

▶▶ JSGS FEATURED LECTURE SERIES: TECHNOLOGY AND GOVERNANCE

Reclaiming Public Administration

Presented by the Honourable Jocelyne Bourgon, P.C., Q.C.

Former Clerk of the Privy Council and President, Public Governance International

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The Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy organizes an annual Featured Lecture Series exploring themed policy areas. Presenters are invited to bring a unique and interesting look to the topic, especially any new theoretical or applied developments. The theme for 2013-2014 was Technology and Governance.

RECLAIMING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

*Presented by the Honourable Jocelyne
Bourgon, P.C., Q.C.*

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INTRODUCTION

You have selected an interesting theme for this lecture series: *Technology and Governance*.

Technological innovations have contributed to transforming the world we live in. They have played a key role in human history. The effects of technological innovations are cumulative and transformative. There are often long gaps between discovery, early implementation and the moment when their full impact is revealed.

The countries that have been able to adapt to a changing world and to harness the potential of technological innovations have enjoyed some comparative advantages – temporarily. However, the countries that have performed the best in recent times may not be those that will adapt successfully to the challenges resulting from the coming together of globalization and the revolution in digital communications.

Your lecture series proposes that, “digital communication is transforming political and public life.” Fair enough, but let’s explore what this may mean in practice; and in the process, let’s challenge some conventional ideas. After all, this is the role of a school like yours, dedicated to the study of public policy challenges.

There is much more to the topic you have selected than E-government (the use of IC technologies to improve the productivity, efficiency and

accessibility of government services); the creation of a single window to provide integrated services across agencies and levels of governments; and open data (making publicly available the data generated by the use of public funds; or the exploration of how governments can better use social media).

How will digital communication and IC technologies transform the world we live in? What new public policy challenges will emerge as a result?

How can we prepare government and society for the challenges that lie ahead and that result from the transformation brought about by ICTs and digital communications?

What is different about governing in the hyper-connected world we live in?

These challenges and others have been the focus of an international collaborative research effort I have led over the last five years to generate a *New Synthesis of Public Administration*. The project is aimed at preparing government for the challenges of governing in a post-industrial era. I will tangentially refer to it during this lecture, and draw some examples relevant to our topic.¹

REACHING A POINT OF INFLECTION

We live in a period of profound transformation. To navigate successfully through an intense period of change will require:

- A *different way* of thinking about the role of government in society;
- An *expanded view* of the range of options available to us to bring about the desired societal results;
- The *recognition* that conventional approaches will be insufficient to generate viable solutions to an increasing number of public policy issues.
- An *appreciation* that the digital revolution and IC technologies increase the potential for *recombinant innovation* – the

recombination of issues, capacities, capabilities, instruments, and resources to achieve results of higher public value. The coming together of a diversity of means of production, some conventional and most not, that by interacting with each other generate results of higher public value at a lower overall cost for society.

Different *public policy choices* will set countries on different trajectories. Some will evolve and prosper, some will adapt with difficulty and at a great cost to society, while others will falter.

The difference, to a large extent, will depend on the capacity of their respective political and public institutions, as well as on the policy choices governments make.

Developed economies are reaching a point of inflection. The key choices have not yet been made and the outcomes remain uncertain, but whatever the choice – countries with public institutions fit for addressing the challenges of the post-Industrial era will have a heightened capacity to influence the course of events in their favour and to outperform others.

Political and public institutions matter. They play an important role in the overall performance of countries. They play a critical role in periods of transformation. They hold the levers necessary to steer society through periods of change by improving the likelihood of successful adjustments and by mitigating the negative impact on society, particularly for the most vulnerable.

And yet, public and political institutions in many developed countries are showing serious signs of weakness at the very moment when they are most needed.

Thirty years of “public sector reforms” have reduced public administration to public sector management and a concern about the inner workings of government. A drive for efficiency has displaced discussions about public policy choices. Accountability for processes has become a substitute for accountability for societal progress.

Fifteen years of crises have clearly revealed that reforms did not prepare government for the challenges of serving in a post-industrial era. Instead, these crises revealed the weaknesses of institutional arrangements.

After so many years of reforms, we are losing sight of the big picture and governments are struggling to adapt. Reforms are getting in the way of the most necessary transformations – building the capacity of public institutions able to adapt to fast-changing needs and circumstances, and building the resilience of societies able to absorb shocks and disturbances, adapt, evolve and prosper in all circumstances, whether favourable or unfavourable.

Public organizations and institutions serve a public purpose. Whatever the political inclination of the governing party, the objectives of public institutions are to build a better future and to improve the welfare of its citizens.

