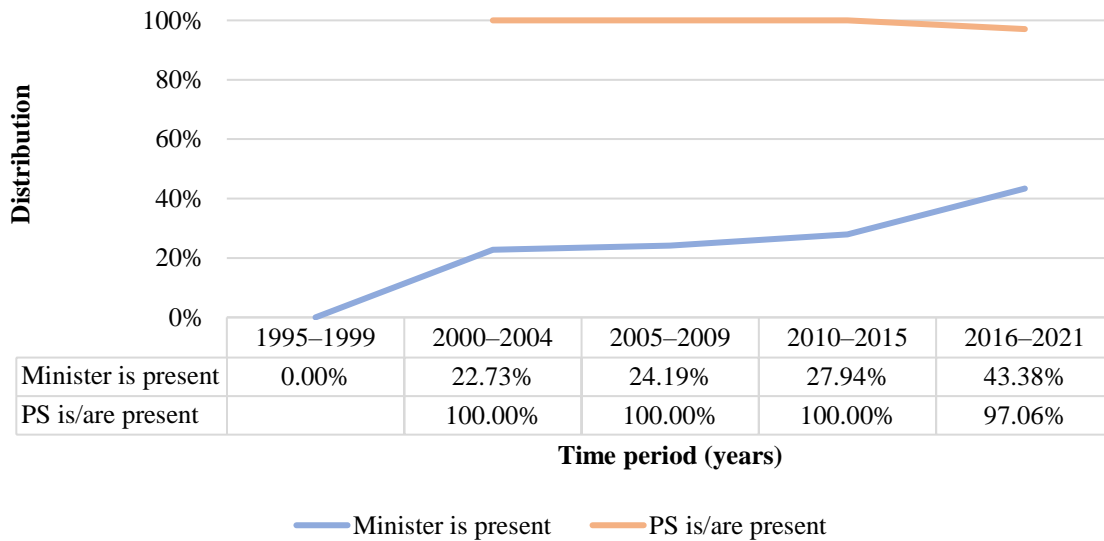
**Figure 9: Minister witnesses by presence of public servants, 1995–2021**



■ PS is/are absent ■ PS is/are present

We note that more than two thirds (69.1%) of public servant witnesses appear without the minister present to take the lead accountability role. Meanwhile, almost every ministerial appearance (85/86) is supported by the presence of public servants. From a situationally specific perspective, then, it seems that public servants are more likely to find themselves appearing alone before the committee, which could have significant implications for the responsibility dimension of the minister–public servant relationship. That said, an interesting story emerges when these indicators are examined over time. Figure 10 shows public servant and minister accompaniment together over 27 years.

**Figure 10: Public servant and minister witnesses by each other's presence, change over time**



Although the presence of public servants alongside ministers remains constant for almost the entire time period, the same cannot be said for the presence of ministers alongside public servants. Indeed, there is a clear upward trend in the proportion of public servant witnesses who are accompanied by their responsible minister before the committee. By 2016–2021, this proportion was quickly approaching half (43.4%). Accordingly, contrary to popular allegations that ministers are shifting more and more of their public accountability burden onto their neutral officials, these findings point towards a renewed commitment by ministers to appear before their parliamentary colleagues as the responsible actor. While the quantitative nature of the data cannot speak to the intricacies of such a commitment, it clearly challenges the narrative of a straightforward decline in ministerial responsibility at committee.

**4.5. Answering our research question**

The results and findings presented throughout the previous sections each provide a crucial piece of evidence to the more global perspective from which we will answer our research question. How is the relationship between public servants and ministers in the Westminster tradition – with a focus on the dimensions of anonymity and responsibility – changing through these actors’ appearances before parliamentary committees? This chapter has revealed several patterns of change among witnesses who appeared before the Standing Committee on

Citizenship and Immigration of Canada’s House of Commons between 1995 and 2021. Table 3 provides a summary of our results and findings.

