The city that never suffers


Review by Tyler Meredith

For a capital city so frequently derided as “broken” by acrimonious partisanship and special interests, life in Washington, DC, has never been better for the political class. Or so it appears from Mark Leibovich’s *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral — plus, Plenty of Valet Parking! — in America’s Gilded Capital*, an aptly titled insider’s diary (Leibovich is currently Washington correspondent for the New York Times Magazine) of the life and times of political Washington between the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. Biting and cathartic, *This Town* is Leibovich’s attempt to reconcile his place in the city’s principal industry, the Club — “that spinning cabal of ‘people in politics and media’” — and its toxic decadence, which he so clearly reviles. The picture he weaves leaves the distinct impression that Washington during the Great Recession was more akin to the Manhattan of Chrystia Freeland’s *Plutocrats* than those in Congress or the media would care to admit. In other words, a city that never suffers.

For the average political junkie *This Town* offers a number of revealing and caffeinated vignettes about the personal lives of Washington’s dramatis personae. They range from “People on TV” and “Leading Thinkers” to the vast cadre of officials, consultants, politicians and, most revered of all, “Formers” (ex-politicos turned lobbyists or consultants) who inhabit the centre of American power. *This Town* exceeds even Mark Halperin and John Heilemann’s 2009 bestseller, *Game Change*, in its ability to demystify the public personas of a number of important characters. However, *This Town* gets to the heart of why, for all the “change” elections in recent years, DC is as golden as ever, more effectively than Halperin and Heilemann or the broader genre of “inside the campaign” books that follow American electoral cycles.

It is no surprise that through the Great Recession the DC metro area held the status of one of the highest-earning areas in America. As in any capital city, there is economic security in being in close proximity to power. Ottawa, for example, is insulated from the higher unemployment rates in much of the rest of the country. However, as Leibovich explains in his book, in equal parts soap opera and essay, a golden age of monetizing relationships has come to Washington.

According to the nonpartisan Centre for Responsive Politics, 2010 was the most active year on record for Washington lobbyists, with nearly $3.6 billion spent by special interests to lobby the federal government and Congress. This figure excludes the larger army of consultants, special advisers and communications people who are legally able to avoid officially registering as lobbyists. While it is important to note that spending on lobbying has declined in almost every quarter since the 2010 peak — a fact Leibovich does not mention — 2012 spending ($3.3 billion) was still nearly double that of a decade

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The Capitol in DC: Friend me!

The pernicious effects of such a bubble are that not only has it made many lobbyists rich, but it also has changed the endgame of political careers, with many people moving seamlessly from Congress to K Street.

"Washington is where the money is...and that’s what generally keeps people here," explains Trent Lott, the former Republican Senate majority leader turned superlobbyist. Stay they are.

Leibovich cites a recent analysis by the Atlantic magazine, which found that the percentage of retiring members of Congress who become lobbyists has increased from 3 percent in 1974 to nearly half today (42 percent among senators and 50 percent among members of the House).

Given this trajectory, one might ask: are the actions legislators take today in some way influenced by what they may do tomorrow? In response, Leibovich marshals evidence not so much of collusion as of great hypocrisy.

One infamous example involves the 2011 search for a new head of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the lobbying arm of the American film industry. The $1.2-million-a-year position ultimately went to former Connecticut senator Chris Dodd, although not without stiff competition from his old colleague from Nebraska, Bob Kerrey.

"I don’t give a fuck about piracy," Leibovich quotes Kerrey as saying about what is arguably one of the most important policy priorities of the MPAA, "but for that money, I have to admit, I started getting interested in piracy."

More grotesque, argues Leibovich, is former House Democratic majority leader Dick Gephardt, whose 28-year congressional career was devoted to the policy agenda of the American labor movement. Now a lobbyist, Gephardt reported nearly $7 million in billings in 2010, much of it from private interests like Boeing, Visa and Goldman Sachs. He has even assisted Spirit AeroSystems as a ‘labor consultant’ for its antiunionization campaign.

