

STRENGTHENING REPORTING ON THE STATE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Corin Tentchoff and
Jocelyne Bourgon P.C., O.C.

February 2025

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Published by Public Governance International (PGI)

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February 2025

ISBN: 978-1-989294-36-9

ISBN Digital: 978-1-989294-37-6

Introduction

Tracking the state of the Canadian public service as a whole, its fundamentals and its ability to meet the challenges of the rapidly moving and rapidly changing 21st century, is not an easy task. Information is splintered across data collections, surveys, and annual reports from a wide range of entities each responsible for particular aspects.¹ Pulling everything together and getting a holistic view is challenging and time-consuming.

Since 1992, with the passage of the *Public Service Reform Act*, the Clerk of the Privy Council, assigned the additional title of Head of the Public Service, has been tasked with producing an annual report on “the state of the public service.” This was a distinct Canadian innovation, and it has been a valuable part of the information ecosystem, informing its audience of the priorities of the Clerk-as-Head. However, with little definition of what such a report should include and no systematic approach to information gathering and reporting, it is only of so much use. It gives a useful view of the Clerk’s priorities as leader, but the report is not and does not try to be for tracking and reporting on *the state of the public service*.

It has been over thirty years since Canada introduced the role of Head of the Public Service and its associated annual report on the state of the public service. Other countries have also produced similar reports, some clearly taking inspiration from Canada’s innovation and building on it. With decades of lessons to learn from Canada and abroad, it is time to revisit the state of the public service report. What do we need to track to have a comprehensive view of the state of the public service?

This paper attempts to shed some light on these questions. Examining the existing annual report from its inception and similar reports abroad could help in reinventing the report on the state of the public service. Ideally, the Clerk’s existing annual report should remain under a new title, promising what it can and does provide best - the Clerk’s priorities - while a new report on a slower triannual schedule would take on the task of reporting on the state of the public service. This would be flexible but anchored by the fundamentals of an effective public service, focused on rigorously bringing together key indicators to track and report on the fitness and preparedness of the public service. Canada innovated thirty years ago, and others have drawn from the Canadian example. It is Canada’s turn to learn from them and from other similar reports and build on that foundation.

Canada’s State of the Public Service Report

In Canada, some information on the health and performance of the public service as a whole (as opposed to individual parts) is made available by various responsible bodies. On an annual basis, the Treasury Board Secretariat, Public Service Commission, Privy Council Office, various oversight bodies such as the Ethics and Privacy Commissioners, and others release reports, touching upon many elements of the state of the public service. This information landscape is fragmented and difficult for an interested observer to work through, but there is a central report promising, in title, to give some idea of the state of the public service: that of the Clerk of the Privy Council in their role as Head of the Public Service.

The Clerk of the Privy Council’s mandatory annual “report on the state of the public service,” legislatively attached to their role as Head of the Public Service, is a recent creation. It was,

1. On the sheer range of reports and reporting spread about, see Evert A. Lindquist, “Moving Ottawa’s Department and Agency Reporting Forward: Encouraging Accountability and Sustaining Reform,” *Canadian Public Administration* 67, no. 4 (2024)

as Dutil and Ryan noted, “unique in commonwealth practice” - a personal report from the Clerk of the Privy Council, accessibly written and aimed at covering the whole of the public service.² It has since been joined by similar reports from Australia’s and New Zealand’s public service commissioners, to be discussed later, but the novelty should be recognized.

The 1992 *Public Service Reform Act* declared the Clerk of the Privy Council to be the Head of the Public Service, and attached to that extra title the single specific responsibility of writing “a report on the state of the public service.” These decisions came out of the *Public Service 2000* reform effort. The mandate for a report adapted part of the implementation plan in the *PS2000* 1990 white paper; the original white paper specified that the report would specifically be about *PS2000* for its first five years, a point left out of legislation.³ The designation of Head of the Public Service itself, meanwhile, was treated as simply formalizing existing convention and understandings, formalizing the Clerk as the leader of the public service and in this context the leader of *Public Service 2000*.⁴

This annual report has varied significantly in form and content over the years. Section 127 of the *Public Service Employment Act 2003* requires that “The head of the public service shall submit a report on the state of the public service in each fiscal year to the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister shall cause a copy of the report to be laid before each House of Parliament on any of the first fifteen days on which that House is sitting after the Prime Minister receives it.” That is to say, there will be an annual report, it will be from the Head of the Public Service, it will be on the state of the public service, and it will be submitted to the Prime Minister and tabled in Parliament (and, as a result, released to the public). With no definition beyond this, the report has run from as short as nine pages (including cover and front matter) to as long as eighty. It has been used to state and provide updates on the core priorities of the Clerk-as-Head.

The report is and has been a valuable document, contributing to public knowledge and parliamentary oversight of the public service. Clerks-as-Head have used it to publicize their objectives and priorities, making commitments to the Prime Minister, Parliament, and the greater public. They have used it to comment on progress with their past commitments and to highlight some of the issues the public service faces each year. They comment on major events and changes in circumstances.

