

“The changing role of the Deputy Minister in Canadian Governments”

By

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Carol, Mr. President, Clerk and Deputy Ministers, Distinguished guests....
I want to thank you all for this opportunity to launch the first lecture honouring the memory of our dear friend Joe Galimberti. Many people I know would have asked for this honour and privilege.

Joe was the Executive Director of the Institute when he passed away last year - after 30 years with IPAC in this capacity. What better way to remember him and his passion for both scholarship and for making government better than to create an annual lecture in his name. Every year, as we strive to make the world a better place - we pause - to remember Joe and his great contribution to an institution we cherish.

I feel quite moved in being able to express a few memories of our great friend, Joe Galimberti. He conquered us with his intelligence, his strategic analytical capacity, his humanity, his loyalty and his passion for our institutions, our universities and our members, and more generally, for his service towards others.

Joe could have been a great Deputy Minister. He could have been a leading public sector consultant to government. He preferred to lead through IPAC. And

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he ran IPAC like a Deputy would. (I have studied DMs - so I recognize their behavioural traits! And I worked with Joe.) He was strategic; he marshalled resources, and led his team in both official languages. He managed diversity, talent and egos --- as he worked very effectively with more than 30 presidents - a new one every year. He has transmitted the organizational memory; he had to deliver results with his crew in a dramatically changing context. He composed brilliantly with the wide diversity of the regional situations across Canada, all this with the same sense of confidence that he dispersed around him.

IPAC changed and evolved with his steady leadership. He analysed trends, and he delivered the results. Joe balanced regional strengths and challenges and the wealth of academic expertise that he wove into the fabric of IPAC. He nurtured and showcased emerging talent. The public sector in Canada is a diverse and changing community and IPAC reflected this with Joe at the helm. Joe took seriously the task of sharing with others the Canadian expertise that he was so proud of.

Joe taught me, and many of us in this room, without really “teaching”! So very much.

Carol ---- I hope my formal presentation in his honour - the Galimberti lecture - imparts some of his wisdom. Referring to Joe reminds me the say: "We stand on the shoulders of giants".

Now, dear colleagues, and friends -- on to the lecture ----“The changing role of the Deputy Minister in Canadian Governments”

The first observation that came to my mind is “...changing since when?”

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It is difficult to devise universal comments as certain factors play a primary part in the role of the Deputy Minister: factors such as the size of the organization, the impact of recent history and even the personality of the individual deputy minister. And there is not enough time in twenty minutes to deal with the diversity across 14 different governments!

My notes arise from readings in and around IPAC's Journal and as well from a series of interviews conducted this summer with Deputy Ministers from the federal government and from three provinces.

Much can be said about the duties and the role of deputy ministers, but under a Westminster type government, what a deputy minister contributes to his minister, the Prime Minister and to the Government, is essentially knowledge: sectorial knowledge, procedural and implementation knowledge.

In general, Ministers are not subject matter experts in the portfolio to which they are appointed. In some cases, they have no knowledge whatsoever of the subject area. In fact, they are appointed for a number of reasons more often than not, unrelated to the mandate of the department. It is the role of the department, through the Deputy Minister, to provide clear advice and opinions, clearly documented, to make recommendations and, when needed to propose new programs, policies, laws, regulations and statements. The Deputy Minister transmits a synthesis of this knowledge to the Minister and to the Government. Thereafter, depending on the issue, it is the role of the Minister, the Prime Minister (Premier) or the Government to decide – and the Department/Ministry to implement the decision.

That is what has not changed! But it is not really that simple.

In 1961, R.M. Burns, former Deputy Minister at the federal level, wrote in Canadian Public Administration (CPA) that living with minority governments was

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a delicate task. A.W. Johnson insisted on the importance of giving Ministers the opportunity to participate in decision-making!! Let me repeat **“giving the opportunity to”**

Under-secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Cadieux insisted in 1963 on the importance of clairvoyance on the part of Deputy Ministers in matters of politics and courage and frankness in providing their opinions to Ministers.

For his British counterpart Bridges, what makes a good Deputy Minister in 1964 is “a first class brain, the constitution of an ox...and some illusions, but not too many!”

