



## **The New Liberalism and Canada's Public Service**

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### **Introduction**

Despite a natural reluctance to present a paper at the last session of a conference, there is a certain logic to this order. The discussion to this point has focused on developing a new liberal perspective on major policy issues. The public service represents a key component of Canada's infrastructure. Canada's politicians will turn to it, both for policy advice – which may either reinforce or contradict that given at this conference – on how to respond to these issues and for the implementation of their chosen policies. What then would a New Liberal perspective on the public service be?

This paper begins with recent history, looking at both the Mulroney-Campbell and Chretien governments in terms of their ideological approaches towards the public service and their policy decisions affecting the public service. I then discuss three major challenges facing the public service: the need for integration, the opportunities presented by information technology, and strategies for being an effective employer in the evolving labour market. I sketch out responses to these challenges, and make the case that these must come not only from the public service, but from politicians as well.

In the interest of brevity, and in recognition of the national focus of this conference, I deal primarily with the federal public service. I will try to avoid what the Americans refer to as “inside baseball,” namely extended discussion of the details of public service management, and will aim for a broader perspective.

## **The Mulroney-Campbell years**

During the heyday of neo-Conservatism, the received wisdom regarding the public service was encapsulated in public choice theory. This theory attempts to extend the economist's model of individualistic, self-interested, rational choice from markets to organizational hierarchies. Politicians are seen as simply desiring power, with policy as a means to that end. Bureaucrats – and I purposely use the pejorative term – want larger empires to run, leading to higher salaries and more prestige. Rent-seeking interest groups attempt to use the political process to insulate them from market competition. These incentives then lead to a three-way coalition in which politicians use the public purse to buy electoral contributions from organized interest groups and votes from their supporters, and public servants design and deliver the policies and programs benefiting the interest groups. The losers are large interests that are difficult to organize, for example, consumers and the general taxpayer, who bears the ever-increasing tax burden required to pay for growing government. This cynical analysis was delivered in its most amusing form in the television series *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* (Borins, 1988).

The public choice prescriptions were clear. Reduce the size and power of the bureaucracy through program and staff cuts, market testing, and privatization. When delivering policy in a particular area, opt for market-based demand-side solutions (e.g., housing vouchers) rather than bureaucratic supply-side solutions (public housing). Control politicians' temptation to spend through legislated constraints, such as balanced budget laws, binding scheduled tax reductions, and laws obligating them to use surpluses to pay down the debt.

While Brian Mulroney was always more of a pragmatist than an ideologue, which gave rise to Margaret Thatcher's jibe that as leader of the Progressive Conservatives he put more emphasis on the adjective than the noun, his government often treated the public

service in ways consistent with the public choice approach. In the 1984 election campaign, Mulroney talked about giving bureaucrats “pink slips and running shoes” and his ministers used similar rhetoric. The creation of ministerial chiefs of staff was intended to provide an alternative to the presumably self-seeking advice offered up by the bureaucracy. During this period Zussman and Jabes (1989) compared public and private sector manager attitudes and found increasing disaffection and declining loyalty as one moved down the ranks of the public sector managerial cadre – which was not the case in the private sector. Partially in response to these findings, the government launched its Public Service 2000 initiative. Ultimately, this initiative delivered little, in part because it did not engage middle managers and staff, and in part because the government gave it a low priority as compared with implementing the GST and bringing Quebec into the constitution. As the government’s fiscal position worsened, it took a harder line in collective bargaining with public servants and froze salaries. A 1991 strike by The Public Service Alliance of Canada was ended by back to work legislation. The al-Mashat affair was a demoralizing instance of senior public servants being blamed by the government in order to protect ministers (Sutherland, 1991). Finally, while the Cabinet and departmental restructuring announced by Prime Minister Campbell was widely recognized as long overdue, one of its consequences was a dramatic reduction in the ranks of senior public servants (Lindquist and Paquet, 2000).