**Table 3: Summary of results and findings**

<p>Anonymity: Types of witnesses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ On average, public servants made up about 25% while ministers made up about 2% of witnesses.</li> <li>○ Over time, the representation of both public servant and minister witnesses increased while that of other witnesses decreased.</li> <li>○ In 2016–2021, the change in public servant and other witnesses reversed direction.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Findings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The anonymity of public servants before parliamentary committees is declining.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Anonymity: Variation among public servant witnesses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The majority of public servant witnesses were below the rank of (Associate) Assistant Deputy Minister and equivalents, including over 16% who were not executives at all.</li> <li>○ From 2000 to 2015, the representation of non-executives and junior executives steadily increased while that of chief administrators and senior executives decreased.</li> <li>○ The vast majority of public servants came from line departments, with the next largest group coming from arm’s-length bodies.</li> <li>○ From 2000 to 2021, this organizational makeup changed very little.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Findings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Junior public servants are experiencing the overall decline in anonymity increasingly more than senior public servants.</li> <li>○ Public servants from line departments are the most visible, but this does not appear to be changing over time.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Responsibility: Public servant and minister witnesses in comparison</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The ratio of public servant to minister witnesses fluctuated frequently, changing direction about every five years.</li> <li>○ There is no clear direction of change in this ratio over 27 years.</li> <li>○ It was far more likely for ministers to be accompanied by public servants than for public servants to be accompanied by ministers.</li> <li>○ However, the proportion of public servant appearances where the minister is present increased by more than 40 points over 27 years.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Findings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The responsibility of ministers before committee is not declining in step with the anonymity of public servants, and it may actually be on the rise.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Our four main findings lead us to a complex and nuanced answer to our research question. In the simplest of terms, tracking their appearances before a parliamentary committee over nearly three decades tells us that public servants are becoming less and less anonymous, with the junior ranks of public servants and those from line departments experiencing this decline the most. Meanwhile, we see that ministers are not necessarily shifting their burden of responsibility onto public servants since there is no clear pattern of change in their relative rate of appearance at committee. In fact, from the perspective of individual committee meetings, ministers are appearing alongside their bureaucratic officials increasingly frequently.

The fact that the last 27 years have seen federal public servants become increasingly visible actors in the Canadian parliamentary environment lends further empirical support to the wide-reaching argument that the relationship between political and bureaucratic officials under Westminster no longer ensures or depends on the latter's quiet anonymity. Evidence of this important shift had already been uncovered in several contexts, from personal and professional social media use (Cooper, 2020b, 2020c; Grube, 2017) to public speaking (Grube, 2013) to policy advocacy during and after their time in the halls of government (Grube, 2019). While the specific context of parliamentary committees had been explored from the perspective of actor discourse and public accountability (e.g., Grube, 2014) there was insufficient evidence to back up the serious claim that “[i]n part through their appearances in front of parliamentary committees, contemporary public service leaders have become part of the public face of modern government” (Grube, 2019, p. 99). Our study provides that missing piece by highlighting a significant and ongoing *change over time* in who is appearing under the bright lights of parliamentary accountability. As a result, we can argue with more legitimacy than ever that the committee environment is indeed another site in which the public servant is becoming less anonymous and growing into a public role rather alien to Westminster customs.

But who are these public servants, anyway? Our finding that *junior* public servants are more and more the ones stepping into the ring of parliamentary scrutiny forces us to revisit this question, even when the literature on declining bureaucratic anonymity sometimes pushes it aside. When authors talk about the public servant–minister relationship, they are most often referring to the administrative elite, the most senior public service executives who work in closest proximity to the partisan arm of government and who, in many Westminster systems,

have accountability duties enshrined in law (Savoie, 2003; Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2019). Writing specifically on Canadian Deputy Ministers as the administrative heads of public organizations, Bourgault (2018) describes a uniquely intimate relationship with ministers and how, despite this intimacy, the tenets of Westminster still provide remarkably strict conditions under which these Deputy Ministers should testify before parliamentarians. It is difficult to square this aspect of the literature with our findings that middle and junior managers, along with low-level public servants with no managerial duties at all, are experiencing the most drastic decline in anonymity. Could it be that as anonymity under Westminster obsolesces, the public servant–minister relationship is being opened up and the line between senior officials and their subordinates is blurring? Or could it be that there are perceived advantages to both ministers and their most senior officials to have more functionally oriented and less politically minded subordinates represent the organization at committee? We do not believe our work or the literature can speak to such questions yet, but we believe they will continue to insert themselves into discussions on the future of Westminster until they are addressed.

The other thing we learned about the types of public servants appearing before committees is that the vast majority have long been, and continue to be, from a minister's line department – the statutory organization that absorbs the most important parts of their mandate. This finding may appear relatively insignificant to the evolution of Westminster due to its stability over time, but a comparative glance at the literature says otherwise. According to the studies on committee witnesses in the UK, central government departments account for a substantial portion, but not the greatest portion, of public servant witnesses. Berry and Kippin found that “other central government” organizations, meaning any organization at the national level that is *not* a line department, account for the most witnesses (37%) (2014, p. 5). Meanwhile, Geddes found the same for “arm's-length bodies”, a category that aligns more or less with the arm's-length organizations from our study, at 40% of witnesses (2016, p. 204). There is a clear difference between the Canadian and British contexts in terms of where committees draw their public servant witnesses from. The Canadian dominance of line departments is not matched in other studies, which reminds us not to underestimate the diversity among Westminster systems – especially as it relates to the finer points of the relationship between ministers and their public servants.

