

DEVELOPING POLICY CAPACITY AND THE POLICY RESEARCH INITIATIVE: AN OVERVIEW

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and the Policy Research Initiative:
An Overview

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Foreword


I have dedicated my career, over 50 years so far, to the field of public administration both as a practitioner in Canada and abroad and by conducting research.

In 2023, I started to collect my documents for their transfer to and safe keeping by Library and Archives Canada. In the process, I realised that the public records on many issues are lacking a public service perspective, including about events and changes that have shaped the Public Service as an institution over the years. This is due to many factors, including that:

- Canada does not have a tradition of documenting historical events as is the case in Europe, the USA, and many Asian countries.
- Memoirs and biographies focus primarily on political events, leaving unanswered the question of how ideas came about and how they were achieved in practice.
- There is no rigour to the transfer of public records to Library and Archives. In most countries, it is mandatory after 20 years. In Canada, this is left to each organisation. By the time records are transferred, there may not be anyone left with direct knowledge of the context.

Colleagues I consulted argued that the transfer of my documents should be accompanied by a number of essays to guide future readers and researchers. This was a useful suggestion. For instance, many of my papers as Clerk of the Privy Council were not written as detailed agendas or articles. They were speeches, not intended for publication. Speeches are vignettes of an exchange between a speaker and the community it aspires to reach at a given point in time. They were aimed at public servants, people with insider knowledge of the situation prevailing in the public sector at that point in time. Therefore, they do not explain the context but go straight to discussing the challenges ahead to generate a common sense of purpose and encourage convergence across the public service. They made sense for people who were there at the time. But, many years later, readers may be unaware of the context, the aspirations, or the significance of the actions taken at the time.

Putting these records into context grew into a broad research and archival project, an effort to trace ideas and their development, to remember public service history from a public service perspective, and to draw lessons for serving and governing in the 21st century. The PGI team has conducted interviews, gathered and reviewed additional records, and worked to record history. This paper is a product of that work.



The Hon. Jocelyne Bourgon
President of PGI

Introduction

In the earliest stages of Program Review, on June 22nd-23rd 1994, Jocelyne Bourgon held the first Deputy Ministers' Retreat of her time as Clerk of the Privy Council. By the end of the meeting, attendees were to "have reached some conclusions about the work plan that would lead us into the fall."¹ Bourgon's Public Policy Forum speech on October 13th 1994, four months later, reflects a key set of findings from the Retreat. From her first days as Clerk, Bourgon spoke of strengthening a public service undergoing transformation.² The PPF speech was more specific, laying out three goals to both mitigate the harm of a decade of continuous public service downsizing - something that, with Program Review underway, would continue - and to bring about a public service stronger than before: "to modernize our service delivery, strengthen our policy capacity and build a vibrant institution capable of serving today and in the future."³

In August of 1995, these three goals became a full chapter of Bourgon's first annual report on the public service, explored in greater depth,⁴ and each was handled with its own initiative: in order, an effort to modernize service delivery, the Policy Research Initiative, and La Relève.

Identifying Needs

Two months prior to the annual report, June 1995, Bourgon gave a keynote address for the Canadian Centre for Management Development's (CCMD) Rethinking Policy program conference. The Canadian public service had, she said, the task of assisting elected representatives in making decisions, in providing "knowledge and the analysis of alternative futures, options, [...] information - research, data, trends, comparisons with other countries - in such a way that ministers can fulfil their role."⁵ Bourgon identified a need to strengthen the public service's capacity to anticipate and understand issues in the long term - detecting and analyzing future trends and issues, anticipating problems and planning ahead. At the same time, the capacity to manage horizontal issues, ones cutting across boundaries and departmental jurisdictions, also needed building up. Collaboration was necessary, coordinating activities across potentially many departments, but at the same time, in building horizontal policy capacity, ministerial accountability still had to be respected.⁶

The annual report gave these two goals - long-term policy thinking and cross-boundary policy thinking - their own section: "Strengthening the Public Service's Policy Capacity."⁷ About half a page was dedicated to addressing long-term policy issues, making advice "expansive and reflective rather than reactive and expedient" and making sure immediate crises would not completely overshadow long-term preparation.⁸ More was given to horizontal issues and

