

Pandemic shows the true value of government

By Michel Bilodeau and Jocelyne Bourgon

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Conservatives and libertarians have been telling us for decades that less government is good government. But the current pandemic is showing us the fallacy of this principle.

The New Synthesis of public administration has argued that the private sector and civil societies play important roles, but that only government, and by extension public institutions, have the exclusive *responsibility* of serving the collective interest. Governments are the stewards of the collective interest in all circumstances, whether they are the primary service provider or use intermediaries. Governments bear a special responsibility to monitor progress and initiate corrective action if necessary. Public institutions, public organisations and civil servants serve a public purpose. This is the essence of their role in society. Public institutions are needed to build a civic spirit conducive to collective actions. They provide the checks and balances to reconcile the pursuit of individual and collective interests. They build the collective capacity to invent a better future. They are the stewards of the collective interest and the insurer of last resort.

Of course, the public service must increase its efficiency wherever and whenever it can. But the pursuit of efficiency may have perverse effects. For example, it is generally accepted that an **optimal occupancy rate** for an acute-care hospital is 80-85 per cent. This allows hospitals to face peaks and valleys, respond to crises or outbreaks and use staff efficiently. Organizations that devote 100% of their resources to their day-to-day operations are actually ineffective because there is no time to foresee the changes in the environment, to innovate and no capacity to face surge in demand. Over the years, hospitals and beds have been closed to the point where occupancy rates hover around 100 per cent most of the time. This means that people stay longer at Emergency, surgeries are postponed, hospitals are short staffed, etc... Efficiency gains may reduce the overall effectiveness of the system. We could have financially very efficient hospitals but a very unhealthy population.

The coronavirus pandemic should help us rediscover that the public sector's role is to define, promote and advance the collective interest, and produce the goods that we consume collectively. Public institutions must reconcile people's interests as part of a broader community. People in government today face an increasing number of complex issues, such as an aging population, climate change, global security and, of course, pandemics. These issues are multidimensional—the economic, social, political and environmental dimensions are intertwined—and respect no boundaries.

People in government today serve in a world characterised by volatility and uncertainty resulting from our global economy and our hyper connected society.

The last fifteen years have witnessed crises of various kinds and the current pandemic shows that there is every reason to believe that the scale, scope and frequency of crises will continue to increase.

We owe to public institutions many of the innovations that have given shape to the societies we live in today. They have given us the nation state and the rule of law. They have created the policies and programs that have contributed to building societal solidarity--from public health and public education systems, to public pension and support programs to assist citizens most in need. They have generated the laws necessary for a market economy to flourish, from corporate laws to intellectual property and the regulation of financial institutions. They have built the infrastructures needed for a modern society and economy to develop including the roads, harbours, airports, as well as the modern information and communication infrastructures.

Governments are the insurer of last resort. They have rescued financial institutions during the 2008 financial crisis, and they are now asked to rescue individuals and businesses. This gives new meaning to the concept of *private risks and collective responsibility*. Now more than ever, we need governments and public institutions that are strong and competent, and we also need citizens who act responsibly and understand that government is much more than another provider of services in exchange for their taxes.

(Jocelyne Bourgon is a former clerk of the Privy Council and now President of Public Governance International (PGI). Michel Bilodeau is a former CEO of Bruyere Continuing Care and CHEO, and now Vice-President of PGI)