

SERVING IN 2025 AND BEYOND

by the

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# Serving in 2025 and Beyond

This lecture was delivered in Singapore in November 2024. It celebrates thirty years of friendship between Jocelyne Bourgon, President of Public Governance International (PGI), and the Singapore civil service.

“Serving is a process of invention: People in government today serve in a more dangerous and challenging time than their predecessors experienced during the last 30 years. The challenge is to ensure that public institutions and public organisations are fit for the challenges ahead. Like their predecessors they will need to preserve ideas and practices of enduring value, but they will also need to bring forward ideas better aligned to the reality of serving in the second quarter of the 21st century.”

## Introduction

In 2023, I received an award from IASIA (the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration). The award recognized that the New Synthesis of Public Administration (NS) “catalyzed public administration scholars and practitioners...” and that it was an “outstanding contribution to public administration and public policy in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

While I was the recipient of the award, the New Synthesis initiative was the result of a collective effort. I am here to celebrate the contribution of the Singapore Civil Service to the New Synthesis of public administration. Singapore’s participants played a key role in this international effort to modernize the field of public administration.

My second purpose is to encourage you, and a new generation of public servants, to take the lead in preparing government for the challenges of serving in the second quarter of the 21st century - a period that is shaping up to be significantly different from the one that existed in the 1990s and until recently. I hasten to say that this keynote address was prepared before the presidential election in the USA and therefore it reflects what was already known about some of the drivers of change that transform the practice of public administration.

## A New Synthesis of Public Administration

The NS initiative was launched in the early days of the 21st century. It focused on a few key questions:

*What do we need to do to prepare government and the public service for the challenges of serving in the early part of the 21st century? And what do we need to do to ensure that the capacity of government to invent solutions will keep pace with the increasing complexity of the world we live in?*

Public administrations have existed since time immemorial. From China to Egypt, from Persia to Rome, kings and emperors have relied on public administrations to transform their ideals about society into reality and to oversee the affairs of government.

Public administrations take different shapes and forms in different parts of the world, but they share some characteristics. They give form to the exercise of power in society. They define the role of government in society and they embody a concept about the relationship between people and government.

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1. Najat Zarrouk, mail to Jocelyne Bourgon, August 3rd, 2023.

Periodically, changes emerge that transform the role of government and the practice of public administration. No institution, public or private, is fit for all times. The challenge for public sector leaders the world over is to ensure that their country will be among those that will successfully navigate through periods of profound changes. This means building public institutions and public organisations fit for the time and the challenges ahead.

The NS initiative brought together senior public sector leaders from six countries: Canada and Brazil, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, Singapore and Australia. It was led by a group of practitioners who shared the view that there was a growing gap between public administration ideas inherited from the 19th and 20th centuries and the complexity of the challenges governments were facing in the early days of the 21st century. The participants believed that they could do something to help close this gap.

This was a most unusual initiative, and borderline crazy when you think about it.

The challenge was to preserve ideas of enduring value inherited from a prior time (rule of law, accountability for the exercise of power, incorruptibility, the merit principle, etc.) and to blend them with new ideas better suited to the reality of serving at a time characterised by increasing complexity and an accelerating velocity of change due to the combined effect of a technological and a digital revolution.

The NS initiative brought to the field of public administration ideas from complexity theory and system thinking, and ideas of adaptive capacity and resilience. The key findings were published in 2011 and again in 2017, once 1000 practitioners had tested these ideas in practice.

In summary, governing and serving was a dynamic process of invention - a consensus significantly different from a mechanistic and minimalist view of the role of government. Governments do much more than just to correct market failures. The public sector is the only sector able to operate on the scale needed to address some of the complex problems that stem from living in a modern, diverse, hyperconnected society on a fragile biosphere in the midst of a technological revolution.

The answer of the pioneers of the NS initiative to prepare governments for the challenges of the early years of the 21st century was to build the anticipative capacity of government, the capacity to work across scales and timelines, the adaptive capacity to course correct as needed and the resilience of society to adapt and prosper even in unforeseen circumstances. In many ways, the Singapore civil service exemplifies these capabilities. The pioneers of the NS Initiative have done good work - but this will be insufficient to prepare governments for what lies ahead.