The overall record of the Mulroney years, then, was not particularly supportive of the public service. What Lindquist and Paquet termed the traditional cosmology of the public service – a non-partisan public service, with promotions from within on the basis of merit, and with lifetime employment at decent salaries – had been called into question by the Conservatives (see also Kernaghan, 2002).

### **The Chretien years: cosmology restored?**

In the last decade, a new way of thinking about the public service has begun to replace public choice. It has assimilated the most positive of the lessons of the New Public Management, such as its emphasis on user satisfaction and efficient production, with the injection of choice where possible as a means to those ends (Borins, 2002). An efficient, effective, and honest public service has now come to be seen as one of the factors responsible for a nation's economic competitiveness and social well-being. Conversely corrupt, ineffective, and overstaffed bureaucracy is seen as one of the causes of underdevelopment. This case is being made at an international level by organizations such as the World Bank and OECD. Evidence is often advanced through the creation of global league tables, and here non-governmental organizations such as Transparency International ([www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)), which focuses on corruption, and international consultancies such as Accenture (2002), which focuses on e-government, have also played a role.

The most articulate Canadian voice in this movement is not a politician, but rather Jocelyne Bourgon, first in her capacity as head of the public service from 1994 to 1999, and now as President of the Canadian Centre for Management Development. She has put forward a Canadian model of public administration reform which rejects the minimalist state and envisions high-quality public services produced by a professional, non-partisan, career public service. That model is also consistent with one of the main political concerns of the Chretien government, namely the survival of the federal government in the face of separatist and regionalist challenges. The federal government wants to remain visible to its citizens by continuing to deliver public services. In this view, career federal public servants can be expected to show greater loyalty to the Canadian state than loosely-affiliated networks of contractors and sub-contractors.

Many of the actions of the Chretien government are consistent with this more activist approach (Lindquist and Paquet, 2000). Chretien and his ministers have not engaged in

bureaucrat-bashing. One of Chretien's first actions was to remove the ministerial chiefs of staffs, signaling a greater reliance on the advice of public servants. As part of its Program Review, the Chretien government did preside over the largest reduction in the history of the public service (45,000 positions – roughly 20 per cent of the public service – over three years), but its early departure and early retirement initiatives were quite generous. The improvement in public finances and better economic performance of the latter years of the Nineties made more resources available for responding to the claims of the public service, and salary increases at all levels and merit pay for senior public servants were restored, with special adjustments made for some groups such as information technology professionals and the military. The public service and its departments rapidly increased their reward and recognition programs (Borins, 2000). Jocelyne Bourgon's La Releve initiative constituted a greater commitment to career development for the senior public service. On the question of letting public servants take the heat to protect ministers, the record is mixed, with the defense of the HRDC grants program handled mainly by public servants, while the Prime Minister himself defended advertising practices in Quebec as a necessity in the fight against separatism.

While the traditional cosmology that Lindquist and Paquet speak of has not in all respects been restored, the Public Service of Canada will be in better shape when Jean Chretien leaves office than when he entered office. The radical surgery of Program Review affected the public service just as it affected public sector programs, but what emerged was viable and sustainable. We now have a smaller public service that is less under-resourced than a decade ago. It is more visible. It also has more public respect. The latter is partially the result of the Chretien government's actions and partially the result of a changing environment. Terrorism has led to a recognition that the public sector bears the ultimate responsibility for ensuring citizen safety and security. The dot.com crash and the accounting

scandals have led to a re-examination of the private sector's alleged superiority and a recognition that, here too, the public sector has a unique and unavoidable role to play in ensuring transparency and fairness in the marketplace.

While recognizing both the achievements of the Chretien government in restoring the public service – and the influence of changes in the environment that made such a restoration possible – it is also necessary to look ahead. What are the key challenges and opportunities the public service faces ? What is required to meet them ? I believe there are three major challenges – integration, information technology, and the labour market – each of which has a variety of aspects.