In 1967, the former British Minister Crossman, in *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, wrote something like: “I felt very well treated, like an impotent old man in a hospice: the senior civil servants took very good care of me, sat me in the wheel chair, kept me warm and guided me comfortably where they wanted and at their own pace”

In 1987, Plumptre, a close observer of Ministers, insisted in CPA, that there were new tendencies that affected Deputy Ministers: expenditure control, anticipating policies, and the need for more organizational leadership in these times of momentous change. What would he say today!

In 1989 Louis Bernard, former Secretary General in the Government of Quebec wrote in CPA that Deputy Ministers were managers under supervised release. “The accountability of Deputy Ministers will increase, even if people are alarmed by this!” he said, continuing “it is scary to see how the system could lose contact with good sense management. The obsession is to not take any risks.” Since then we have seen a proliferation of additional controls.

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The contribution of administrators to governance is through the application of knowledge in all its forms: knowledge of the past (organizational memory), knowledge of the future (scientific and technological advancement in the field), knowledge of the environment (organizations, institutions, and special interest groups involved), knowledge of what is possible (economic challenges), knowledge of how to get things done (the capacity of organizations to implement decisions). In departments/ministries, and more generally in government, there is a vast network of experts, people who have multiple years of study in a subject matter, years of practical experience and of reflection in a narrow field of the human endeavour.

In 1984, in CPA, Robert Normand wrote, following up on A.W. Johnson in 1961 that the role of the Deputy Minister is, and has always been, to harness this disparate knowledge and to make them converge, to ensure that this knowledge is integrated in projects, proposals, advice and even in the decisions made on behalf of the Minister.

Here is where things have changed and continue to change: the nature of knowledge, the rapid turnover of staff, the nature of the governmental environment, the nature of the global economy, the functioning of organizations, the decision-making process in government, the interaction with the public through the media, and of course, the changing characteristics and duties of Ministers, and more than likely of Deputy Ministers as well.

Let's now explore, briefly, the evolution of each of these, starting with the older to more recent developments. We will then look at their impact on the role of Deputy Ministers within Government.

Evolution

In a few words: Government fulfills a more ambitious mission, with higher expectations from citizens, with more resources and also with more constraints. Since the 1950's, the Government has expanded its role in society, significantly increased its budget (thousands of times larger, in constant dollars) and the size of the civil service. This has had a significant impact on the role and duties of the Deputy Minister and on the amplitude of the impact of the following ten (10) factors.

1. The Nature of Knowledge:

When we talk about the “nature of knowledge”, we mean the professional and theoretical understanding needed to prepare and implement decisions. What an extraordinary evolution!

It has been said that today, there is more computer capacity in a car than was in the capsule that took the first men to the moon in 1969. Forty (40) years ago, it was common practice that a lawyer be a generalist. Twenty (20) years ago, in 1987, we had just begun to utilize PCs. The internet did not really exist.

In the last ten (10) years, we commercialized advanced technology and integrated it into telephone and musical devices.

Sixty (60) years ago, the Deputy Minister of Agriculture was an agronomist; the Deputy Minister of Health was a doctor, an engineer headed up Transportation: each could aspire to rapidly master the global knowledge of their portfolio.

But science evolves more and more rapidly. It becomes more specialized. It is more and more obvious to observers that a specialist cannot cover the wide

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range of knowledge in a given field, nor keep up to date on the latest developments. One no longer seeks professional scholars in a field to be Deputy Ministers and Deputy Ministers do not function as “expert-scientist”, holders of all knowledge.

Moreover, science is now being understood as *the level of non-knowledge/ignorance that we are at*. Knowledge progresses always more rapidly. This impacts on policies’ level of certainty and their life cycle, which in turn, challenges the DMs as Ministers’ advisors and Department’s leaders. Knowledge’s evolution asks for interdepartmental, inter-jurisdictional actions and more collaboration with the other sectors of the society.

2. The Rapid Turnover of Personnel

Sixty (60) years ago, employees, in general, stayed in the same area, in the same department/Ministry for their entire career. The Deputy Minister generally came from within the same department/Ministry after a career of 20 or so years and remained as Deputy Minister for another 10 to 15 years (unless there was a political transition).

Today, employees enjoy greater professional mobility. At the Federal level, there is a complaint that senior managers stay in their job for only two (2) years! This churn will increase even more with the upcoming generational shifts.