But This Town is more than just another book about the influence of money in politics. Indeed, what lends the story such a quality of resigna-
tion about the ability to actually effect change inside the Beltway is that Leibovich’s own profession — the media — appears to be an equally flawed player, not up to the task of being a watchdog. He argues that Bill Clinton’s presidency marked an important turning point for the Washington press corps. The combina-
tion of a number of tabloid-heavy scandals and an explosion of electronic political news coverage — first on cable TV and now, more recently, on Internet properties such as Politico, Drudge and the Huffington Post — set in place a culture of political celebrity that has been hard to dislodge, and that is now deeply intertwined with the substance of political news itself.

Inordinate coverage is now devoted to irrelevancies such as the guest lists and pre-parties associated with the annual Correspondents’ Dinner, and news cycles are dominated by the perpetual war on terrorism and the sexual misconduct of the name-dropping of Politico’s daily e-mail newsletter. "The orgy of new media, news-about-news, and the roll-
ing carnival of political moneymaking and celebrity has only exacerbated This Town’s default vanity," Leibovich concludes. Or, as Politico co-founder and executive editor Jim VandeHei admits candidly about his entity’s place in the Washington media ecosystem, “The most successful journalists have their own unique brand and circle of friends...This is the Facebook-ization of politics and D.C. The more friends and acquaintances you have, the more time you spend interacting with them via e-mail and I.M. [instant messaging], the more information you get, move and market.” Politico’s infamous news-
letter Playbook, VandeHei claims, is thus “D.C.’s Facebook.”

If that is Leibovich’s Washington, what does Ottawa look like?

Canadian journalists are on an impressive run of uncovering malfeas-
ance: the Senate expenses scandal, the robocalls affair, political corruption in Quebec and the Ornge air-ambulance scandal in Ontario, all of them major public interest stories and the products of journalists doing serious investiga-
tive work. But it would be remiss of me to say that celebrity and the tac-
tical side of politics don’t also play an important role in the way news about Parliament Hill gets covered. Witness the fact that both of the weekday polit-
ical news programs on Canada’s two main English-language television news networks emphasize “power” in their name. Whether it’s Power and Politics or Power Play, the subject of analysis is often the same: the three federal polit-
ical parties, MPs, their strategists and the reporters who cover them.

That obsession contributes to the perception, real or otherwise, of a “bub-
ble” hanging over Ottawa (a failing that I, having been born and raised in the capital, am acutely aware of). One only has to watch the semiregular Twit-
ter analysis performed by Jaime Watt of the communications firm Naviga-
tion for CBC’s Power and Politics to find quantitative proof that often the topics of conversation important to the press gallery and the parliamentary precincts are at odds with what’s happening in the rest of the country.

On the more salient question about the influence of money and lobbyists, Canada emerges quite favourably, but the rest of the country.

This difference is a huge productivity gain for our legislators and an import-
ant protection against potential con-
flicts of interest.

Furthermore, as political scien-
tists often bemoan, individual MPs are rather powerless and therefore much less relevant in the process of lobbying. Setting aside the many drawbacks to the ever-greater centralization of power within the executive branch, perhaps one advantage is that it is hard to find many former MPs actually employed in government relations after politics.

Though there are no hard data on the proportion who end up in these roles, with many former MPs actually finding some difficulty in

On the broad structural factors, like political financing and the role of parliamentary institutions, we can rightly be proud that our legislators are less vulnerable to the influence of big money. Because money from cor-
porations and unions is outlawed and restrictive caps have been set on the amount an individual can contribute, the actual amount of political funds potentially available is smaller in Canada.
Ottawa isn’t “this town” by any stretch, but there are lessons to be learned from Washington’s failures.

making the transition back to private life. The lobbying option is even less likely going forward. As of 2010, all MPs and senators are subject to a five-year prohibition on lobbying after politics.

