

Leadership for a More Independent Public Service

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Presentation Outline

1. Establish the case for a more independent public service
2. Describe the kind of leadership for such a public service

1st case: a more independent public service

Greater independence, *than is now the case*, required for non-partisan, merit-staffed public service

Required to help secure *two fundamental objectives*:

- democratic governance
- effective public administration

At present, we have non-partisan, merit-staffed public service in Canada *only to a point*

Present situation

- Federally & provincially: top public-service executives (deputy ministers, associate DMs, and, in some cases, assistant DMs) appointed by prime ministers/premiers
- PMs and premiers advised by “public servants”, but these advisers also appointed by them or their predecessors
- PMs and premiers are partisans: they cannot staff on the basis of “merit” – (i) not qualified; (ii) conflict of interest when fellow partisans are candidates – selecting from “short lists” of “qualified” doesn’t meet standard of merit

Traditions

Federal non-partisan, merit-staffed public service: staffed by/under authority of Public Service Commission, an “independent” executive agency – independent of Government/ministers

Variations in provinces, given statutory authority and independence of staffing authority

Everywhere, assumption that non-partisan, merit-staffed public service can be led by public servants not staffed independently, but by political executive (PM or Premier)

Traditions & Variations

Federal tradition, with some few exceptions, is appointment to DM (and Associate DM) positions from the PSC independently staffed public service

- appointment to top positions is “promotion”

Provincial traditions vary, over time/with governments

- some mirror federal experience
- some partisan with appointments: overt or covert

The Problem

The current approach “politicizes” the public service

- ✓ encourages public servants, even competent public servants, to curry the favour of ministers, especially PM/Premier
- ✓ encourages public servants to be responsive and loyal in ways that can be inappropriate

The current approach is an “obstacle” to professional public-service management

- produces a chill on speaking truth to power, undermines integrity because rewards/sanctions in hands of partisans

The Problem Exacerbated

1980s: New Public Management but also “new public governance”

1. Concentration of power in PM/Premiers and “court”
2. Increased number, role & influence of “political staff”
3. Increased attention to PM’s/Premier’s prerogative to staff DM cadre – “one of us?”
4. Increased expectation of public-service enthusiasm for Government’s agenda – beyond “loyalty”
5. Increased efforts to impose Government’s partisan “spin” (or worse) on public-service communications

International phenomenon

- 7/24 media: aggressive & competitive and with frequent public opinion polls
- greater transparency: access to information; internet
- external audit & review agencies
- decline of citizen deference to political authority
- fewer partisans and thus less interested and more volatile electorate

Counters New Public Management

- Micro-management, command & control overwhelm delegation and decentralization
- Compliance/conformance/rules displaces performance improvement, willingness to experiment, take risks
- Ideology/political commitments substitute for evidence-based decision-making (& thus diminish efforts at policy analysis & program evaluation)
- Vertical hierarchy re-asserted for decisions & accountability (horizontal efforts undermined)

How serious is the problem?

- NPG pressures not new, but greater intensity and connected
- New context: DMs being regarded as “sub-cabinet” (L. Martin) – ‘junior ministers’ (from whence they came!)
- Nuance about non-partisan, professional public service undermined by new simplicity: either ‘for’ or ‘against’ us!
- “New professionals” – the future: no problem for “bullies on the dark side”, but serious retention problem for those who want “to make a difference” – wrong signals!

The leadership challenge

1. Collegial, corporate governance of profession
 - DMs need professional independence from PM and Ministers
 - Appoint DMs independently, with cabinet “democratic veto”
 - Corporate Governance:
 - Clerk/COSO?
 - PSC?

The leadership challenge

2. Management boards in place of central agencies

- Central agencies: without C&C, cannot hold accountable
- Boards of management with authority – CRA model?
- DMs accountable to boards for management performance?
- Boards: mix of outsiders, former DMs, public-service peers

The leadership challenge

3. Networks to the fore?

- networks critical to effective public-policy implementation:
 - ✓ down the line: motivating real people
 - ✓ across programs & departments: virtual horizontal integration
 - ✓ up to central agencies: leveraging power & resources
 - ✓ out to citizens/partners: citizen engagement, shared governance
- but, networks require trust – no substitute for trust ties
- theory Y triumphs over theory X – command & control obsolete?

The leadership challenge

4. Accountable leadership

- DMs, at least, accountable personally to parliamentary committees, & thus publicly
- Managers (DMs down): 360 degrees accountable – superiors, peers, subordinates
- Management accountability: for performance broadly defined (MAF) – not compliance on systems or narrow output targets

The leadership challenge

5. Accepting checks & balances as essential to good public management

- merit-staffing vs bureaucratic patronage
- transparency vs entitlement to secrecy
- values and ethics vs whatever works
- Parliament and its agencies vs promiscuously partisan