## 2025 and Beyond

A new generation of public sector leaders must take on the task of preparing public administrations for the challenges of the next 25 years. Public service leaders are called upon to serve in a more dangerous world and a more challenging time. They will need a different way of thinking and different approaches to problem solving.

### Existential Threats

Governments are facing a convergence of existential threats. I like Edgar Morin's perspective: these are risks that threaten the future prospects of the human species.<sup>2</sup>

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2. See Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern, *Homeland Earth* (New York, NY: Hampton Press, 1999); see also Michael Lawrence, Scott Janzwood, and Thomas Homer-Dixon, *What Is a Global Polycrisis? And how is it different*

For the people of my generation, climate change was top of mind. This is an existential threat my generation was unable to address in a timely way and where we are leaving a heavy burden to this generation of public service leaders. Today, my list of existential threats requiring urgent attention is much longer. The risk of other, more virulent pandemics remains very high. The risk of nuclear conflict is at its highest since the end of the Cold War. New technological innovations in areas such as artificial intelligence, bioengineering and geoengineering offer unprecedented opportunities and unprecedented risks for humanity.

For instance, the COVID crisis was not born in a lab, but the next one could be (bioengineering). Artificial intelligence, on top of being excessively energy intensive, is displacing clean energy needed to reduce CO2 emissions and will have unpredictable consequences. The temptation to tamper with the world climate will be irresistible as the impact becomes unbearable in parts of the world (geoengineering).

This is not a gospel of doom. This is part of understanding the landscape and it signals the need to explore the dynamic interrelationships across existential risks to prepare governments for the challenges ahead.

## The Undoing of a World Governed by Rules

Public sector leaders will serve without the benefit of the protective shield that international norms, conventions, and treaties provided at a prior time. The factors that contributed to the *long peace*<sup>3</sup> - a period in modern history without great power wars - are being eroded.

In the aftermath of WWII, a combination of international conventions and the work done by international institutions - the UN, the International Court of Justice, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Genocide Convention, the World Trade Organisation, to name a few - coalesced into a web of norms and principles that influenced countries' behaviors. These norms and conventions never amounted to an international system and even less to "a global world order." It was never universal or universally accepted, but it was sufficiently broadly respected to influence the behaviors of governments. This contributed to a period of relative stability that benefited developed and developing countries alike. For instance, China is rightly proud of lifting millions of people out of poverty. This is undoubtedly due to a mix of sound policy decisions, but it is also due to having access to the world market under WTO rules.

The protective shield of the past 30 years is breaking down. Trade liberalisation is moving in reverse as protectionism is on the rise. A world shaped around Fortress USA, Fortress China and Fortress Europe is a very different world than one propelled by world trade.

The invasion of Ukraine brings us back to a world of realpolitik where countries dominate through territorial invasions, a context favourable to countries with territorial ambitions. Genocides and massacres are showing the weakness of common norms and common institutions when there is no common will to give them effect. Nuclear proliferation treaties are coming to an end and the race is on. The protective shield that contributed to a long period of peace and growth is fraying. The rule of the jungle is different from a world governed by rules. A shift is taking place with yet unknown consequences.

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*from a systemic risk?* (Victoria, BC: Cascade Institute, 2022).

3. John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," *International Security* 10, no. 4 (1986): 99-142.

## Nature's Protective Shields

Public service leaders will need to invent solutions to the problems of living at a turbulent time on a turbulent planet.

The biosphere is a living system where the dynamic interactions between sea, land and air maintain and renew the life sustaining power of the planet. Humans are eroding nature's protective shields.

We are past the time for preventing climate change. The world's biodiversity is rapidly declining. Water scarcity and desertification are expanding, and with this, populations, plants, animals and diseases are on the move. Extreme heat is making populated areas inhospitable.

