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IPAC EXECUTIVE BRIEF

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“Working with Political Staff at Queen’s Park: Trends, Outlooks, Opportunities”

By Patrice Dutil

Executive Summary

Over the past several years, members of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada have argued that one of the most important issues facing public sector executives has been the emerging role and responsibilities of ministerial staff. This area has also been the object of many explorations, notably in Australia and in the United Kingdom. The second and final report of Justice Gomery also devoted a study on this topic, as well as two key recommendations.

Responding to this request, IPAC convened a roundtable discussion in Toronto on February 14th, 2006. The group brought together twenty Queen’s Park veterans: half drawn from the ranks of Deputy Ministers; the other half from former ministerial advisors. The participants had served as either ministerial staff and senior officials in each government from Premiers Peterson to McQuinty, with one DM going as far back as the Robarts era.

The meeting explored the evolving roles and responsibilities of ministerial advisors from both the public service and the governing party perspective over the past thirty years.

The meeting took place two weeks after Justice Gomery submitted his final report on the Government of Canada’s Sponsorship Program.

21 recommendations emerged from this round-table discussion, falling into three broad categories, all of which were aimed at building relationships and creating an environment that was positive, and clear in its expectations:

1. Investments should be made in establishing a sustainable infrastructure for recruiting, succession planning and career planning for EAs
2. There should be some sort of “Code of Conduct” for ministers and ministerial staffers (this was recommended by Justice Gomery);
3. Investments for the training for ministerial staffers and for public servants should be made, both in terms of a comprehensive orientation and for “in-service.” This should be tailored to the needs of a government at various points of its mandate.

IPAC Consensus Agreement on “Working with Political Staff: What Needs to Be Done”

On the Selection of Ministerial Staff:

1. There should be a more comprehensive “Human Resources” approach to the staffing of ministerial offices.
2. A real investment should be made by governments to improve the recruiting process for ministerial assistants in a way that would make it sustainable. There is precious little time available to break in new staff. The “transition” cost of orientation for every new staffer is expensive. There must be attention paid to turnover, succession planning, career continuation for “career” political staffers, etc.
3. The number of staffers should be re-examined to diminish the brutal workload. The lifestyle is especially discouraging for women.
4. The process of recruitment needs to be revised. The current Liberal government has adopted new procedures, but it is not clear if these are working better than the previous, more informal arrangements.
5. There should be clear job definitions (e.g. Chief of staff, scheduler, caucus relations, communications, media contact).
6. Policies on hiring, compensation, performance evaluation and dismissal should be clear and disclosed. A number of options could be explored to manage this professionally: to the legislative assembly, an outside non-profit agency, political parties, etc.
7. Compensation policies should be reviewed. EAs occupy high pressure positions with no security of employment. In order to attract high quality candidates with experience, salaries should be re-examined.
8. Secondments from the public service to the ministerial office should be encouraged, and accepted both by the political order and the bureaucratic apparatus.

On the subject of a written code/declaration/ statement regarding the role and responsibilities of ministerial Staff:

9. A code that would recognize the importance of ministerial staff, their role, responsibilities and ethics would be desirable. The code adopted by the British is extreme in parts, too long and cumbersome, but something invoking its spirit could be beneficial.
10. The code must be clear on what is not allowed: clear demarcation of “no-go” zones (such as procurement policy, privacy issues, etc). Different ministries have different rules, and so attention would have to be devoted to ensure that principles are realistic and respectful of established lines of command. (e.g. some ministries are mostly funders, while others are mostly regulators, while others are focused on liaison with the community).
11. A code such as this must be easily communicable, and quickly absorbed. Its meaning must be reinforced by a strong communications strategy. It should be based on values and commitment to a culture of engagement, open dialogue and debate, respect.
12. A code of conduct will be judged on the basis of enforceability. Individuals must be empowered to enforce compliance, and that there should be consequences for those who do not live up to the standards. (Who should enforce it?).
13. There should also be a dispute resolution mechanism in place.
14. There is a need to entrench civil service norms in the ministers’ offices in relation to managing situations of personal or sexual harassment and similar work-place conditions.

On the issue of Training:

15. There is an urgent need for training of ministerial assistants that would underline roles and responsibilities. The emphasis of the training should be on professionalism, on the ways to

create a sense of civility; and acceptable behaviour.

16. There is, similarly, an urgent need to build an orientation and education framework for public servants on how to build effective relationships with Ministerial staff and Premier's Office.
17. Training modules for ministerial assistants should include issue management as a clear focus. These must learn to adapt and to modernize with the changing times.
18. The training should be innovative and make extensive use of presentation and discussion of case studies/simulations/scenarios that would illustrate the responsibilities of ministerial assistants. Clearly, an investment will have to be made to research and document best practice case studies.
19. Trainers should include current and former ministerial staffers and public service executives.
20. "Orientation" training is not sufficient. A system of "Master classes," "support networks" and mentorship should be installed to in-service ministerial assistants and public servants. These could be conducted by incumbents as well as veterans of past governments.
21. Ministers themselves must be brought into the training.

Excerpts from the minutes of the meeting

Chair: Michael Fenn, CEO, Halton-Mississauga LHIN; Chair, IPAC Research Committee

Reporter: Patrice Dutil, Acting Executive Director

The roundtable started by a *tour-de-table* designed to elicit descriptions of the complicated relationship between ministerial aides (chiefs of staffs, communications advisors, executive assistants (EAs), principal secretaries) and the executive ranks of the bureaucracy. In Ontario, EAs function as Chiefs-of-staffs

The Deputy Ministers

For a group that brought such a wide range of experiences to bear, the former staff and deputies came to a surprising level of consensus that government resources could be well invested in adopting a more rigorous framework for recruitment, selection, training and succession planning for ministerial offices, complemented with work on the public service side to improve understanding of the challenges faced by political staffers and facilitate the needed collaboration.