However, it does not fulfil what the title promises: a report on *the state of the public service*. It was introduced with little guidance and no system-wide approach to gathering critical information. While successive Clerks have tended to discuss what the public service is doing and give a summary of the year in review, the report has a tendency towards being a sort of ‘highlight reel’ of successes (which has its value, but only so much) rather than a clear glimpse of the public service’s ability to handle the challenges ahead. It is a noteworthy document that adds to the public information on the public service, but it is limited.

2. Patrice A. Dutil and Peter Malachy Ryan, “The bonds of institutional language: A discursive institutionalist approach to the Clerk of the Privy Council’s annual report,” *Canadian Public Administration* 56, no. 1 (2013), 28.

3. Canada. *Public Service 2000: The Renewal of the Public Service of Canada*. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1990, p. 98.

4. *Ibid.*, 95-96.

Examples from Other Jurisdictions

Canada is not alone in producing periodic reports on the state of the public service. There are examples abroad to learn from.

New Zealand:

New Zealand's tri-annual State of the Public Service report, first issued in December 2022, is the most similar to Canada's; the Canadian Head of the Public Service model was taken into consideration during the legislative process and it is likely that Canada's report had some influence. The New Zealand report is legally mandated, was introduced alongside the position of Head of Service, and is produced by the Public Service Commissioner, the Head of Service. It is sent to the Minister for the Public Service, rather than the Prime Minister, and from there tabled in the House.

Section 16 of schedule 3 of the *Public Service Act 2020* sets out the legal requirements for the report. At least once every three years, the Public Service Commissioner must provide the Minister for the Public Service with a briefing, then to be provided to the House. The contents of this briefing are open-ended, but the *Public Service Act* provides specific suggestions of the purpose and content (underlining added for emphasis):

- (2) The purpose of a briefing is to promote stewardship of the public service.
- (3) The subject matter must be selected by the Commissioner and take into account the issues that the Commissioner considers are of significant public interest.
- (4) The briefing may include an assessment of—
 - (a) whether and the extent to which—
 - (i) the public service is achieving its purpose:
 - (ii) public service chief executives, public service agencies, and Crown agents are upholding the public service principles:
 - (iii) public service chief executives, public service agencies, and Crown agents are promoting stewardship of the public service, in particular its long-term capability:
 - (iv) people working in the public service are meeting the required standards of integrity and conduct:
 - (v) public service agencies are achieving workforce diversity and inclusiveness:
 - (b) the risks and opportunities that are affecting the context in which the public service operates:
 - (c) any other matter that the Commissioner thinks is relevant.⁵

In short, legislation recommends, but does not require, coverage of a core set of fundamentals (performance, principles, stewardship and long-term capability, integrity and conduct, and representation/diversity), context and circumstances, and anything else the Commissioner thinks needs to be flagged. This guidance is explicit and clear, as is the central purpose of

5. *Public Service Act, 2020*, sch. 3, sec. 16 (New Zealand)

the report: to promote stewardship of the public service.

The first (and so far only) report (2022), being the inaugural report, features several pages of introductory material and historical background - what is the public service? How has it developed over the decades? - and cannot be assumed to be representative of what the average report will be. However, the content is worth noting. The report describes progress and the state of affairs on several themes, including outcomes and services, trust and integrity, open government and public participation, and the Maori-Crown relationship. These sections include relevant data, as well as short case studies of particular programs and activities. Each section concludes with a “Commissioner’s comment” laying out expectations and priorities for the next three years - e.g. “our people” ends with objectives such as “better, more detailed, and more real-time workforce data, allowing for an accurate and up-to-date picture of the Public Service size, pay and composition” and “hybrid ways of working enabling us to be more agile, use our workforce better, be more productive, inclusive and cost effective.”⁶

What stands out most about New Zealand’s report, taking Canada’s experience into account, is the timeline - tri-annual, rather than annual - and the extent to which legislation lays out the report’s purpose and desired content. The Public Service Commissioner has been given guidance for their task, and time to do it with rigour and depth. All of this is for a defined purpose: furthering the stewardship of the public service.

Australia

Section 44 of Australia’s *Public Service Act 1999*, as amended by the *Public Governance and Resources Legislation Amendment Act (No. 1) 2017*, mandates the production of an annual report on the state of the Australian Public Service, handled by the Public Service Commissioner.⁷ Like Canada’s, the report is vaguely defined in legislation, the only specific requirement being that it covers “the state of the [Australian Public Service] during the year.” The completed report is provided by the Commissioner to the Public Service Minister, who is to table it in both houses of Parliament.

The *Public Service Act 1999* notably empowers the Commissioner for the purpose of writing this report: per 44(2), “An Agency Head must give the Commissioner whatever information the Commissioner requires for the purpose of preparing the report [on the state of the public service] referred to in subsection (1).” The Commissioner is not just told to write a report; they are given the power to get whatever information they need from across the public service.