### **Integration**

One of the popular New Public Management reforms was breaking much of the bureaucracy into smaller operating units, and giving them a few clear and measurable objectives and greater autonomy to pursue them. The Major Government in the UK pushed this farthest, reorganizing the public service so that roughly 70 % of core public servants were working in 130 executive agencies by 1997. The federal government's establishment of Special Operating Agencies (SOAs) is a comparable initiative, though not nearly as comprehensive in scope or autonomy as the UK's (Zussman, 2002). Executive agencies and SOAs have demonstrated efficiency gains in functions involving production that can operate at the margins of the core public service.

Unfortunately, the world is not neatly separable into discrete problems each of which can be parceled out to an autonomous SOA. The most important and most intractable (“wicked”) policy problems are those that cross departmental and governmental boundaries, as was evidenced in our discussions of the cities, economic competitiveness, and aboriginal issues. Policy research indicates that progress will be made on these problems only if

governments approach them holistically. Information technology facilitates horizontal communication – it is easy to keep a wide range of people in the loop through an email address list. As will be discussed below, the Internet creates a common platform for delivering many departments' services. Users of public services have made it clear in survey after survey that what they care about is quick and courteous one-stop service, while the identity of the level of government or department that owns the store is irrelevant. My own research on public sector innovation convinced me of the importance of integration; when I analyzed innovations in a variety of countries at different stages of economic development, the most common characteristic of the innovation, appearing in two-thirds of them, was that it was holistic, in that it crossed organizational boundaries, was based on systemic policy analysis, or provided a variety of services to users (Borins, 2001).

### **Information Technology (IT)**

Information is intrinsic to government. Governments have the most comprehensive holdings of information regarding many important aspects of the lives of all Canadians. The application of IT to the public sector is becoming so extensive that it no longer makes sense to talk about e-government, e-consultation, or e-democracy; we will always have government services, consultation, and democracy, and IT will be applied to each, with impacts on each. The Internet may well be an ideal medium for many public sector transactions because they are relatively straightforward and require neither physical examination of products nor face-to-face contact. Indeed, the Internet may be more suitable for public sector transactions than for many of the products and services initially offered through business-to-customer e-commerce (Porter, 2001). IT providers, for example IBM, have noticed that their fastest-growing market is in the public sector.

Consider the following impacts of IT in the public sector.

- It can facilitate integration. Delivering service over the Internet is a clear example. The only logical way to organize a government web portal is along client lines. The Canada site now has 35 service clusters (e.g., seniors, youth) and each cluster has a multi-departmental management board. While the management boards are initially tasked with managing the website, they facilitate discussions about program inter-relationships, for example whether there is overlap among programs, or whether a common electronic form could be created that could serve a variety of programs.
- IT changes the nature of the public sector workforce. Applying IT is what economists call capital-labour substitution. It reduces the size of the clerical and operating legions that once populated the public service. Fewer jobs remain, and those that do require higher skills, particularly the knowledge workers who operate the technology. The Public Service Commission (2002) reports that administrative support and operational categories fell from 49 % of the federal workforce in 1991 to 37 %, while the scientific and professional and administration and foreign service categories rose from 37 % to 52 % -- in effect a mirror image. Technology made it possible for the public service to continue delivering services while undergoing the downsizing mandated by Program Review.
- IT requires extensive outsourcing. In this capital-labour substitution, the public sector no longer builds the capital, but buys it from the private sector. The public sector has become a huge purchaser of hardware, software, and systems. The federal government is now spending \$ 4 billion annually on hardware and software acquisition and operating cost, which represents 10 % of its budgetary expenditure on operations. The big problems come in purchasing large systems and/or ongoing

support services, and public servants must become effective contract or relationship managers (Auditor General of Canada, 2000).