Many participants voiced the view that many of his recommendations would calcify the relationship between the political and the administrative and should be avoided.

One former Deputy Minister noted that there is danger in the public service's wish to see politics "bureaucratized," and vice-versa, in the political wish to see the bureaucracy "politicized." He also observed that the OPS executive "does not engage" the political class, noting that politicians live in an "oral culture" while public servants are much more comfortable in a "written" culture. The argument was made that the OPS must change and "look to itself" to find the solutions required.

Another former Deputy Minister recalled an experience where the Executive Assistant to the Minister was allowed to "act" as the minister. Access to the actual minister was guarded, with the minister literally removing himself from critical discussions. It was noted, however, that this was, in all likelihood, a deliberate positioning to provide support to the minister.

Another former Deputy Minister recalled a time when a Minister adopted a strongly principled policy that downplayed the many complications the position entailed. "Mistrust" bred "interference" and in the end neither the bureaucracy nor the minister was able to deliver on the expected results.

Another former Deputy Minister recalled working for a minister that could be seen only once a week, for a short time. At no time was the DM and the Minister left alone to discuss policy and procedures; the executive assistant being present constantly. Indeed the EA was actively involved in public consultations and in private dialogues with stakeholders. The net effect was that the procedures gave the department little negotiating room, and that poor policy emerged. The DM also noted that the Premier's Office had trouble disciplining ministerial staff (reflecting both an unwillingness and, effectively, an inability to do so) and that it was clear that recruitment was proving difficult, especially late in the mandate. The DM also observed that a safety valve is required to defuse tensions between ministerial staffers and the public service executives.

One former Deputy Minister noted that, unlike the municipal world, there are very few occasions when the cabinet and the deputy ministers meet as a group to discuss key policy or fiscal issues, long-term plans, communications issues, and the like. The absence of such a broad forum consigns the relationship to ministerial silos and files controlled and coordinated by political staff in the Premier's Office and, to a lesser degree, staff in Cabinet Office. Political staff thus plays a fundamental "gate keeping" role in the political/bureaucratic interface and can frustrate productive, collegial discussion among leading ministers and seasoned public servants.

The Ministerial Staff

A former ministerial assistant invoked a vivid "coffee" metaphor to illustrate the different visions of the political and the administrative. The politicians see themselves in the latte business, while the bureaucracy sees itself in the coffee business. The difference is in the froth (as a politic-added value), and many in the bureaucracy don't understand the importance of the added ingredient.

One former Executive Assistant noted that the traditional perception that "policy" and "politics" were water-tight compartments do not exist for EAs. He noted that policy and political messages can easily get crossed and that in his experience the best

DMs were the ones that found clever and creative compromises between the two.

More than one former Executive Assistant noted that the working environment is hostile to women. The hours are simply unreasonable and the workloads are unmanageable. It was noted that the hostility towards women in executive assistant position emanated from ministerial offices especially. The Ministerial office is quickly perceived as “bad workplace” which discourages many highly qualified women from seeking these positions. It was also intimated that it is more difficult to address situations of perceived personal or sexual harassment within Minister’s offices than it is within the bureaucracy (especially within the bargaining units), where there are clear, vigorous and well-understood responses and procedures.

A former Executive Assistant recalled beginning a government’s mandate at a time when the transition was left “unprepared” by the defeated party. The bureaucracy was similarly unprepared with the senior executive unable to interpret the wishes of the new government. He noted that life in Ministerial offices is consistently full of surprises and where there is no “luxury of time.” Many echoed this perception, commenting on the “crackberry” speed of decision making in ministerial offices and the consequent confusion of priorities between the near-term urgent and tactical, and the longer term and strategic.

Another Executive assistant chose to focus on the difficult days of election campaigns. It was noted that during the term of a government, Ministers are used to a “yes culture.” During the end of the mandate and during the election campaign, the relationship changes to one of “No”: a sea-change that is unexpected for many Ministerial staffers who must bear the brunt of delivering this message to Ministers. Suddenly, bonds of trust are dissolved. Work needs to be done to prepare this difficult passage.

Another former ministerial assistant described assuming the position with little understanding of the responsibilities, opportunities and limitations of the posting. More importantly, the standards were not clear. A great deal of work needs to be done to demystify the roles and priorities of the ministerial assistants.

A former ministerial assistant described the tension between ministerial staff and the public service as a positive factor. What is lacking is the mechanism to dialogue about the tension in a way that will be respectful and that will nurture trust. It was also

noted that many public servants are insensitive to the “rhythm of the legislature.”

A former Deputy Minister chose to recall pleasant memories when Ministers, Ministerial staff and department executives worked collaboratively. He ascribed the good relations to shared social habits, a culture of informality and the personality of the minister who insisted on courteous, frank and honest relations between the political and the administrative.

One former Deputy Minister remembered working with political staff that welcomed friendly debate and that insisted on examining the full range of options. “Their software was programmed differently.” Ministerial staff should be encouraged to be more frank about internal political dynamics, about which the general public and even the senior bureaucracy would inevitably be unaware. Administrative staff is often left in the dark on these dynamics, while expected to find solutions that accommodate them.

Many former Deputy Ministers commented on the shift in importance to the Premier’s office and to the centralization of power. It was also noted that the ability and experience of ministerial staff seemed to decline as governments aged. Clearly, governments have a greater challenge, as mandates age, in attracting qualified individuals who have the knowledge and leadership skills necessary to effectively assist ministers and the bureaucracy. This is all the more important because ends-of-mandates are among the most challenging periods in the life of any government.

Patrice Dutil, at the time of the event, was Director of Research at IPAC. Currently he is IPAC’s Acting Executive Director.