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What Is Government Good At?: A Canadian Answer

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Recent decades have shown the public's support for government plummet alongside political leaders' credibility. This downward spiral calls for an exploration of what has gone wrong. The questions, "What is government good at?" and "What is government not good at?" are critical ones - and their answers should be the basis for good public policy and public administration.

In What Is Government Good At?, Donald Savoie argues that politicians and public servants are good at generating and avoiding blame, playing to a segment of the population to win the next election, embracing and defending the status quo, adding management layers and staff, keeping ministers out of trouble, responding to demands from the prime minister and his office, and managing a complex, prime minister-centred organization. Conversely, they are not as good at defining the broader public interest, providing and recognizing evidence-based policy advice, managing human and financial resources with efficiency and frugality, innovating and reforming itself, being accountable to Parliament and to citizens, dealing with non-performers, paying sufficient attention to service delivery, and implementing and evaluating the impact of policies and programs.

With wide implications for representative democracy, What Is Government Good At? is a persuasive analysis of an approach to government that has opened the door to those with the resources to influence policy and decision-making while leaving average citizens on the outside looking in.

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