- IT poses major challenges of security and privacy. Security means protecting systems and data from hackers; it has also meant removing from public sector websites information that could be used by terrorists to plan attacks. Public servants can envision a variety of reasons, such as better policy analysis, enhanced program design, and better service delivery, to justify linking public sector databases. Privacy legislation generally permits only voluntary linkages (e.g., the Permanent Voters List compiled annually from income tax records) and linkages justified by law enforcement, health, or security.
- IT has begun to effect public consultation and democratic dialogue. The Internet reduces the cost of communication, and hence makes it easier for marginal candidates like Jesse Ventura and John McCain to campaign (Kamarck, 2002) and for opponents of the WTO to organize (Deibert, 2000). Canadian governments have started experimenting with posting discussion papers on their websites and are wondering about protocols, such as whether to post all responses as well, and how to analyze what comes in. People are using the Internet to talk about politics, sometimes in banal ways, such as the wide circulation of jokes about the deadlocked US presidential election, but increasingly in more creative ways. A friend of mine, an Israel activist, has taken to emailing daily a wide range of media articles supportive of his view to several hundred friends and associates. I thought he was unique until I recently read a *New Yorker* piece about someone there doing exactly the same. This also illustrates, however, the Internet's tendency to facilitate the reinforcing of like-minded views rather than dialogue between differing views (Sunstein, 2001).

## **The Public Service faces the Labour Market**

In attempting to renew its workforce, the federal public service faces some equally daunting challenges. First, the public sector workforce is older than the Canadian labour force as a whole. The Public Service Commission forecasts that 45 % percent of the public service, and 70 % of its executives will retire between now and 2011-12. In addition, the retrenchment of the Nineties meant that there is not a large cohort of experienced younger public servants ready to replace them. As discussed above, an increasing percentage of the public service will consist of highly educated knowledge workers, and it is for this group that the competition with the private sector will be fiercest. Career aspiration studies show that this group is looking for interesting work and competitive wages, but not necessarily lifetime employment with a single employer (Public Service Commission, 2002). The public service has generally provided competitive entry level salaries, but does not keep up with the private sector at more senior levels (Gunderson, 2002). Hence, the quality and variety of the work and career development opportunities become extremely important to public sector retention.

One of the big difficulties in recruitment is that the application of the merit principle leads to lengthy competitions for permanent positions. As a consequence, managers have relied on short-term contracts to circumvent competitions. While this has the advantage of giving managers an opportunity to test new staff without making a commitment, it has the converse disadvantage that temps are equally uncommitted. Furthermore, short-term contracts are rarely advertised, and tend to be won by people known to the manager. Thus, the overly-exacting application of the merit principle has itself subverted the merit principle (Auditor General of Canada, 2001; Malloy, 2002).

The Canadian labour market is becoming increasingly diverse, particularly in the large urban centres. Despite making strong efforts to increase representation of designated

groups (women, aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, and visible minorities), all but aboriginals are sharply under-represented in the executive category (Public Service Commission, 2002).

### **Responding to these Challenges**

If the Public Service of Canada is to make a major contribution to the well-being of Canadians and to participate creatively in solving the policy problems we have discussed, it has to make progress on confronting these challenges. The public service is not self-governing, and needs the support and assistance of its political masters to move forward. Consider some responses to each of the three challenges.

### **Integration**

Integration poses several challenges for public servants. Will the careers of public servants who have been active in inter-departmental initiatives advance, or will they have been seen to have deserted their home department? Many departments or branches are dominated by a particular profession; integration often requires different professions having different cultures to work together. A classic instance of this is community policing, which has required police to move from a culture of “fighting crime” to a culture of collective problem-solving together with other professions. Generally, public sector budgets are allocated to departments, rather than inter-departmental projects or programs. Will departments be willing to make agreements with one another that would involve reallocating departmental funds to collective initiatives, and will such agreements be acceptable to the Treasury Board, the Auditor General, and Parliament? Despite these potential impediments, casual empiricism suggests that public servants in Ottawa are much more enthusiastic about participating in initiatives that cross organizational boundaries than they were twenty or thirty years ago. Being a strong defender of one’s turf is not a good reputation to have these days.