There have been **too many reforms and not enough re-forms**. This is a propitious time to re-think the role of government in society, re-frame the most important policy challenges we face as a society, re-design our approach to problem-solving and re-form (transform) the relationships that create a bond between government, citizens, and society.

This transformation may prove particularly difficult for countries that have benefited the most from the governance model inherited from the Industrial Age.

AN INDUSTRIAL STATE FOR THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

Looking back is always useful. It helps us to see more clearly what is already emerging.

What have been some of the most important developments in human history, and what do they tell us about the impact of technological innovations?

Farming and agricultural technologies have helped to ensure abundant

food supply. They enabled human settlements and eventually facilitated the development of cities. Cities made it possible to accumulate wealth and to free up creative time for arts, innovation, philosophy, governance, etc. High population density is the bedrock of innovation. Rich cities were the regular targets of conquests. Empires with military knowledge, know-how and advanced warfare technologies expanded their dominance over vast territories.

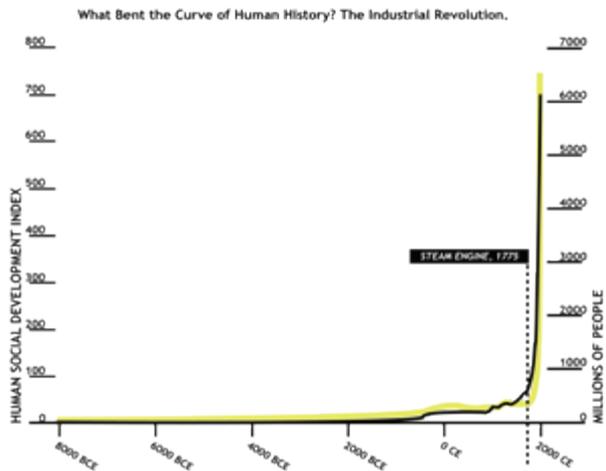
For many thousands of years, human development followed a progressive trajectory. This pattern changed less than 200 years ago.

The Industrial Revolution bent the curve of human history and propelled population growth and social development.²

The Industrial Revolution was the result of several nearly simultaneous innovations in mechanical engineering, chemistry, metallurgy, and other disciplines. The most important technological innovation was the steam engine in the mid-to-late 18th century.

These innovations gave rise to the mass production of goods, the industrialization of the economy, and the “modern way of life.”

The Industrial Revolution took shape over several decades. At first, the transformation was progressive and incremental; then it gained momentum and changes occurred very fast.



Source: Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules for Now: The patterns of History and what they reveal* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010) p.497

Government and public institutions played a key role in ensuring the successful transformation of countries undergoing a dual process of change related to industrialization and democratization. There is every reason to believe that the role of government will be as critical this time around, and that government will be called upon to steer society through the change process that is currently under way.

The question is – are public and political institutions up to the task?

THE INDUSTRIAL STATE

Most of the public institutions in place today in OECD countries, including Canada, adopted their current shape towards the end of the 19th and early 20th century.

The *Industrial State* was and remains a powerful governance model. It was designed for the mass production of public services. It works best in a relatively stable environment and for providing standardized services codified under law. Its functioning is based on a number of conventions, including a relative separation of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary in efforts to provide checks and balances on executive power, as well as a separation of political and professional activities to prevent patronage.

This model of government encouraged the dominance of the rule of law. It provided the stability and predictability needed to support industrialization and for a market-based economy to flourish.

A professional civil service ensured that public agencies had the capacity to administer an expanding range of programs and services. This was essential for nation-building and allowed government to support a growing population.

In this model, citizens are subservient; they vote and pay taxes. They are recipients or beneficiaries of government services.

The *Industrial State* provides us with a solid foundation, but this model

of governance will be insufficient to prepare government and society for the challenges of serving in a post-industrial era.

The public institutions inherited from the Industrial Age were not designed to operate in an environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and the risk of global cascading failures. They are not adapted to the transformation brought about by the digital revolution and the changing relationship between government and citizens that a hyper-connected society entails.

ARE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS FIT FOR THE TIME?

Traditional approaches are leaving government in a reactive position, unable to anticipate, prevent, or initiate proactive action to reduce the risk of failure even when the costs of inaction will be borne by society as a whole.

This can be seen in the real estate crisis, the Great Recession, the crisis in the financial sector, the sovereign debt crisis, but also in the inability to mitigate the impact of climate change or to curb rising inequality. It can also be seen in the manifestations of weakness in our political and public institutional arrangements.