When it comes to the concept of responsibility, our study provides an answer that challenges a popular narrative in the literature. According to the doctrine of ministerial responsibility, about which much has been said throughout Westminster's history, the minister's ability to fulfill their accountability obligations to Parliament as the responsible executive actor depends heavily on the legal and practical "indivisibility" of their relationship with their bureaucratic officials (Savoie, 2003; Richards & Smith, 2016). In other words, the public servant and the minister are two people speaking through a single mouth, and that mouth belongs to the minister. As research tracks the rupture of this indivisible partnership across the several contexts mentioned above, it is therefore assumed that a less anonymous role for public servants means a less accountable role for their ministers. However, our study suggests that this assumption should be approached with considerable caution. On average, ministers are still appearing at committee as often or sometimes more often than they did a decade or more before, even if they are now more likely to be accompanied by neutral officials.

Accordingly, and contrary to many existing understandings of elite relationships under Westminster, we argue that the visibility of public servants does *not* automatically come at the expense of the responsibility of their political masters. Rather, we could say that committees are seeing an uptick in responsibility from executive actors overall, as both ministers *and* public servants represent an increasingly large proportion of committee witnesses. If these patterns of change are coming at the expense of anyone, it is the diverse pool of potential witnesses who do not represent executive government at all.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we set out to build on an existing corpus of research on the relationship between neutral public servants and elected ministers, which, according to the Westminster tradition shared across several countries, is subject to many written and unwritten rules. Two of those rules, the quiet anonymity of bureaucratic officials and the more forthcoming responsibility of political officials, have shown evidence of change in recent times. By looking at the particular context of parliamentary committees, we learned whether public servants have been becoming more visible, and ministers less responsible, through appearances over nearly three decades. Our exploratory quantitative examination of a standing committee of Canada's House of Commons provided mixed results that led us to nuanced findings. On one hand, we can say that public servants have indeed become less anonymous in light of their growing representation among committee witnesses. Furthermore, despite the unique role played by a public service's most senior officials, we can say that more and more of their junior subordinates are the ones shedding the veil of anonymity that the Westminster tradition had placed over them. On the other hand, and despite these findings, ministers do not appear to be slacking in their traditional responsibility quite as much as some would claim.

As we explained at the beginning of this paper, the practical and academic context in which we asked our research question is one of keen interest in the evolution of the Westminster tradition. When we talk about change in elite relationships, we do so from the starting point of Westminster – a set of both prescriptive norms and descriptive facts that have shaped so much of so many countries' political-administrative realities. Now that we have carried out our research design and offered an answer to our specific question, we eagerly but humbly return to this larger discussion and consider how our work contributes to it.

As political-administrative systems undergo frequent and rapid change, many authors have given the future of the Westminster tradition a grim prognosis. Especially from institutionalist and rationalist approaches, we encounter strong arguments that public servants are becoming "promiscuously partisan" (Aucoin, 2012, p. 189), that ministers, their top bureaucrats, and Parliament are "breaking the bargain" that governs their relations (Savoie, 2003), or that many other core underpinnings of the tradition have become little more than "a convenient myth" (Richards & Smith, 2016, p. 501). However, when empirical evidence shows that

traditional Westminster principles, even as faint shadows of their former selves, continue to operate across various contexts with little sign of disappearing altogether, such arguments face considerable hurdles. By showing that ministerial responsibility is still a guiding feature of the public servant–minister dynamic before parliamentary committees, even as public servants have become increasingly visible over the last three decades, our study provides more of this kind of evidence.

Far from endorsing the view that Westminster is becoming a thing of the past, we believe our study instead contributes to the argument that Westminster has always been a flexible arrangement that is more likely to adapt for survival across time and territory than die clinging to the most orthodox version of itself. More accurately, as proposed in the interpretivist or discursive approach, those who live and speak Westminster will continue to mould it to their needs (Rhodes et al., 2009; Weller & Haddon, 2016; Flinders et al., 2022). Of course, we must still question, study, and seek to understand these adaptations. In the case of this study, the increase in public servants appearing before parliamentary committees and shedding their anonymity is without a doubt a departure from what Westminster used to be. Recognizing this and the many other ways public servants have become visible and vocal actors, some authors now chart the rise of a hybrid arrangement they call “Washminster” – a name that symbolizes that combination of traditional Westminster institutions with the high-stakes, mediatized, and politicized accountability culture of the American presidential model (e.g., Matthews & Flinders, 2015; Grube 2019). Could the compromise inherent to the “Washminster” model reconcile our study’s conflicting conclusions? If public servants’ declining anonymity opens the door to the bureaucratic autonomy and personality of Washington, then ministers’ enduring commitment to basic responsibility leaves one foot firmly in place in the halls of Westminster.

