

# Rebranding the Public Service

David Mitchell

*The public service has a reputation problem. While many of those negatives are both outdated and exaggerated, the conventions that once defined the role of public servants have been over-written by the realities of perpetual election campaigns, the 24-hour news cycle and realignments in the responsibilities of political vs. bureaucratic staff. As Public Policy Forum President David Mitchell argues, today's public services offer a compelling challenge for the innovators of tomorrow.*

Imagine you're a senior public servant, currently approaching the conclusion of your career. A bright young person whom you truly care about—a family member, a recent university or college graduate—asks for your advice. "I'm thinking of applying for a government job and pursuing a public service career and I'd very much value your honest opinion." What would you say?

Not sure? Try the question on a bureaucrat you know. I've actually done this many times over the past year in different parts of Canada. And the answers have been revealing. In fact, this has emerged for me as a kind of litmus test on the state of the public services in our country.

Before I share what I've learned, let me provide a bit of context.

Let's face it: the public service has a reputation problem. The idealism that may have attracted previous generations to work in government has dissipated. The conventions that previously defined the role of the public service have also changed. For example, the growing numbers of political staff in ministers' and prime minister's offices increasingly seem to be doing work that traditionally was delegated to the public service. No



PPF President David Mitchell. PPF photo

longer are public servants focused on developing policy options for elected governments and taking medium to longer-term perspectives on the big challenges ahead. Instead, the public service often seems to have become more of an administrative service, implementing policies and decisions that they haven't directly contributed to. What's worse, public servants are now increasingly blamed when things go wrong.

Of course, the role of government has grown increasingly complex. Globalization, new technologies and huge demographic changes are leading to a re-evaluation of what citizens expect from the state. And while more authentic forms of public engagement are necessary, governments seem reluctant to experiment and are averse to taking risks. The private sector, not-for-profit organizations and institutions of higher learning are more inclined to innovate, especially with the use of new technologies.

Governments don't make it easy on themselves. As a result of numerous accountability measures implemented in recent years, including the Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector, the Policy on Conflict of Interest and Post Employment, the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act, bureaucrats are spending much of their valuable time on process. And while this has led to smarter management, it raises questions about why we need a permanent, professional, non-partisan public service.

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The explicit efforts to implement austerity measures over the past number of years, including downsizing and fis-

cal restraint, have also had side effects. Cutbacks, often across the board, don't recognize or reward productivity where it exists in government. Senior executives in the public service have often needed to focus their attention on managing staff cuts in their departments and lowering the expectations of external stakeholders.

Elected governments have pursued their agendas with an expectation that the professional public service will loyally implement policies. However, we're now seeing the emergence of permanent political campaigning in Canada (an unwelcome influence of American politics). With fixed election dates, 24/7 news media cycles and the pervasiveness of social media, elected governments are increasingly calling upon the support and advice of political advisers. After all, the public service was neither built nor structured for non-stop political campaigning.

Under these circumstances, how can the public services of our country attract, retain and harness the talent of a new generation of leaders? How can they compete with other sectors in the national and global search for talent?

**C**learly, the strategic shifts and culture changes required represent very big challenges. Yet, I notice anything but complacency as I survey the senior ranks of the public service across Canada. Virtually every province and territory has recently been engaged in program reviews, core mandate analyses and new forms of employee engagement. At the federal level, the most significant public service engagement program ever initiated in our country, *Blueprint 2020*, is now entering its third year, with impressive momentum and commitment. A great deal of concerted effort is being made to reposition—or rebrand—the public services of our country.

The task ahead isn't going to be easy. It will require dedicated and persistent leadership. And it will also require some committed political champions.

And while the reputation of the public service may be tarnished, this doesn't need to be permanent. After

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all, a reputation is simply a snapshot at a moment in time; it's what other people say. In my view, a more important question is: what does the public service say about itself? I'm referring to its brand. Its promise. Different from reputation, the public service brand needs to be clearly and credibly articulated. And it requires some reach, some ambition for the future. As the Clerk of the Privy Council, Janice Charette, noted in the message accompanying her recent annual report, the public service of Canada “can never be satisfied with the status quo—we must always make room for new ideas, new realities, new business models and new developments.”

**A**s a non-governmental organization, the Public Policy Forum has the privilege to work with all levels of government in Canada. As a keen observer of our public services, I can confidently say that that the energy currently being devoted to strategic realignment and managing generational change is truly impressive. What's more, very few career paths offer the range of opportunities or challenges that can be found in government. And these jobs provide a chance to have a real and lasting impact on our fellow citizens, communities and country.

Rebranding the public service requires continuing outreach and active engagement. Public service leaders need to be involved in promoting the potential for rewarding careers—and helping to make them happen. People want to work for leaders who are passionate about what they do. Those who take pride in their work instil the same attitude in others. To build an attractive workplace environment, public service leaders must

value people, listen to their needs and nurture talent. By engaging and empowering employees, the public service can support innovation and increase productivity, leading to greater impact and public confidence. All senior managers today need to be passionate talent scouts, always alert to high potential recruits, internally and externally. This essential task can't be the responsibility of the human resources department alone.

Yes, the task is a bold one: reclaiming the public services of Canada as employers of choice for a new generation of leaders. I believe, such a repositioning—or rebranding—is ambitious, timely and necessary.

Now, to return to the advice requested by that bright young person. I asked numerous senior public service leaders how they might respond. While these were private conversations, I have no difficulty in telling you that initial reactions were quite negative. No one wants to see a bright, promising career launched by heading down a cul-de-sac. However, upon reflection and with a bit of discussion, the responses generally changed to something along these lines: “Well, it's going to be different than it was in the past. And it's going to be very, very challenging. But we're going to need smart, committed and innovative people more than ever...” **P**

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