Institutional Deficits

We are witnessing *institutional deficits* when institutional capacity is not commensurate to the challenges at hand. For instance, in spite of 50 years of effort, the project to create a united Europe – the European Union – is facing difficulty because of a lack of common institutions and common instruments to support a common currency.³

Institutional Breakdowns

We are witnessing *institutional breakdowns* when the public and political institutions that were created for deliberation, consensus-building and compromise are paralyzed by entrenched positions. For instance, the USA is facing a governance crisis because the mechanisms

to enforce the will of the majority are weaker than ever.⁴ This is what F. Fukuyama describes as the decay of institutions – the result of intellectual rigidity and the growing power of entrenched political actors that prevent reform. The federal government’s shutdown over the debt ceiling in October 2013 is a clear example of this challenge.

Institutional Erosion

We are witnessing institutional erosions in various parts of the world. Such erosion may take many forms.

For instance, tensions between elected officials and the professional public service in the UK are at an all-time high. This dysfunctional political-professional interface affects the capacity of government to undertake reforms that require a high level of cooperation.

There are signs of a progressive de-professionalization⁵ within the civil service in a number of Westminster countries. This is the case in Canada and Australia for instance, where a parallel political public service,⁶ comprised of people who are neither elected nor office-holders in the civil service, yield great power without accountability for the influence they exercise on elected officials. This gives rise to issues of accountability and transparency. It brings confusion to roles and responsibility. It can be both risky and costly, as was recently witnessed in the case of the closure of an energy station in Ontario.⁷

Other signs of erosion include measures that limit the answerability of government to Parliament or increase the power of the purse at the expense of citizens’ influence on their democratic institutions.

Whatever the case, the main point is that there is a growing gap between the capacity of public institutions in many developed countries, the increasing complexity of the public policy challenges we face as a society, and citizens’ expectations of their government.

DIFFERENT TIMES, DIFFERENT WAYS

Institutional reform is extremely difficult because there are vested interests, the prevailing order is entrenched, and because it can only be achieved with some disruption to the existing political order. Reforming out-dated institutions may be one of the most important challenges faced by people in government today and promises to be a crucial step towards preparing government for what lies ahead.

A Changing Political Landscape

Some think of technology and government as a way of providing better public services at a lower cost and with higher user satisfaction. This is a worthwhile endeavour, but in reality, the impact and the potential are much greater.

People in government today are the first generation to serve in a world where social media transforms both public policy issues and the context within which solutions to these issues must be found.

Citizens are political beings. This was always the case, but the notion is now taking on new meaning. New information and communication technologies are giving people new ways to express their views and new tools to ensure that their voices will be heard.

That said, people are not born citizens. We become citizens as we accept the constraints that make living in society possible and rise above our individual preferences to advance the collective interest. We become citizens by taking on responsibilities as members of a larger community.

Public institutions create citizens and promote citizenship. They build civic space to reconcile differences, make choices and set priorities. They help ensure that society is imbued with a civic spirit conducive to collective action. The role of government to forge broad-based consensus to advance the collective interest is more challenging than ever.

A multitude of voices does not amount to an expression of the collective interest:

The capacity to gather large crowds at the same place at the same time does not guarantee societal or democratic progress. In fact, we have seen that vast mobilizations that have required sacrifice and courage could be easily reclaimed by groups with a single focus and some organizational capacity.

The rise of “angry hashtag activists” may be a force for change – but it is not always civic or civil. It operates as a network in which Twitter, political activists and corporate entities co-exist and where outrage and anger are the currency that galvanizes people.⁸ This may help to advance a cause, but it also makes it more difficult to search for solutions that are acceptable to the larger community because it leads to a hardening of positions, and portrays people with opposing views as “the enemy”.

The path of least resistance for government is to run for cover, find someone to blame, or cater to the loudest demands regardless of whether this serves the collective interest. A challenge for government will be to find new ways to elevate the public discourse and forge broad-based consensus in this changing political landscape. This is not on display as frequently as one might hope, but there are signs of a public appetite for a different way of doing politics and for forging policy responses.

Political parties that have benefited from traditional approaches may have the greatest difficulty adapting.

A Changing Relationship with Citizens

Citizens are breaking out of their subservient relationship with government. In various ways, they are seeking mutuality and shared responsibility. They want to be involved.

They want to have a say in matters of interest to them. They want to know that their voices will be heard. Digital communications and IC

technologies are giving them the means to ensure that this will be the case. They want to play an active role as value creators of public results by working with public agencies.