While we have discussed at length the epistemological and methodological assumptions upon which our conclusions are based, it is once again important to qualify our contributions and their limitations. To investigate our topic over time and with the resources available to us, we limited ourselves to a single case in a single jurisdiction. We may be confident in our chosen committee’s faithfulness to the larger Canadian parliamentary system, but we have some reservations about its reliability across the diverse Westminster family. We also acknowledge that our selected time period, influenced by both the history of parliamentary committees in

Canada and the availability of data, may artificially crop our understanding of patterns of change. Finally, we reiterate that the descriptive nature of our study has no pretensions of offering explanations for the patterns observed across our data, let alone measuring in any detail the associations between concepts.

On that last point, there is still great need for deeper, larger-scale, and more theoretically sophisticated research around the topic of public servant–minister relationships in the context of parliamentary committees. If we know that the anonymity of public servants through their committee appearances has been decreasing, what causal factors explain this effect? If it appears that the responsibility of ministers through their relative presence at committee has been fluctuating at regular intervals, what accounts for this fascinating pattern? If one legislative assembly in one jurisdiction cannot offer sufficiently generalizable results, then how can we answer this research question across different Westminster jurisdictions? We hope researchers will take up these questions and make good use of our work along the way. If nothing more, we hope they find in our paper a compelling argument that elite relationships and the traditions that define them strike at the very core of politics and administration.

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## Appendix: Codebook

### Time indicators

Year	In what year did the witness appear?
1995 ... 2021	Year 1995 to year 2021

Month-day	On which day of which month did the witness appear?
01-01 ... 12-31	January 1 to December 31

Parl.-ses.	During which session of which Parliament did the witness appear?
35-1 ... 44-1	35 <sup>th</sup> Parliament, first session to 44 <sup>th</sup> Parliament, first session

Meeting #	At which meeting of the committee during a given session of a given Parliament did the witness appear?
1 ...	Meeting #1 to #unlimited

### Witness indicators

Other	The witness was neither a public servant nor a minister (nor a minister's parliamentary secretary).
0	No
1	Yes

Public servant	The witness was a public servant.
0	No
1	Yes

Minister	The witness was a minister (or their parliamentary secretary).
0	No
1	Yes

Public servant witness indicators

Rank	What rank did the public servant witness hold?
1	Non-executive (below Director and equivalents)
2	Junior executive (Director, Senior Director, Director-General, and equivalents)
3	Senior executive (Assistant Deputy Minister and equivalents)
4	Chief administrator (Associate Deputy Minister, Deputy Minister, and equivalents)
5	Clerk of the Privy Council

Org. type	To which type of public organization did the public servant belong?
1	Central agency (E.g., Privy Council Office; Treasury Board Secretariat)
2	Line department (E.g., Department of Citizenship and Immigration)
3	Agency (E.g., Canada Border Services Agency; Statistics Canada)
4	Arm's-length organization (E.g., Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, RCMP)
5	Crown corporation (E.g., Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation)

Min. present	Did the minister (or parliamentary secretary) to whom the public servant reported appear alongside the public servant?
0	No
1	Yes

Minister witness indicators

Portfolio	Did the portfolio of the minister (or parliamentary secretary) correspond to the mandate of the committee at which they appeared?
0	No
1	Yes

PS present	Did at least one public servant reporting to the minister appear alongside the minister (or parliamentary secretary)?
0	No
1	Yes

Political context indicators

Gov. type	Did the witness appear during a majority or minority government? <sup>3</sup>
1	Majority
2	Minority

Gov. party	Which party formed government when the witness appeared?
1	Conservative Party of Canada
2	Liberal Party of Canada

Off. opp. party	Which party formed the official opposition when the witness appeared? <sup>4</sup>
1	Bloc Québécois
2	Conservative Party of Canada
3	Liberal Party of Canada
4	New Democratic Party of Canada
5	Reform Party of Canada/Canadian Alliance

<sup>3</sup> I.e., did the governing party hold a majority of seats (50% + 1) in the House of Commons, or only a plurality?

<sup>4</sup> I.e., which party had the second-most seats in the House of Commons?