1. Jocelyne Bourgon, "Government Priorities and Strategic Planning Role" (speech, Deputy Ministers' Retreat, Ottawa, ON, June 22, 1994), 1.
2. Jocelyne Bourgon, "Change and Management in the Public Service" (speech, APEX, Ottawa, ON, May 11, 1994).
3. Jocelyne Bourgon, "Key Challenges Facing Canada's Public Service" (speech, Public Policy Forum, Ottawa, ON, October 13, 1994), 4.
4. Jocelyne Bourgon, *Third Annual Report to The Prime Minister on The Public Service of Canada* (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, 1995), 37-48
5. Canadian Centre for Management Development, *Rethinking Policy: Strengthening Policy Capacity: Conference Proceedings* (Ottawa: CCMD, 1996), 24-25
6. *Ibid.*, 26-29.
7. Bourgon, *Third Annual Report*, 43
8. *Ibid.*, 44

interdepartmental collaboration, to the need to adapt to “the dominance of horizontal and cross-sectoral issues.”⁹

1995 was a busy year. The Clerk formed nine Deputy Minister Task Forces to probe various public service issues.¹⁰ Each of the coming initiatives found some foundation here. Two in particular were important for the Policy Research Initiative, focusing on the two sides of policy capacity development Bourgon identified: Mel Cappe’s Task Force on Managing Horizontal Policy Issues and Ivan Fellegi’s Task Force on Strengthening Policy Capacity.

Cappe’s task force, launched in the summer of 1995,¹¹ gave advice and made recommendations regarding cross-cutting horizontal issues. In its December 1996 report, it highlighted the need to develop and work with the broader policy community beyond government, and to prepare to handle longer-term policy development, but its primary focus was its primary purpose - horizontal issues.

Fellegi’s task force, launched November 1995,¹² led to the development of the Policy Research Initiative. Fellegi’s team, in their December 1996 report, identified a need to strengthen the public service’s policy making and analysis capacity. Particular emphasis was placed on community-building. The task force recommended working to improve relations with provinces and with the broad policy research community, academics and otherwise.¹³ As well, the report noted a need for a broad policy community *within* the federal public service, one linking policy managers across the government to share best practices and build expertise.¹⁴ A key recommendation followed from there:

The Clerk should establish an inter-departmental umbrella group consisting of ADMs policy or equivalents, to discuss and deal with shared problems of management and methods in policy work. Directly or through subcommittees and task forces, the group should share experiences and, where desirable, develop common approaches to such issues as: policy research and associated methods; information management and the use of information in the policy development process; statistical and data management issues; monitoring and evaluation; personnel management issues specific to the community; contacts with external bodies, including research institutes and academics; best practices in placing federal-provincial issues into a longer term strategic framework through shared strategic policy explorations.

The group’s chair should be appointed by the Clerk. PCO should provide secretariat services.¹⁵

As can be seen from the recommendation, Fellegi’s task force emphasized the role of the Clerk and the Privy Council Office. Fellegi believed there had to be a sustained demand for expanding policy research capacity, and that the PCO was best positioned to keep that demand sustained.¹⁶

9. Ibid., 45

10. A full list can be found in the preface of each Deputy Minister Task Force report.

11. Task Force on Managing Horizontal Policy Issues, *Managing Horizontal Policy Issues* (Ottawa: CCMD, 1996), i

12. Task Force on Strengthening our Policy Capacity, *Strengthening our Policy Capacity* (Ottawa: CCMD, 1996), 1

13. Ibid., 31-37

14. Ibid., 14

15. Ibid., 15

16. Ivan Fellegi, interview by Justin Fiacconi, August 3rd 2023

The Policy Research Initiative

In July 1996, Bourgon launched the Policy Research Committee (PRC), co-chaired by Alan Nymark and Jim Lahey.¹⁷ This was the foundation of the Policy Research Initiative (PRI). Initially meant to have members from 13 departments and agencies, the Committee grew quickly, bringing members together from 22 by the time of its first report.¹⁸

The Policy Research Committee brought ADMs from across dozens of departments and agencies to work together on strengthening policy capacity,¹⁹ as Fellegi recommended, but was not as PCO-centric as Fellegi hoped.²⁰ As of 2001, the co-chairs reported directly to the Clerk,²¹ but it was more bottom-up and department-centric than top-down and PCO-driven.²² It did, as Fellegi recommended,²³ emphasize horizontal and long-term work and collaboration - right from the start, it was aimed at identifying and researching cross-cutting long-term challenges.²⁴ It also worked extensively with the wider policy research community beyond government, and publicized its work - the PRI was exceptionally committed to making its products accessible online.