But we should not be complacent. It is important to keep in mind that while the scandals involving our political class are often tamer and more mundane by comparison with the US variety, lobbying remains an active and necessary element of how governments of all kinds interact with external parties.

According to the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying, more than 5,000 individuals were registered to lobby the federal government in 2012. (A precise number is hard to come by because of limitations in the detail of data made available in the registry’s public use file.) In the United States, the Centre for Responsive Politics reports that 12,407 individuals were active in federal lobbying during the same period.

These numbers are more illustrative than comparable: the American numbers are restricted to those who are “active” by way of spending a minimum amount of time and money on lobbying activities during the period, while the Canadian figure tracks only those whose registration remained open. Registration requirements are also somewhat different. Because Canada does not track actual expenditures related to lobbying, as is required in US filings, we have no way of comparing the intensity of activity.

But it is at least significant that the Canadian figure is larger per capita than the 1:10 ratio between the two countries we expect.

One factor that may account for the difference is the kind of lobbying that goes on in each capital. Of the more than 5,000 individuals registered to lobby at the federal level in Canada, only 15 percent are actually consultant lobbyists hired on behalf of clients, compared with the estimated 60 percent in the United States. That a vast majority of Canadian lobbyists are considered “in-house” staff and also happen to work for nonprofit and charitable organizations (including industry associations) is an important distinction. They too represent “special interests,” but not the kind that voters often think of when they hear about organizations hiring consultants to lobby for them.

This distinction is also important because, as a small but growing literature of American research has found, external, “for hire” lobbyists in that country are more likely to have prior experience in and connections to government. While I am not aware of similar research in Canada, it should be noted that the five-year ban on lobbying, which applies to all former designated public office holders (all MPs and Senators; staff in a minister’s office, the House and Senate offices of the leader of the official opposition; deputy ministers and certain senior executives of comparable rank) and former members of transition teams, is significantly longer than comparable cooling-off provisions in US federal regulations.

Whether readers of This Town find the book outrageous, depressing or just sad, its unsurprising commentary about the state of affairs in Washington says something about whether there is hope for change in the US. The book is one of the sharpest and most accessible diagnoses of the true problems ailing the American political system: money and celebrity.

Where change will come from is not clear, nor are remedies particularly well articulated by Leibovich. His answer generally is to wish for “more discomfort” for everyone in the political and media classes that inhabit Washington. But unless a sense of outrage inspires a revolution of values, we will probably reach for the old fallback answer of tighter rules and greater regulation. But is this really the answer?

In one of the few international comparisons of lobbying rules, a 2011 study by researchers in Ireland found that rules at the US federal level as well as those in 41 states require more disclosure from lobbyists than do Canadian regulations. I’m not saying more can’t be done. But no one who reads This Town is likely to put it down arguing that Canada should emulate the American system, or that our own is anywhere near as broken.

And yet, while Ottawa isn’t “this town” by any stretch, there are lessons to be learned from Washington’s failures. The real lesson for Canadians may not be so much about excesses of lobbyists or the institutions that have enabled them as it is about the culture of insularity and entitlement that gave birth to them. That comes from being caught up in the bubble. Canadian democracy would be well served if our politicians — and our national media — got outside Ottawa more often. We need to do more than just measure the differences in Twitter conversation between Ottawa and the rest of Canada. We need to bridge them.
The precept as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony. (Wilde) 23....Ratterer and Hegglund..., as well as most of the others, were satisfied that there was not another place in all Kansas City that was really as good. (Dreiser) 24. Twelve years is a long time. (Galsworthy) 25. There were a great many ink bottles. (Dickens) 26. May and I are just friends. (Keating) 27. How are the terms Compte rendu and Review related? Compte rendu and Review are synonymous, and they have mutual synonyms. A usually critical look at a past event. Compte rendu and review are semantically related. You can use "Compte rendu" instead a noun "Review". Nearby Words: revise, reviewed, reviewer, reviewing. Synonyms for Review.