

BUILDING TOMORROW'S PUBLIC SERVICE

2008 APEX SYMPOSIUM

PANEL PRESENTATION – LARRY MURRAY

Thanks very much....

Good afternoon everyone. It is great to be back among colleagues and friends at this APEX Conference.

In my view, Canada continues to need a professional, nonpartisan Public Service, recruited and promoted on the basis of merit and capable of providing good, apolitical policy advice to Government and high quality service to Canada and Canadians in areas of federal responsibility.

Throughout my career in the Canadian Forces and the Public Service, I have seen no indication of “an independent bureaucracy.....unwilling to respond to the expectations of government”. Occasionally we may have been “unable” to respond fully to the expectations of Government but never because of a lack of loyalty or effort.

I would also have to say that my observation of government “Transitions” in the United States would lead me to conclude that the lack of continuity inherent in changing most EX's and above, every four years, is not something to be desired.

Further, I believe that the bureaucratic turmoil experienced every four years in the US would be even more challenging in the context of our Parliamentary system, with its risk of Non-Confidence votes, particularly in Minority situations such as have existed for the past several years.

I also see no compelling reason for any fundamental redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of Elected Officials and Public Servants.

However, I do see the need for a solid relationship between the two based firmly on mutual respect, trust and confidence and a shared understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.

I would acknowledge that a few things have changed since 1908 which do make perceptions and realities about this extremely important aspect of governance in Canada particularly challenging currently and worthy of debate.

Some of those changes, in the past few decades, would include the advent of the Charter and the focus on individual rights, the plethora of new Officers of Parliament, the arrival of the Knowledge Age and incredible amounts of information available to all citizens through the Internet as well as 24 hour news coverage. Globalization in a particularly unpredictable and dangerous world with both growing economic disparity and major environmental and demographic challenges is another compelling reality today. Demographics within Canada, including the end of the Baby Boom and our increasingly diverse population, are also huge factors as is the increasing competition to attract and retain talent in the workplace.

I could go on, but my principle point is to suggest that within this rapidly evolving global and Canadian context, there are some basic requirements which the Public Service must strive to address, to help ensure that the essential trust and confidence between Elected Officials and Public Servants, that I mentioned a few minutes ago, is preserved.

In my view:

1. The Public Service must be open and transparent as well as fair and flexible in its recruiting, retention and promotion practices. It must be as culturally intolerant of bureaucratic patronage at all levels as it is of political patronage. It must also do a good deal more to welcome talented Canadians to the Public Service for shorter durations, at all levels, and do a better job of recognizing and rewarding outside experience as relevant in its selection and promotion processes.
2. The Public Service must be a truly professional organization. Among other things, that means that in addition to executing its various roles well, it also needs to look after its people with the same priority. They matter and so does their professional development.

3. The Public Service must be an inclusive learning organization which encourages and rewards diversity and diverse views; which actually functions as a horizontal team; which consults in a meaningful manner and which, most of all, listens to others and to each other.

4. The Public Service must be creative and at the same time it must be practical. It must be imaginative, innovative and “think outside the box”. At the same time, it must connect the dots between “blue sky”, strategic policy options and where “the rubber actually hits the road” operationally. Policy research based on credible data, resource availability, operational realities and relevance to the Government’s policy platform do matter and all options presented to the Government for consideration must be real options not simply two throwaways and a third option preferred by the Public Service because we think we know best.

5. The leadership of the Public Service, and I include everyone in this room in that category, must be personally engaged and always strive for excellence. You must be visible, open and honest with your staff, with your leaders, with each other and with the Government. You must communicate, communicate and then communicate some more and I am not talking about Blackberries here. You must be bold, take sensible risks and make things happen. Most importantly, you must lead with passion, clarity and compassion.

6. Finally, the Public Service must be loyal in all respects and in all directions, including fearlessly speaking truth to power and faithfully implementing Government policy once a decision has been taken. Elected officials have the same obligation of public support and loyalty to an apolitical, professional Public Service which really cannot adequately defend itself, in Parliament or elsewhere.

I recognize that the points that I have just made are an incomplete and imperfect answer to the complex question posed. However, I would argue that a conscientious effort by Senior Public Servants and Elected Officials to adhere to some version of this formula invariably does produce the solid relationship between the two, based on mutual respect, trust and confidence, which is essential to effective governance in our system. I would also argue

that the ongoing Public Service Renewal and Human Resource Modernization initiatives address all of this and much more, at least theoretically. However “hands on” leadership by folks like you is essential, if success is to be achieved in a consistent manner, across the entire Federal Public Service.

That concludes my opening remarks. I look forward to my colleagues’ comments and the question period. Thanks very much.