Getting Going

The mandate of the PRC in July 1996 was to “...prepare a report for Deputy Ministers on the pressure points that are likely to arise in Canadian society by the year 2005 as a result of economic, demographic and social trends...(and to)...make recommendations regarding an interdepartmental research agenda and work program to address gaps in knowledge.”²⁵ This project, known as Canada 2005,²⁶ resulted in a report, *Growth, Human Development and Social Cohesion*, in October 1996, identifying the three titular issues as “the fundamental socioeconomic challenges facing Canada over the 1997-2005 period.”²⁷ This led to the formation of dedicated research networks on growth, human development, and social cohesion. An additional network, focused on global challenges and opportunities, released its own report in February 1997.²⁸ A

17. Laura Chapman, interview by Justin Fiacconi, July 28th 2023

18. Policy Research Initiative, *Overview: Report on Growth, Human Development, and Social Cohesion* (Ottawa: PRI, 1996), archived September 14th 2000 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000914061039/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/overview/growth-e.htm>

19. Policy Research Initiative, *Outlook* (Ottawa: PRI, 1998), archived August 19th 2000 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000819030620/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/perspectives/perspectives-e.htm>

20. Ivan Fellegi, interview by Justin Fiacconi, August 3rd 2023

21. Mark Hopkins, Chantal Couture, and Elizabeth Moore, *Moving from the Heroic to the Everyday: Lessons Learned from Leading Horizontal Projects* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, 2001), 55. The report also lists the PRI's annual funding as \$4.4 million.

22. Ivan Fellegi, interview by Justin Fiacconi, August 3rd 2023; Laura Chapman, interview by Justin Fiacconi, July 28th 2023; Jean-Pierre Voyer, “Policy Analysis in the Federal Government: Building the Forward-looking Policy Research Capacity,” in *Policy Analysis in Canada: The State of the Art*, eds. Laurent Dobuzinskis, Michael Howlett and David Laycock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 322-324

23. Task Force on Strengthening our Policy Capacity, *Strengthening our Policy Capacity*, 22-23

24. Policy Research Initiative, *Outlook*

25. Ibid.

26. Canada 2005 also involved some informal outreach to experts from the academic and business communities – see Jocelyne Bourgon, *Fourth Annual Report to The Prime Minister on The Public Service of Canada* (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, 1997), 31

27. Policy Research Initiative, *Overview: Growth, Human Development, and Social Cohesion*

28. For a summary of the report, see Policy Research Initiative, *Canada 2005: Global Challenges and Opportunities - Overview* (Ottawa: PRI, 1997), archived September 14th 2000 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000914061039/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/overview/canada2005-overview.htm>

Knowledge-Based Economy and Society horizontal research project was also launched.²⁹

Consolidating

In the summer of 1997, a Policy Research Secretariat (PRS) was formed to support the Initiative,³⁰ giving the Initiative an organizational core. Laura Chapman, already the Executive Director of the PRC,³¹ was made head of the Secretariat. The PRS initially operated on a minimal budget. It was assigned, in Chapman's eyes, excellent personnel that it benefited greatly from.³² Several would rise to high leadership positions throughout the public service in the years to come.

The PRI saw itself as entering a new phase of operations. Phase I of the PRI produced the first report, phase II launched targeted networks, and phase III combined support for the networks' continued research with further community-building and wider outreach to the broader policy community.³³ November 1997 featured both a Policy Researchers Conference in Ottawa, aimed at bringing public servants together to share know-how and findings,³⁴ and a first-of-its-kind meeting bringing together Canada's policy research think tanks to plan cooperation and coordination.³⁵ Both events, along with collaboration with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, were highlighted in Bourgon's third annual report, early 1998.³⁶ In the coming years, the PRI held several more conferences and events, including a 1998-99 series of events focused on regional issues and regional policy research communities.