The conventional approach sees government agencies as the primary providers of public services. While this approach remains relevant in a number of cases, it is now possible to explore different ways to share responsibilities, where users and beneficiaries of government services are active participants in the production of public results.

In every country one can find powerful examples of how a different sharing of responsibilities between citizens and public agencies may generate better public results, and higher user satisfaction at a lower overall cost to society. The following examples are drawn from the *New Syntheses Project*.⁹

Self-organization, and in particular, technology-enabled self-organization, opens new avenues to reinvent a vast range of government services. In these cases, the role of government is to uncover the ways and means to create an enabling environment that empowers citizens to take actions of interest to them in a manner that also advances the collective interest. The role of government is also to monitor results and to stand ready to course-correct as needed. Self-organization was used successfully to reduce energy consumption in Charlotte, USA¹⁰ and to lower the rate of cycling accidents in London.¹¹

Co-creation brings together users, providers of public services and other interested stakeholders to generate a policy response adapted to the circumstances and within the parameters set by government. The policy reform initiated by the Danish National Board of Industrial Injuries provides a compelling example.¹²

Co-production entails the shared and reciprocal responsibilities of users or beneficiaries working with public agencies to generate better public results by making use of their respective resources and capacities. Co-production may also engage the families and communities that use public services. This was the case for the clinic of

internal medicine in Sweden.¹³

An increasing number of complex public challenges exceed the capacity of government working alone. Public results are a shared responsibility that requires a collective effort.

Smart governments are those that will develop innovative ways to combine state authority through conventional means (taxation, spending, legislation), with a diversity of other processes to enrol the active contribution of users and beneficiaries of government services, as well as their families and communities. The challenge for government is to uncover how to achieve the best results with the least amount of energy and resources.

A CHANGING PUBLIC POLICY LANDSCAPE

Political and public institutions must adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

At the same time, they must also re-think the policy responses that may have worked well in the past, but are unlikely to perform as well in the future. This starts by challenging the conventional ideas that are considered to be immutable truths. This challenge function is one of the important roles played by schools of public policy such as yours.

Old Truths, Half-truths and Lies

For many years, people were told that if they worked hard, got the right skills, and played by the rules, they would move ahead and achieve middle-class status. They were told that, with the proper education, they could expect their children to do better than themselves. Quoting Thomas Friedman, “That is just not true anymore.”¹⁴

What if the high unemployment levels that have prevailed in most developed countries over the last ten years continue unabated for the next decade?

What if the pace of disruptive technological change outpaces the absorptive capacity of society for years to come?

What if the already rising income and wealth inequalities present in most rich countries continue to grow? And what if all this was the natural consequence of the transformation of the economy brought about by ITCs and digitization?¹⁵

In summary, what if digital technologies were generating more wealth, more growth, more choices, more diversity and a higher quality of life for some, but also increasing disparities of wealth, income, standards of living and opportunities for a better life for others?

Governing is never boring, but governing currently presents an interesting mix of challenges for political and public institutions to steer society through the most profound transformation since the Industrial Revolution. What do we need to do to create shared prosperity? What are we prepared to do as a society to help our fellow citizens adjust?

MORE WEALTH AND LESS WORK

It took generations to fine-tune the steam engine to the point that it could power the Industrial Revolution. It also took time to refine the digital engines. The conditions are ripe to accelerate the process of change significantly.

Instagram and Kodak

Fifteen people at Instagram created software that 130 million customers have used to share 16 billion photos. After eighteen months, the company was sold for \$1 billion to Facebook. The owners became billionaires.

Kodak, at some point, employed 45,300 people. A few months before Instagram was sold, Kodak filed for bankruptcy.

There is no cause-and-effect relationship between these two stories, but

it does illustrate the transformation that is under way in the economy.

A conventional view inherited from the Industrial Age is that technological advances always boost productivity. They may lead to some dislocations for a time, but ultimately they will generate wealth and new growth prospects that in turn will create new job opportunities. The conventional view was that improvements in productivity work alongside job creation and wage increases. It is time to re-think this assumption, re-frame the issue, and re-design our policy responses.¹⁶

TurboTax

TurboTax automated the job of preparing tax reports. It provides people with the option of getting their tax report done free of charge with the support of good algorithms. By automating the process, it triggered a chain reaction that is likely to affect hundreds of thousands of tax preparers.

Similar chain reactions can be expected in many domains of activity. The policy response of choice in the past has been to upgrade skills. This is unlikely to work if unemployment caused by discovering new ways to use less labour outruns the pace at which the economy is able to generate new sources of employment.