How does integration play at the political level? The most important fact of life is vertical accountability to Parliament through a minister. The question always asked of inter-departmental initiatives is who is the minister accountable. The question becomes even more complicated if the initiative also involves a partnership with the private sector. The government-of-the-day and the government-in-waiting dislike inter-departmental partnerships for reason that are opposite sides of the same coin. If an inter-departmental initiative goes well, ministers ask who gets the credit and who cuts the ribbon – not an academic exercise when the prime minister has announced his intention to retire. If an inter-departmental initiative goes poorly, the opposition wants a scapegoat to blame and a ministerial career to destroy, rather than having responsibility diffused among several ministers.

Canadian politicians have not been particularly creative in delivering policy and program integration. Some think it unnecessary, hearkening back to a golden age – the St. Laurent years, perhaps – of strong ministries run by strong ministers, with little need for integration. Some governments have attempted to achieve integration by strengthening the central agencies, in particular cabinet office and the first minister's political office, and forcing ministers to get central clearance for virtually everything. Critics have alleged that Chretien (Savoie, 1999) and Mike Harris have both followed this model. Another alternative used to deal with high profile inter-departmental problems is the creation of a temporary special purpose agency staffed by secondment, reporting to a ministerial committee, and represented in the legislature by the committee chair. This is the secretariat model used by Allan Blakeney (Blakeney and Borins, 1998) and, at the federal level, exemplified by the Trade Negotiation Office created by Brian Mulroney. The problem is that this structure works for problems of finite duration, while the policy issues of the cities, seniors, and economic competitiveness are ongoing.

Of all Westminster governments, Tony Blair's appears to have approached the problem of what it calls "joined-up government" with the most creativity. Some UK initiatives include

- directly funding inter-departmental initiatives and programs, with success measured on the basis of outcomes rather than outputs
- establishing central policy making units for cross-cutting problems (e.g., Social Exclusion Unit)
- establishing joined-up inter-ministerial service delivery units
- assigning a minister specific responsibility for a particular inter-ministerial program (Mulgan, 2002).

If New Liberalism is about bringing the power of government to bear on the major policy challenges we have been discussing this weekend, then Liberal governments of the future will be experimenting with more permeable boundaries within the public service, which necessarily entails more flexibility in the organization of Cabinet.

### **Technology**

In the federal government, the impetus for IT appears to have come mainly from public servants. This has been the case from the outset, for example public servants in Industry Canada developing Strategis as a way for the department to meet its mandate of providing industry information within the constraints of Program Review and SchoolNet as a way to bring the Internet and the federal government presence into the school system. Public servants are at work on integrating service delivery through the clusters on the Canada site. There are other integrative initiatives happening, such as closer co-operation between HRDC and CCRA. Together these two ministries deal with 85 % of Canadian individuals and businesses. There is the potential for both front-line service delivery initiatives and back-

office co-operation (e.g., shared server farms). Public servants can take service integration only up to the point where they require legislative change. Just as IT professionals talk about legacy systems, legislation enacted long ago for other needs is a legacy system. Just as updating legacy systems is costly (the Y2K fix), legislative change is costly. But we will achieve the full potential of IT in the public sector only with legislative changes, and the question is whether politicians will be willing to do what only they can do.

While the federal public service has embraced IT, there is a great deal more reluctance at the political level. We are just scratching the surface of e-consultation, with individual departments experimenting in the absence of any policy framework. There appears to be little political interest in IT, nor little use of IT by politicians, beyond perfunctory web sites (brochureware). The typical MP's reaction seems to be, "why should I concern myself with public sector IT when the voters aren't asking for it?" A somewhat more thoughtful MP's reaction might be, "why should I take email seriously when all that happens is I get spammed by vocal interest groups outside my constituency?" There are reasonable answers to both questions. To the first, I would point out that IT is a means of improving service quality and reducing costs, both factors that matter to politicians. There are many constituencies where IT firms are large employers. The public is concerned about policy issues involving IT, such as privacy, security, and intellectual property. Finally, demographic change is occurring. For many of my students, being in touch means their hotmail account and their cell phone. They are voters, too, and in ever-increasing numbers. To the second question, the answer is that the problem of MPs offices being spammed is not insuperable, software filters have been developed, and authentication software is on the way. On the other hand, MPs – especially those with policy interests that transcend their geographic constituencies – might decide that their constituencies include anyone who contacts them.