In June 1998, the PRI launched a newsletter, *Horizons: Emerging Developments and Knowledge in Public Policy Research*, distributed for free online. Initially, *Horizons* focused on very short-form content - comments, quotes, and snippets from reports and books of interest, alongside highlights from events and links to websites of note. The first issue, twelve pages in length, opened with a guarantee that readers "will be able to scan the newsletter in the time it takes to ride a taxi-cab from Place du Portage to the Langevin Bloc."³⁷ Over time, issues grew in length and in depth, soon featuring short research reports and more full articles than snippets and highlights. The March 2009 10th anniversary issue, for instance, was 84 pages long,

[archive.org/web/20000914061032/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca:80/keydocs/overview/global-e.htm](http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca:80/keydocs/overview/global-e.htm)

29. Policy Research Initiative, *Outlook*

30. Ibid.

31. Policy Research Initiative, *Progress Report* (Ottawa: PRI, 1997), archived September 14th 2000 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000914061025/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/overview/progress-e.htm>

32. Laura Chapman, interview by Justin Fiacconi, July 28th 2023

33. Policy Research Initiative, *Outlook*. Some later PRI materials placed phases II and III together as a single phase in the Initiative's history; e.g. "About the PRI." Policy Research Initiative, 2007, archived November 15th 2007 at the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20071115064921/http://www.policyresearch.gc.ca/page.asp?pagenm=pri_bck&langcd=E

34. A report was written afterward: Policy Research Initiative, *Policy Researchers Conference* (Ottawa: PRI, 1997), archived December 6th 1998 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19981206212813/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/nov18-97/index-e.htm>

35. A report was written afterward: Policy Research Initiative, *Meeting of Policy Research Organizations* (Ottawa: PRI, 1997), archived January 29th 1999 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990129082328/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/nov13-97/index-e.htm>

36. Jocelyne Bourgon, *Fifth Annual Report to The Prime Minister on The Public Service of Canada* (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, 1998), 9-10.

37. Policy Research Secretariat, "Welcome," *Horizons: Emerging Developments and Knowledge in Public Policy Research* 1, no. 1 (1998): 1

featuring research articles by scholars and the PRI alike.³⁸ Eventually, after many years of distribution, it would cease publication.

Another outreach program of note was the PRI's annual award program, the Canadian Policy Research Awards. Launched in November 1999, the Awards recognized and honoured individuals in and around policy research - people who had made major contributions to policy research over their careers, journalists who covered and analyzed policy research, graduate students who showed potential, and more.³⁹ This received some outside attention. Notably, the journal *Science*, in its capacity as a newsmagazine, gave the graduate student awards feature coverage in 2003.⁴⁰

In the meantime, the PRI's research networks continued to work, but output slowed. The Global Challenges and Opportunities Network released a second report, really a collection of six research reports on topics identified in the first report, in November 1998.⁴¹ All networks worked to write a February 1999 sequel to the PRI's original report - *Sustaining Growth, Human Development and Social Cohesion in a Global World* continued where the original left off, its scope expanded to feature work from the Global Challenges and Opportunities Network and Knowledge-Based Economy and Society Project.⁴²

After Bourgon

At the start of 1999, Bourgon moved on from the post of Clerk of the Privy Council, becoming President of the Canadian Centre for Management Development. In her absence, the Policy Research Initiative continued its work, Chapman continuing to serve as executive director under Clerk Mel Cappe.