In these examples, workers are not replaced by cheap labour in other countries (in fact the same trend is happening in emerging markets – manufacturing employment has fallen by 25 percent in China since 1996). Rather, technology has allowed companies to produce more output with less demand for labour.

Transformation and adaptation are facts of life and necessary conditions for society to evolve, but dislocation is not inevitable.

The key point to remember is that these problems will not resolve themselves. They require deliberate actions and a robust mix of public policies.

Some countries have made the choice of exploring options for “equitable

economies” (e.g. South Korea). Some are exploring options for creating “shared prosperity.” Denmark is working to reinvent social safety nets based on principals of shared responsibility.

Canada, to some extent, has been protected from the challenges associated with rising inequality by significant cash transfer programs between provinces (“equalization”). Nonetheless, no country is an island. A world of rising unemployment and rising inequality is a dangerous world environment for all.

THE RISE OF INEQUALITY AND THE DECLINE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

It is known by now that income and wealth inequality in many rich countries has soared in recent decades and even more since the Great Recession.¹⁷ In the last decade, income inequality grew even in traditionally more equalitarian countries like Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.¹⁸

The conventional view is that technological advances work alongside wage increases. Recently, median wages have stopped matching productivity gains. The reality is that a small fraction of people capture an increasing portion of the benefits of growth. But does this matter?

Many public policies are based on the assumption that income distribution follows a normal curve. This means that the largest number of people find themselves in the middle. As you move further away from the centre, the number of participants drops rapidly. An average person is one in the middle of the distribution.

This might have been a valid assumption until recently, but it needs to be revisited. If the economy were still behaving this way, the median income over the last 10 years would have risen with the average income.¹⁹

We might be heading instead for a power-law distribution of income and economic opportunities. This means that a small number of people reap a disproportionate share of the benefits of growth and wealth creation. In practical terms, it also means that most people are below the average and

that average income can increase without any increase for most people.

In a number of developed economies, middle class workers are squeezed between a shrinking welfare state and a changing market.²⁰ People feel that the economy is not working for them. They worry that public institutions may not be able to protect their interests. In the end, it does not matter if a country's GDP is growing if people lose hope that they can benefit from such growth.²¹

Rising inequality is not inevitable. Public policies make a difference. Some countries, including Canada, fared better than others due to an elaborate system of transfer payments. In other cases, it is possible to link policy decisions and increasing inequality. For instance, in the USA, inequality rose as tax for the wealthiest fell. In the UK, the second most unequal developed country according to the OECD, inequality rose with the introduction of austerity measures, a problem that Sweden and Canada managed to avoid when they introduced ambitious austerity policies during the 1990s.

CONCLUSION

What can we do to prepare government for the challenges of the 21st century?

I would like to conclude by saying a few words about an international project I have been leading for the past five years.

There are significant differences to governing in a post-industrial era compared to any time in the past. The *New Synthesis Project*²² is dedicated to modernizing public administration as a discipline and as a domain of practice to prepare government to be fit for the challenges of the 21st century. As a discipline, public administration did not keep up with the changes taking place in the current era. In practice, governments are struggling to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century.

The New Synthesis Project draws its inspiration from what is happening in practice in various countries. It draws insights from a diversity of

disciplines including ecology, sociology, psychology, complexity theory, adaptive systems, etc.

The project has evolved through many phases. It has generated an intellectual theoretical framework that is quite different from the classic public administration, and has proven to be robust for developed, developing and emerging economies. We are now testing how to transfer the key findings to practitioners and assess what differences it makes in practice.

Public administration is not about structures, systems or the inner workings of government. It is about the relationship that binds citizens, government and society. This calls for a very different approach to public sector reforms than the one on display in most developed countries over the last 30 years. We need fewer reforms and more transformation. We need less focus on the efficiency of the parts and more on public purpose and societal results, less on the efficiency of public agencies and more on building the capacity of public institutions to adapt to the changing needs and circumstances and to co-evolve with society.

Countries with public administrations that are fit for the times will be able to propel society forward. Countries with maladapted public administrations will pay a high price. They will slow down human progress and inflict society with a higher burden than necessary. In the worst cases, they will lead to declining confidence and social unrest.

The trajectory of a country is not pre-ordained. Past successes do not guarantee future progress. At this very moment, there is a search for a model of governance better adapted to the reality of serving in the 21st century. Countries are experimenting with various approaches. Over time, some approaches will come to dominate.

This is a challenging but opportune time to be in government. People in government deserve all the help we can give them. In some modest way, this is what the NS Project is about. It is also the mission of a school deserving of the names of Johnson and Shoyama.

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