Electronic voting is also at the experimental stage, but with the lowest voter turnouts among the youngest voters, there is clearly an incentive to politicians to move forward.

### **Competing in the Labour Market**

The challenges the public sector faces competing in the labour market are not insurmountable, and substantial progress has already been made. Public service salaries have become more competitive. The Public Service web site (<http://jobs.gc.ca>) attracts a large number of applicants, but needs continued investment in screening software (Public Service Commission, 2002) to process effectively the large numbers of applicants. The Public Service Commission runs an elite entry-level internship program; that program will have to be expanded to prepare to replace the wave of executive retirements in the coming decade. The internship approach can be applied not only for general managers but in specific functional areas; the Ontario Public Service has launched an internship program in the IT area.

One way to tackle the problem of managers having an incentive to hire only on short-term contracts is to create pools of pre-qualified candidates for various areas, so that managers can quickly hire people for permanent positions from those pools (Malloy, 2002). The current managerial preference for short-term contracts is a function of both the lengthy hiring process and the difficulty of releasing people hired for permanent positions during their probationary period. The latter, too, will have to be addressed.

The biggest challenge will continue to be retention, which depends very much on whether work in the public service continues to be stimulating and to provide opportunities for career development. Here, too, there are some hopeful signs. If New Liberalism incorporates an active public sector agenda, there will be many opportunities for work in policy analysis and program development. One area where this appears to be the case is IT.

Government IT applications are more challenging than those in the private sector – compare [www.gc.ca](http://www.gc.ca) and [www.amazon.ca](http://www.amazon.ca) – and for those who want to work at the leading edge, the public sector is the place to be. The fact that there will be such rapid retirement at the executive level in the next decades means that there will be many more opportunities for promotion at all levels than in the last two decades.

I'll conclude this section with a word about public sector innovation, an area in which I have been doing research for the last ten years. My studies of the best applications to innovation awards in Canada, the US, and economically advanced and developing Commonwealth countries have shown that approximately 50 % of innovations – a surprisingly large percentage – are bottom-up initiatives launched by middle managers and/or front line staff. This compares with roughly 25 % by politicians and agency heads. I say this is surprisingly large because public sector organizations have traditionally been structured hierarchically and because their personnel systems have tended not to reward public servants for successful innovation, but to punish them for unsuccessful attempts (Borins, 2001).

Producing a climate supportive of bottom-up innovation is one of the ways that a government can provide stimulating careers for public servants. The Canadian Centre for Management Development recently sponsored an action-research roundtable on the innovative public service, and the group made a number of recommendations to the Clerk of the Privy Council on how to create a culture where innovation can flourish. These included

- an annual report on innovation in the public sector
- a Chief Innovation Officer or Innovation Champion
- an innovation fund to support innovative new projects
- an innovation award
- teaching and developing innovation as a skill that is valued among public servants.

## **Conclusion**

Liberalism is ideologically disposed to support the public service, certainly as compared to the skepticism of the neo-Conservative outlook that is so heavily influenced by public choice. Comparing both rhetoric and action, it is clear that the Chretien government has compiled a better record than its Conservative predecessors.

In some areas, such as integration and the application of IT, the public service has already been moving ahead rapidly, and politicians are being challenged to keep up. The activist policy agenda that is likely to come out of New Liberalism will create opportunities for stimulating careers in the public service. The traditional public service cosmology referred to at the outset of this paper included non-partisanship, promotion from within on the basis of merit, and lifetime employment with decent salaries. A New Liberal cosmology – and one that is more likely to appeal to young people now entering the labour force – may pay less attention to the expectation of lifetime employment, but will certainly put more emphasis on the quality of work by formulating and implementing the new policy agenda that emerges from discussions such as those we have held this weekend.

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