For DMs, this means leading more volatile and more unpredictable organizations and where organizational memory is a scarce resource. They are asked to build sustainability with temporary resources

3. The Nature of the Environment has Changed:

By environment, I mean what surrounds the production of applied knowledge: the international and national institutions, and special interest groups.

Fifty (50) years ago, federal-provincial relations were not much formalized (IPAC was “the” occasion when Deputy Ministers of Finance would meet); there were very few well developed international organizations and even less international agreements.

At the National level, there were only a few special interest groups with very general mandates and little in the way of resources. The international situation was dramatic, but relatively easy to follow and understand.

Today, special interest groups are very specialized and narrow focussed– some even have former Ministers and Deputy Ministers as their head! ...and their financial and organizational wealth means to maintain continuous pressure on Departments and Governments. Federal transfers to provinces in 1987 were a smaller part of provincial revenue than is the case today. This represents greater interdependence between the various levels of government.

The international situation is harder to predict given the multi-polarization in the world and the influence of religious factors, especially with the rise of Para-military, multi-country groups such as Al Qaeda.

A Deputy Minister told us “The research function in public policy was held in higher esteem thirty (30) years ago! Today we practice “realpolitik”, doing what is realistic to do in the short term rather than doing what really should be done!”

A DM appears nowadays on a more complex playing field with more and more powerful players. He/she sits in the middle of contradictory pressures: it is now

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difficult to manage one's game plan in isolation, and therefore, to predict how policies will unfold even on the medium term.

4. The Nature of the Global Economy has Changed:

Here we are talking about the globalisation of trade, transactional procedures and the rapidity of change. Fifty (50) years ago in Western Europe, one had to measure the amount of gas in the car's gas tank at the border and declare the amount of currency and the value of any goods transported across the border. Twenty (20) years ago, we discovered global economic exchanges. In the past ten (10) years, the Internet has allowed us to intervene in real time, 24 hours a day, in stock markets around the world. A one week crisis in the resources sector in Asia created reverberations around the world, as it even did on the budget forecast in Alberta!

It is difficult for a DM to forecast the effects of its new policies. What is now the seriousness of any 5-year plans? How could someone predict impacts that will take into account the other economies' evolution?

5. The Nature of Organizations has Changed:

Here we refer to the general framework of work – leadership, structure, delegation of authority, values, telecommuting, and decisional autonomy.

Sixty (60) years ago, it was relatively straightforward: one boss, one authority, one simple organizational chart, employees who expressed only basic demands, in sum a Command and Control model.

We then moved to a participatory model, empowerment of employees, etc.

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Nowadays, I am told that, at least at the federal level, ADMs choose their DM! And it would be the same for EX employees towards ADMs. The DM is no more “the incarnation of power and authority”, he/she has to mobilize, convince and inspire: for this, he /she have to create and maintain credibility with their employees.

6. The Nature of Government Decision-Making processes has changed:

These originate from central agencies, internal obligations and parliamentary accountability as well as the relationship with the media and the expectations of the public.

Fifty (50) years ago, departments/ministries were relatively autonomous within rigid budgetary frameworks and strict management rules: the Glassco Commission commented upon the government’s lack of taking full advantage of opportunities and waste that came from errors.

Twenty (20) years ago, we see the development of oversight agents, the increase in inquiries and the start of performance reports. In 1984, Kernaghan describes these reports as “flourishing” (CPA, 591).

Almost ten (10) years ago, we see the beginning of the promotion of the brilliant Stewardship concept by the Treasury Board Secretariat at the Federal level – less controls, more authority into the Departments and a smart accountability framework.

Then more controls were imposed after the sponsorship so called “scandal” (which was actually not a scandal at all!), after the Gomery report, and after amendments to Bill C-2 – the establishment of audit committees. Today, we are desperately seeking to avoid errors of another type, those that are related to risk-taking.

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A Federal Deputy Minister told us: “there is a battery of measures in place at the request of the “Centre”. These constitute a heavy burden on each department. The Centre is strategic in its approach and departments have the burden of delivering results. As departments, we always have to be clearer on our deliverables and their impact. Deputy Ministers seem to be held personally accountable for what their department does or does not do. But we don’t have the autonomy that we should have to deliver these things. There are multiple central controls on all we do!”

A provincial Deputy Minister said: “The new culture of blame and shame kills risk-taking and innovation. It even prevents us from addressing crucial issues such as the competitiveness of the economy.” In fact, it seems that controls are less pervasive at the provincial level.