None of this comes as a surprise. We know the problems and we even know what needs to be done, but the politics of changes on a planetary scale escapes us. If the role of politics is to build consensus to make what is collectively desirable feasible, then on that count the politics of climate change has failed us. The public is supportive of measures to curb CO2 emissions but opposed to measures that affect them. This was the lesson from the gilets jaunes in France, the coal miner protests in Germany, and the opposition to a carbon tax in Canada. Countries are supportive in theory, but divided about who, when, what and how. This is all too little and way too slow.

Serving in 2025 means serving in a more dangerous and a more challenging time.

## Serving is a Process of Invention

Preparing governments for the challenges of the first quarter of the 21st century meant to prepare governments for complexity. Serving in 2025 is when complex issues on a national scale meet complexity on a planetary scale. We need to think on a bigger and deeper scale, not just at a faster pace. Allow me to share some thoughts to stimulate discussion.

## When Complexity Meets Demography

The population of the world will approach its apex sometime over the next 25 years or so and then will begin a slow decline.<sup>4</sup> This projection does not factor the possibility of another pandemic, wars or climate changes. China's population may already have peaked.<sup>5</sup>

This trend will be disruptive and transformative. From one perspective, this may be the best news to limit environmental degradation and the best opportunity to reconceptualise the economy on a more sustainable basis. An aging population will require reconceptualizing work, workforce, health and education systems, even if technologies help to mitigate some of the impact.

Governments will need to reconcile prosperity, solidarity and fiscal capacity in new ways. This

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4. The United Nations *World Population Prospects 2024* (<https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/Probabilistic/POP/TOT/900>) predict the population nearing its peak in the 2050s, peaking in the early 2080s or sooner; other predictions (e.g. Earth4All's *People and Planet*, in 2023) go as early as the 2050s; either way, the peak is approaching quickly.

5. See the United Nations *World Population Prospects 2024* (<https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/Probabilistic/POP/TOT/156>), usefully summarized by Hannah Ritchie and Lucas Rodés-Guirao, "Peak global population and other key findings from the 2024 UN World Population Prospects," *Our World in Data*, July 11, 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/un-population-2024-revision>



is challenging but doable.

However, demographic changes are disruptive and may unleash powerful forces that reveal profound social dissonances that have been kept at bay below the surface. For instance, the driver behind an aging population and declining population growth is the rapid decline of the fertility rate, and behind this is a looming power struggle about the place of women in society.

The global fertility rate has more than halved since 1960s, from over 5 children per woman to 2.3 currently. Fertility rates in Europe, the Americas and Asia are now below 2 children per woman.<sup>6</sup> Since the beginning of humanity, the life of women has been modulated by their reproductive cycle. Having control over their reproductive capacity has transformed the place of women in society.

Countries will respond differently to the challenge of a declining fertility rate. Some will use social and political pressures to coerce women to procreate more frequently. Some will provide incentives to create more favorable conditions to combine work and family responsibilities. Some, as is the case in the USA today, will want to limit women's control over their reproductive decisions.

The world will not give up easily a patriarchal concept of society. We should not underestimate the power struggles and the violence that these changes may unleash. The anger of young men unable to find a spouse in China is real. The pain of young women in Japan and South Korea who refuse to live under a patriarchal concept of family is real. The frustration of young white men with a low level of literacy that are being left behind by a fast changing economy in the USA should not be ignored. Nor should we ignore the rise of femicide around the world and that women are being erased in Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of WWII, the USA became a magnet to attract the best minds in the world in science and technologies. Modern and inclusive societies that ensure equal rights for men and women may become irresistible magnets for highly educated young families that do not want the State to mingle into their most private decisions. They may be irresistible magnets for highly qualified women who aspire to live in a more hospitable environment than the one that exists in their country of origin. Women already represent a majority of graduates and the graduates with the highest grades in several countries.

Over the next 25 years, the competition for talent will be fierce. There is much talent in the world and much of it is mobile. Addressing demographic challenges at the national scale would benefit from thinking of demography on a planetary scale.

## When Complexity Meets Geography

We need to think of geography in a dynamic way and on a planetary scale. The pace of change of the planet has little to do with the slow movements of tectonic plates we learned about in high schools.

For instance, today one percent of the world is exposed to extreme heat. By 2070, extremely hot zones could make up almost 20% of the land. A third of humanity could be exposed to uninhabitable conditions.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Ritchie and Rodés-Guirao, "Peak global population."