From 2000 to 2002, the PRI managed an online open-access scholarly journal published by Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, *Isuma: Canadian Journal of Policy Research*.⁴³ Editor Alfred Leblanc explained the journal's formation in its opening issue: "Why launch a journal of policy research? Because we think the dissemination of policy research can be strengthened, which in turn will contribute to improved public policy outcomes. In government departments, in research institutes, and in universities, we heard similar observations: that the dissemination and wider circulation of policy research should be enhanced and that a new journal in the field, devoted to multi-disciplinary research, would be welcomed."⁴⁴ Each themed issue carried papers by academics from Canada and from abroad, as well as by Canadian public servants - including some by PRI networks. The journal was productive but short-lived, concluding with its eighth issue, Sustainable Development, in Fall 2002. *Horizons*, the newsletter, took *Isuma's*

38. *Horizons* 10, no. 2 (2009)

39. "Background Information," Canadian Policy Research Awards. Archived January 14 2001 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20010114231100/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/awards-prix/backgroundunder.htm>

40. Lesley McKarney, "Encouraging Young Policy Researchers," *Science*, February 21, 2003, <https://www.science.org/content/article/encouraging-young-policy-researchers>

41. Policy Research Initiative, *Second Report of the Global Challenges and Opportunities Network* (Ottawa: PRI, 1998), archived August 19th 2000 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000819030641/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/global2/index-e.htm>

42. Policy Research Initiative, *Sustaining Growth, Human Development and Social Cohesion in a Global World* (Ottawa: PRI, 1999), archived August 19th 2000 at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000819030637/http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/sustain99/index-e.htm>

43. All eight issues of the journal have been archived at the Wayback Machine: https://web.archive.org/web/20060308101411/http://isuma.net/index_e.shtml

44. Alfred Leblanc, "Editorial," *Isuma: Canadian Journal of Policy Research* 1, no. 1 (2000): 6.

place to a great extent as it grew into a long-form publication.

In July 2002, Jean-Pierre Voyer took over as Executive Director of the Policy Research Initiative. Under Voyer, the PRI was retooled and reoriented quite substantially. Chapman had focused outwards, emphasizing outreach to the broader policy community and work to build and support policy capacity within and across departments and agencies.⁴⁵ Voyer's PRI was more inward-looking. He focused more on building an in-house policy research capacity. The PRI became an internal think tank of sorts, its own analysts conducting research in partnership with various departments.⁴⁶ External outreach continued, but with a focus on meeting the needs of the internal community and the PRI's own projects; Voyer saw the state of external connection-building as already healthy.⁴⁷

After the PCO

Voyer's time in charge ended in June 2006, when the PRI was moved from the Privy Council Office to the Department of Human Resources and Social Development. Clerk of the Privy Council Kevin Lynch established a Deputy Ministers Steering Committee (DMSC), chaired by the department's Deputy Minister (then Janice Charette) to oversee and guide the PRI's work and to help spread it throughout the public service.⁴⁸ A PCO representative was eventually, by the late 2010s, made co-chair of the DMSC.⁴⁹

Over time, the Policy Research Initiative faced more demand for long-term policy thinking. In 2008, by request from Clerk Kevin Lynch, PRI carried out a project training 150 public servants in long-term foresight, canada@150.⁵⁰ In 2010, as Clerk Wayne Wouters emphasized the need for long-term policy capacity, the PRI renamed itself and refocused: Policy Horizons Canada, a foresight centre focused on enhancing long-term policy capacity.⁵¹

Policy Horizons Canada remains active to this day, still dedicated to researching long-term issues itself and to building up the rest of the public service's long-term foresight capacity.⁵² It produces its own reports, published on its website (<https://horizons.gc.ca/en/our-work/>). It collaborates with other bodies across the government, and manages a Federal Foresight Network connecting over 50 federal organizations.⁵³ It also emphasizes foresight training, and has developed training materials that it has released for free online.⁵⁴

45. Laura Chapman, interview by Justin Fiacconi, July 28th 2023

46. Voyer, "Policy Analysis," 323-325

47. *Ibid.*, 324-326

48. "About the PRI." Policy Research Initiative, 2007; "About Us," Policy Horizons Canada, accessed November 15th 2023. <https://horizons.gc.ca/en/about-us/>

49. "About Us," Policy Horizons Canada

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*; Imran Arshad, interview by Justin Fiacconi, August 10th 2023

52. Imran Arshad, interview by Justin Fiacconi, August 10th 2023

53. *Ibid.*

54. "Resources," Policy Horizons Canada, accessed November 9th 2023. <https://horizons.gc.ca/en/resources/>



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