As a general rule no one will dispute that there are much more mechanisms of control and accountability, the latest at the federal level being the Management Accountability Framework, and they look much more deeply into the department’s management. There is a new equilibrium to find between the sound application of basic public management rules AND the safeguard of efficiency and employees’ motivation.

7. The Nature of Ministerial Organizations has changed:

We observe the growth in the limits of the authority of the state, the evolution in the methods of work towards contracting out services and the “litigiousness” of the action.

Sixty (60) years ago departments/ministries constructed roads! The state did not have much involvement in health care and education!

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Twenty (20) years ago, Health Care and Education made up 60% of the spending of provinces. This increased provincial sensitivity to federal transfers. Fifteen (15) years ago, we saw the beginning of the development of Alternative Service Delivery – with its contracts, outsourcing and partnerships.

And, barely ten (10) years ago, we lived through Program Review that questioned how government functioned in order to reduce spending.

The effect of the Charter of Rights frames much more the ways the government may intervene through programs as well as any action that may be taken by government. From an ultimate repository of authority, the State becomes an agent of the Citizenry more than an Authority: citizen movements make sure of it!

A Deputy Minister on the terrain meets many more challenges and policy is much more difficult to plan. They must work *with and through* partners and depositaries of their authorities...but they remain accountable for the other's actions, although those depositaries do not belong to Government! DMs look for citizen engagement, but they fear manipulations, acknowledging that this brings more uncertainty into the decision-making process

8. The Floodtide of public information has major impacts:

Media coverage of governmental action has made the work of government much more delicate.

Sixty (60) years ago there was no television, national media were few in number and news was more locally focused. There were delays in the transmission of news. There were only a few journalists covering Parliament Hill and there was a lot of partisanship in the news coverage. Journalists reported more than they investigated, analyzed or criticized.

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Twenty (20) years ago specialized television stations made their debut, including 24/7 news, news in real-time and the live transmission of Question Period followed by the televising of committee meetings. This has resulted in a heightening of the political theatre.

And in the last ten (10) years, transparency requirements keep increasing without end. Expense reports of Federal Deputy Ministers are posted on the web, as are internal audit reports and performance management reports. At the same time, the entertainment value of information increases and this tidal wave of information feed the competition among media.

Those who began their careers under the guise of anonymity now see themselves on television in legislative committees, answering questions from MPs. Their direct dealing with the media has continued to increase over the last 25 years.

On the other hand, one observed the decrease in the broadcasting of public affairs shows on general television stations. Reporter's analysis has replaced government statements on public policy all of which is much more difficult for the average citizen to understand. Scrums and 8 to 12 second clips are used by citizens to form their opinions on complex issues. Blogs and so-called experts contribute to this mix.

How could a Deputy Minister prepare and make his Minister perform well as a communicator in this context? Deputy Ministers have to promote strategies for engaging fundamental national conversations on those complex issues and for explaining the stakes underlying the policies. Ignoring the media debate would be an error; so they have to make the best of it.

9. Characteristics of Parties and the Duties of a Minister:

Today, professional politicians make up a greater proportion of MPs and Ministers. Some have not done anything else in their life. This experience – or lack of experience - influences their reactions and the expectations that they have of the Deputy Minister.

Ministers are more present in the Ministry than in the past as a result of easier transportation means and are more aware of the business of the department/Ministry as a result of modern communication tools and of the plethora of special interest groups. Some believe that politicians are now more involved in the affairs of the department/Ministry since the platforms of political parties and of Prime Ministers/Premiers appeared more detailed and precise. Personally, I am not so sure – just think of Trudeau in 1968, the PQ in 1976 and during the 1990's, Klein in Alberta and Lord in New Brunswick). Rather, I believe that we see and feel the wishes of others, especially when they differ from our own.

Ministers today have many more public engagements and occasions to address different associations. Ministers today have less informal time with public servants as a result of a lack of available time. Minister's Offices want to get more involved – this is a phenomenon that has its ups and downs. Bill C-2 has increased the constraints for Minister's staff and risks reducing the quality of the personnel.

There are minority governments, but these existed in the 1960's, 1970's as well. Deputy Ministers have the impression that everything is more politically sensitive today and that this political sensitivity keeps increasing. One small detail can raise much concern and require much of their time. They believe that the horizon is short-term and unstable.