7. Sean Fleming, "3 billion people could live in places as hot as the Sahara by 2070 unless we tackle climate change," *World Economic Forum*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/temperature-climate-change-greenhouse-gas-niche-emissions-hot/>

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), global sea water level may rise by 0.3-0.5 meters by 2050. The areas affected by sea level include large coastal cities like New York or Mumbai, small islands like the Maldives, and Southeast Asian cities like Jakarta or Ho Chi Minh City. Some of the most valuable real estate in the world is in coastal areas. The insurance industry is facing billions of dollars of insured loss putting the financial sector at risk and leaving governments in precarious positions.<sup>8</sup>

The inhabitable part of the planet is getting smaller. Planetary changes condition demographic changes, living conditions, access to water, the potential for nutrition, and other forms of development.

By definition, the nation-state is a reductionist concept. Countries simplify the decisions they need to make by forgetting about the complexity of changes on a planetary scale. In fact, we need to do the opposite.

We need a planetary perspective to address challenges born well beyond a country's border and to understand the ripple effects of government decisions in far away places. A planet is a dynamic system.

## When Complexity Meets Ecology

We are lacking an ecological perspective to government decision-making. That means the capacity to understand the relationships between human activities and the environment, and the implications of government decisions for the life sustaining capacity of the planet.

For instance, we know that the techno-industrial complex with its heavy reliance on fossil fuel is essentially responsible for much of the erosion of the planet's protective shields. So, the idea that the digital economy could be the answer to reconciling prosperity and reducing CO2 emissions is alluring. Indeed, many tech companies have positioned themselves as climate leaders to gain government support and public investment.

At this time, there is no evidence and no reason to believe that the digital economy will be any less damaging to the environment than the industrial economy due to the impact of data centers, AI, cryptocurrencies and the like.

Microsoft emissions soared by 30% since 2020 because of data centers. Google emissions are up 50% over the past 5 years because of AI. Goldman Sachs predicts that AI will drive a 160% increase in data center demand by 2030. There are already 5000 data centers in the USA. Microsoft, Google and Amazon are investing in nuclear power (there is still no solution in sight for safe storage). Google and Meta are keeping a coal plant running in Nebraska.

There is a need to reconcile the expected benefits of a digital economy with the imperatives of a green economy. This cannot be achieved without government interventions, without a planetary perspective and, I would add, without an ecological consciousness.

Government cannot take on the cavalier attitude recently of a former chief executive of Google (Eric Schmidt) who recently said that "we're not going to hit the climate goals anyway," and that instead of focusing on reducing emissions, "I'd rather bet on AI solving the problem." Governments do not have the right to gamble with the future of humanity.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Ian Smith and Kenza Bryan, "The uninsurable world: How the insurance industry fell behind on climate change," *Financial Times* (London, UK), June 2, 2024.

9. Quoted in Kenneth Niemeyer and Lakshmi Varanasi, "Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt says we should go

Future public sector leaders will need to reconcile economy, technology and sustainability. They will also need to figure out how technology can be put to productive without destroying the planet.

## Conclusion

The pioneers of the New Synthesis of public administration have done good work. But the search for preparing government for the challenges of serving in 2025 and beyond has barely begun. This search belongs to a new generation of public sector leaders whose thinking and sensitivity are better aligned to the challenges of this time.

What do we need to do to bring a planetary perspective to government decisions to shape responses at the local level that are beneficial on a planetary scale?

What can be done to bring an ecological perspective to government decisions to reveal the consequences that various choices entail for preserving the life sustaining capacity of the planet?

At the end of the day, governing comes down to philosophical choices. What will it mean to be a citizen of this country and a citizen of the world in 2050? What kind of world do we aspire to live in?

The Singapore public service brought complexity theory to public administration before most other countries. The next step may be to bring a planetary perspective and ecological consciousness to government decision making and philosophy to the art of governing.

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all in on building AI data centers because ‘we are never going to meet our climate goals anyway’,” *Business Insider*, October 6, 2024.



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