

## APEX Notes for Politicization or Responsiveness: An Issue for Tomorrow's Public Service?

In preparation for this panel, I thought that I should make sure I was familiar with thinking in Ottawa so I scanned the Ottawa Citizen for guest editorials, and I got a copy of the Public Policy Forum's report on Canada's Public Service in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Destination Excellence. I looked at the two reports of the Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service, flipped through the latest issues of Canadian Government Magazine, and IPAC's journal. I checked the most recent articles of Professors Peter Aucoin, David Zussman, and Donald Savoie's latest books. Like most of the people in the audience, I made sure I was up to date with the speeches of Kevin Lynch.

I was struck by the similarities as well as the differences between the public service in BC and that of the federal service. Of course there is a massive difference in size and scope. Your public service is national and international. BC has about 1/8 of the population of Canada and the BC public service is about 1/8 the size of the federal service. Despite those differences, we have three main things in common: our past development, our present challenges and the imperative that we learn, and adapt for the future.

Let me touch on our past:

We share the same history in the development of responsible government: BC is celebrating 2 anniversaries this year: it's 150th as a province, and 100 years since the principle of merit was introduced into the public service as an element of hiring rather than political patronage. Over the past 150 years, the bargain that Professor Savoie so carefully records was formed between politicians and those in the public service:

- politicians were held accountable to the House for their decisions-
- they needed a coherent and consistent administrative structure to implement their decisions
- neither planning public services nor delivery of public programs could be effectively carried out if the whole public service was swept out every time government changed
- a civil service developed that was permanently appointed so that it could carry on its work regardless of the party in power
- this encouraged a civil service whose allegiance was to the public service as an institution rather than to the views of a particular minister
- government functions were grouped together within departments and a hierarchy enabled officials to define their responsibilities and to do their jobs
- the permanent civil service departments were each subordinate to a Minister who was responsible to the House
- Ministers would speak for the department to the House and the House could seek information about departmental policies and activities only through the Minister

-The House had no control over any permanent civil servant and in fact, civil servants would remain anonymous and advise Ministers frankly without fear or favour.

That was the roots of our public service- one that most students of public administration would recognize.

We share some common current challenges in both the federal and in the provincial public services:

In his recent book "Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability" Professor Savoie presents the view that the bargain has broken down, long standing conventions are eroded, so that Ministers are refusing to accept accountability, and are blaming the bureaucracy. Further he says the chain of accountability from voter to MP, from MP to Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers, from Cabinet to line Ministers, from line Ministers to Deputy heads and from senior civil servants to front-line managers and their employees has broken down at every level.

I understand this bleak view isn't endorsed throughout the federal public service, but the book is full of quotes and examples from senior officials- past and present.

The Public Policy Forum's report on Canada's Public Service in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century paints a less crisis ridden picture but doesn't hesitate to say that a hierarchical, rules-bound and inward-looking environment will have a hard time selling itself as an employer of choice. For public services that are preparing for the silver tsunami of retirements all the clever and catchy recruitment efforts will be wasted if new employees arrive to discover that what they were promised isn't true.

Kevin Lynch's remarks to the National Managers Professional Development Forum in Vancouver last April hit a more moderate note when he said the reality is that the public service is neither perfect nor broken: it is like other public sectors across Canada, under constant pressure to adapt to an ever-changing world, and must embrace change, not the status-quo, to live up to it's potential to make a difference and to keep the public's confidence.

And that brings me to the last similarity that the provincial and the federal public share: the imperative of finding the way to the future: this is not a business that can go bankrupt, layoff its employees, apologize to its customers and close its doors having declared failure.

I don't recommend the advice that Professor Savoie that the role of Prime Minister and that of the public service be placed in statute, so that civil servants have a legal way to resist instructions from politicians to perform essentially political acts. I'm not sure that the Public Policy Forum's suggestion of a public sector summit where politicians and senior public service officials gather to renew the health of their respective institutions will be productive. I'd like to tell you about another path that has been followed in BC- a green, carbon-free path.

I would like to describe several critical actions that have been taken to redefine the roles and responsibilities of politicians and public servants. There has been a deliberate program of mutual collaboration to build trust and cooperation. It has been fostered by the two alpha wolves of their respective packs: Premier Campbell leading his caucus, and Jessica McDonald as Deputy Minister to the Premier leading as Head of the BC Public Service.

There has been legislation passed which provides both individual Ministerial and collective Cabinet responsibility for maintaining a balanced budget, and meeting annual budget goals. There are fiscal penalties for both Ministers and for Cabinet as a whole in terms of salary holdbacks if these goals are not met. Tabled with this legislation are annual business or in BC they are called service plans, where individual Ministers commit to be responsible for the delivery of the high level policy plans.

Each Minister receives a letter of expectation from the Premier, In a fit of transparency in the first year of government the Premier posted all the letters of expectation on the government web site.

Both the legislation, and the tabled service plans have been important instruments where the Premier has set out his expectations for what Ministers, not bureaucrats, will be accountable.

Each Deputy, Associate and Assistant Deputy Minister signs a performance management contract that ties salary holdbacks (not performance bonuses) to meeting the administrative goals of individual Ministry service plans, and a set number of horizontal goals that require corporate collaboration. The Deputy Minister to the Premier monitors these performance contracts. Every Deputy Minister has common goals on increasing innovation, on improving employee engagement and on better workplace health.

These performance management expectations are reflected in plans throughout the public service. There is an intranet where every employee's performance and career development plan must now be posted, which is monitored by the Deputy Minister to the Premier's office. This accountability method has brought life and meaning into what was formerly a compliance exercise.

The use of these, and much more importantly, the monitoring of these have made sure there is a clear responsibility, and answerability chain through the public service.

Finally, and to me, one of the most significant in terms of keeping promises is one the Deputy Ministers Council made in 2006: to become the best public service employer in Canada by fundamentally working on change in the way the BC Public Service is seen and sees itself as an employer. Their progress is measured in 2 ways: (1) through an annual work environment survey- the results of which are also tied into management performance plans. (2) weekly reports on the employee intranet which publishes employee reaction and suggestions. For the first time, in a long time, employees feel listened to and see the results.

Story about new public service values. From the employee survey which questions whether supervisors listen to ideas, consult on decisions that affect their workplace, keep them informed, demonstrate honesty and integrity and are open to flexible work arrangements to accommodate personal needs- some of the really high scoring supervisors were selected. This was to the surprise of some of the DM's- it was mostly director level and even included a couple of Bargaining unit supervisors. A group was asked to come to chat with DM's on what they did and how they did it. The values they talked about as most important to them were written up and taken out to be tested with public service Groups. They reduced the number and said integrity was the highest value- without that- there was nothing. The values have been driven bottom up.

That is how BC arrived at the Public Service Values of curiosity, courage, passion, teamwork and accountability.

This year the BC Public Service was named one of the Top 40 BC Employers. You know that next year, they'll be aiming for Canada's top 100.

To recap: there is a bargain between politicians and the public service. That bargain can be eroded and when it is the effect on the morale of the public service is devastating. It takes the leadership of those in charge and particularly the Premier, or Prime Minister, and the Head of the Public Service and the Deputies collectively to make sure roles and responsibilities are clear.

That needs to be seen and felt at every level through the public service so that those who work here will stay, and that those we would like to work here, will come.

This is where it seems appropriate to paraphrase the Garrison Keillor ode: welcome to BC, where the politics are robust, the Deputies are strong, and all of the public service is above average.