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On the Federal scene, as a result of the contemporary parliamentary dynamic in a minority government, some Deputy Ministers have described themselves as “punching bags” for all political parties when they appear in front of Parliamentary/Legislative committees. The scale of this phenomenon is new.

The Deputy Minister advice to the Minister and to Cabinet is now much more in competition with other sources: external experts, friends of the party in power, special advisers, Minister’s Offices, etc

Deputy Ministers have to adjust their performance to the new Ministerial realities they encounter: different experience, expectations, and environment made of multiple counsellors.

10. The Characteristics of Deputy Ministers has changed:

From subject matter experts exercising their authority, Deputy Ministers have become knowledge-brokers and organizational leaders.

Sixty (60) years ago Deputy Ministers were departmental specialists who related and listened to the Prime Minister/Premier. Twenty (20) years ago, Deputy Ministers became managers who stayed for a shorter period of time in their position and in the government.

Deputy Ministers became mostly generalists with an important experience in public management and talents for leadership. Politicisation continues to vary according to times and jurisdictions.

CONCLUSION: What are the impacts on the role of the Deputy Minister?

1. The Performance Zone is Modified

The Deputy Minister is a manager of complexity playing on internal (in government and in the department) and external chessboards that are much more complex.

They are also leaders: some sense that they recently moved from transformational leaders to... Air Traffic Controllers: they are to provide safety first. Doing so, they relay to their Departments the central agencies' concerns.

As knowledge brokers and minister's principal advisers they confront more competition due to the multiplicity of the sources of knowledge and the new diversity of advice providers.

2. The Political Environment is more sensitive

There is more political reaction, it sows up in real time, and can come from anywhere in the country at any moment. The stress that is placed on the Minister is felt by the Deputy Minister even for any small issue. The focus is on daily issues at the expense of the medium term. The system has become hyper-sensitive. The reaction time is now dictated by the media cycle. Mastery of governmental levers has become more important.

3. The Environment is Characterized by Uncertainty and Continuous Change

Thirdly, knowledge and technology always evolve more rapidly and the international context is hardly predictable.

The timeframe for action gets shorter...at the moment policy needs sustainability. Realpolitik is more present and creates professional frustration all along the organization. Capacity for Creative Adaptation is now a must for any Deputy Minister.

4. New Expectations of Deputy Ministers

We are witnessing the end of the “specialist” who designs policy – we are now demanding an integrator who can manage in a context of multiple accountabilities. The Deputy Minister is the orchestra conductor who uses to the best of his/her ability the instruments. The Deputy Minister must also be able to fill any gaps in the musical score.

THEY LIVE TO MODIFIED EXPECTATIONS: Deputy Ministers moved from the boss to “one of the” leaders, Denise Amyot, VP of the Public Service Agency, plead that IQ’s importance should now give way to more EQ, (emotional quotient) consideration.

SUPPLEMENTARY EXPECTATIONS: After the growth in administrative accountability imposed on Federal Deputy Ministers that was commented upon in 1982 by Deputy Minister Kirkwood (in Optimum), the Deputy Minister became personally accountable to the political institutions for certain management functions, a situation that was feared by many (Rod Dobell in 1984 in CPA 639). The pressures for clarity and coherence in leadership continue to increase.

Karen Ellis, wrote about leadership: « Make sure that the followers know your meaning and intent, then lead them to the accomplishment of the mission » (Canadian Government Executive, May 2007, 12).

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There is a certain constant in the nature of the functions of a Deputy Minister in Canada. What changes are the environment and the context in which the work is performed:

- in fact, uncertainty in the environment, in the context and in knowledge continues to increase;
- and the capacity to control one's Departmental performance and his/her own performance decreases...
- while the pressures for clarity in commitments, transparency and accountability increase at the same time

This has a heavy impact on the product and the way work is undertaken. One thing is certain – due to the challenges it faces, society relies now more than ever on a first quality public service and the role of the Deputy Minister is an even more crucial one.

This account can seem to be worrying – we must remember that people tend to insist upon what worries them more than what does not. For example, the support of the public service community and its professionalism constitute an important resource for Deputy Ministers.

Serving Others:

What an interesting challenge, especially in these demanding times when society really needs this help!

Here is a challenge that suited Joe so well!

Thank you for your attention.