

Thankfully, the authors end the book with concrete advice on how citizens can effectively combat the power of these firms within our government. While there is a wealth of valuable advice for researchers on how to track and monitor the activities of these firms, it is perhaps the authors' first bit of advice that will be the most important for citizens: do not concede that these firms are an unassailable source of knowledge and expertise.

Local residents often harbour more extensive knowledge of the issues and concerns that affect them than a few high-paid consultants that may have never stepped foot in your city.

The book uses the devastating example of how Toronto city councillors, workers and residents used their own knowledge and experiences to push back against the so-called expert recommendations of a KPMG report designed to slash city services.

This is critical advice. From my own experience researching and challenging public-private partnerships (P3s), many of these consulting firms used pre-existing templates and standardized assumptions to produce what is often the same report for different governments.

These can quickly fall apart under the slightest scrutiny, so citizens should not be intimidated to challenge the authority of these firms.

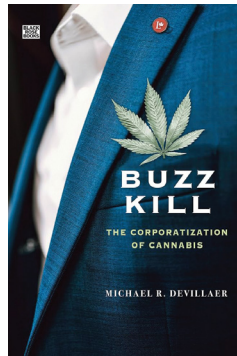
Piercing the veil of impartiality, expertise and competency that these firms portray to legitimize their continued influence over our governments is a first and crucial step to undermining their credibility.

The Consulting Trap is an essential read for citizens and activists concerned about the future of our public services and the capacity of our governments to get things done. **M**

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Bruce Campbell

Corporatization of cannabis allowed profits to trump public health



BUZZ KILL: THE CORPORATIZATION OF CANNABIS MICHAEL DEVILLAER

Black Rose Books, 2023

Buzz Kill is the story of how the legalization of recreational cannabis unfolded and how the public interest was subverted to corporate interests, and those of its government and political party enablers.

It is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand the history of the drug industry in Canada and the legalization of the cannabis industry: its origins, its current status, and action that needs to be taken to prioritize public health over corporate profit. Despite the complexity of the issues, the writing is highly accessible to a non-expert reader.

The book is a damning indictment of Liberal government cronyism; actions that led to the legalization of cannabis without decriminalization, legislation that benefitted corporate interests and those of party insiders with ties to the therapeutic cannabis industry, ignoring the scientific evidence

warning of potentially harmful consequences of not doing so. Internationally, decriminalization has been a highly successful approach to cannabis law reform.

Devillaer traces the origins of the cannabis legalization to Liberal party elite members heavily invested in the therapeutic [medical] cannabis industry. Future cannabis magnate Chuck Rifci was appointed to the Liberal party's board of directors in 2011. Shortly thereafter, the party adopted a motion at its convention to legalize cannabis for recreational use.

Having once embraced decriminalization of cannabis as its formal policy position for cannabis legalization, the Liberal party did an abrupt about-face, campaigning vigorously for legalization without decriminalization.

According to Devillaer, the Liberal promise of a public health approach and strict regulation falsely targeted the unlicensed cannabis trade—a longstanding trade that was mostly benign. The Liberal cannabis legalization communication strategy was twofold:

1. Demonize the unlicensed trade in cannabis and extol the virtues of legal, regulated trade as a panacea.
2. Praise the merits of a legal, government regulated, public safety approach, in contrast to an illegal, unregulated and dangerous one.

A task force, created in advance of the *Cannabis Act*, was largely “willing to recommend measures put forward by public health

authorities as long as those measures would not compromise the aspirations of the industry to expand the market for cannabis and to enhance profits.” Consideration of decriminalization as a policy option was not included in the task force’s terms of reference.

In his submission to the task force, Devillaer, a leading authority on drug policy, warned about the decades-long legacy of public health harm inflicted by the profit-driven alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries, enabled by compliant government regulation.

He highlighted how the legal drug industry has long engaged in illegal activities that were otherwise inconsistent with public health protection, writing: “we may have more to fear from the legal industries that produce drugs than we do from the drugs themselves.”

Health Canada’s enforcement and compliance system had also detected numerous acts of non-compliance, including illegal activity on the part of licensed cannabis producers. Company whistleblowers revealed instances of securities fraud, illegal transport of cannabis, unlicensed cultivation and attempted coverups, financial crimes and connections with organized crime.

Devillaer urged the task force to recommend that the government explore the logistics of establishing a government-controlled, not-for-profit cannabis industry that would prioritize public health over profit maximization and market expansion.

The task force dismissed recommendations for a not-for-profit approach. Nor did it recommend limits on lobbying and advertising. Despite the public health risks, the task force report accepted the industry proposal to market cannabis like alcohol—an approach that, in the author’s words, “not only grants permission to use cannabis but encourages its use.”

Public health and safety were compromised for the increased revenues that would flow to both industry and government from a growing cannabis market. Calls by public health experts for a full ban on product promotion—justified based on years of experience—were dismissed.

The *Cannabis Act*, which came into force on October 17, 2018, largely followed the recommendations of the task force.

A key determinant of the effectiveness of legislation is the strength of surveillance and enforcement regulations. Unfortunately, the *Cannabis Act* was implemented largely without the necessary regulatory measures, another victory for corporate profit over public health protection.

The newly legalized cannabis industry was flooded with companies attracted by the prospect of huge profits. The result was a wave of failures and bankruptcies. An industry takeover by alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical companies is currently underway.

Devillaer writes: “The early days of the cannabis industry were characterized by greed, immaturity, and incompetence. The future incarnation may be one of greed, maturity, and competence—potentially a much more dangerous combination.”

Canada’s drug policy, according to Devillaer, continues to be “a domestically tragic and an internationally embarrassing failure.”

He provides an overview of jurisdictions attempting to implement a variety of not-for-profit approaches. He is supportive of these efforts and urges the creation of a national not-for-profit cannabis commission.

Devillaer’s exposé concludes that the most toxic and damaging addiction in our society may be the corporate addiction to ever-increasing profits; an addiction that is enabled by governments and the political parties that form governments.

The findings of Devillaer’s work parallel my own research. Corporate capture-government complicity is a recurring theme that plays out across the number of sectors, as described in my book *Corporate Rules: The real world of business regulation in Canada: How government regulators are failing the public interest* (James Lorimer, 2022).

It is a key feature of the neoliberal order that has shaped public policy and corroded Canadian democracy over the last four decades.

The corporatization of cannabis is an poignant example of the triumph of cronyism, greed and corruption over public health and safety.

Devillaer’s magnum opus is a cautionary tale of therapeutic cannabis’ troubling history (along with tobacco), the dangers going forward, and what can be done to change course with alternatives that prioritize public health. Even though victories are rare, they are possible; hence his reason for writing the book.

The release of *Buzz Kill* is timely. A parliamentary legislative review committee released its evaluative report on the *Cannabis Act*. *Buzz Kill* provides an indispensable counterpoint to the committee report.

This book can be obtained by your local independent bookstore, or at <https://blackrosebooks.com/products/buzz-kill-michael-r-devillaer> **M**

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