The *State of the Service Report* is a long report - the 2022-2023 one, for instance, is 221 pages long. It covers a wide range of topics, each with links to further information and data. In the 2022-23 report, these topics are grouped into nine sections: Operating context, the Australian Public Service (APS) profile (employment equity, inclusion, and diversity), working in the APS, capability, leadership, integrity, serving the community, the APS of the future (including development of futures work and matters relating to some long-term plans), and agency benchmarking (comparisons across agencies on issues such as employee satisfaction and public trust).⁸ Subjects covered have varied over the years, and how they have been

6. New Zealand. Public Service Commission. *Te Kahu Tuatini – State of the Public Service*. Wellington, NZ: Public Service Commission, 2022, p. 54

7. Prior to the amendment, per the *Public Service Act 1999*, the Public Service Commission’s annual report was to “include a report on the state of the APS during the year.”

8. Australia. Australian Public Service Commission. *State of the Service Report, 2022-23*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Public Service Commission, 2023.

organized has similarly varied.

Writing a 150-300 page report every year is a significant amount of work. The 2022-23 report notes that it “is a collaboration between the Australian Public Service Commission and APS agencies,”⁹ and it draws from and is entwined with other APSC work, including the annual APS Employee Census attitude and opinion survey. Each individual subsection within the nine sections is short and focused, many being highlights of particular public servants’ activities or updates on the year’s major public service news (e.g. public inquiry recommendation implementation).

South Africa

Section 196 of the Constitution of South Africa establishes its Public Service Commission (PSC). The PSC is constitutionally mandated to support and promote a set of nine principles (defined in section 195) across the public service, and is constitutionally required to give an annual report to the National Assembly “in respect of its activities and the performance of its functions, including any finding it may make and directions and advice it may give, and to provide an evaluation of the extent to which the values and principles set out in section 195 are complied with.” The latter half, on core constitutional values and principles, has often been handled in its own report, the State of the Public Service report.

A number of early reports - released on the PSC’s website through 2010¹⁰ - focus tightly on the nine principles - in short, ethics, efficiency, development-orientation, impartiality and fairness, responsiveness, accountability, transparency, good human resource management, and representativeness - each in its own section. While the subjects were set out in the constitution in broad form (e.g. “Public administration must be accountable.”), the precise matters and indicators to be covered were not; there was enough flexibility to, for instance, focus the 2009 report on readiness for the 2010 FIFA World Cup.¹¹

The United Kingdom - Institute for Government

The Institute for Government (IfG), an independent think tank, releases its own unofficial annual report on the state of the United Kingdom’s public service: the *Whitehall Monitor*. The IfG describes it as an “annual, data-driven assessment of the UK civil service - how it has changed and performed, and its priorities for the future.”¹² Being an external analysis rather than a product of the public service itself, it works under several limitations - beyond some interviews, it has to work with data and information that is already public, and it cannot serve the same speaking-for role that an official report can - but what it accomplishes under these restrictions is worth noting.

Much of the value of the *Whitehall Monitor* comes from how it collates public data to create readable overviews on each topic it explores, each with analysis and all brought together under the same cover. It unifies scattered material into a single report, a single place.

9. Ibid., 4.

10. This paper focuses on a particular set of consistent, stable reports from mostly the 2000s, a successive set available on the Public Service Commission’s website. Not all reports appear to be available online after 2010, and the 2021 report uses a different format.

11. South Africa. Public Service Commission. *State of the Public Service Report 2009*. Pretoria: Communication and Information Services, 2009.

12. “Whitehall Monitor,” *Institute for Government*, n.d., <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/trackers/whitehall-monitor>

The *Whitehall Monitor* covers a range of subjects, but primarily focuses on two things: trends and changes over the past year, and recommendations for the future. The 2024 report, for instance, is split into two parts: the retrospective and the forward-looking. In trying to capture the state of the civil service, it covers size and change in numbers (overall, by department, by professional category, and with examination of turnover), the structure of departments and other bodies, budgets, morale and pay, representativeness, transparency, and the government’s publicly stated objectives around each. The report then moves to a range of recommendations, often drawing from other IfG work.¹³

The *Whitehall Monitor*, it should be recognized, is a labour-intensive project. The 2024 report is a 126-page document featuring seventeen listed authors; the number of authors has tended to increase over time. Data was gathered and analyzed, interviews were conducted, statements on government objectives were brought together, statistics were visualized, layout and visual design was done, and proposals were made for the future, among other work.

Moving Forward: Tracking the State of the Public Service

Canada’s existing annual report on the state of the public service was innovative when introduced. There are now three decades of experience and further innovation to learn from. There is an opportunity for something more capable of fulfilling the promise of a report on the state of the public service.

Delinking What Is and What Could Be

The Clerk of the Privy Council’s annual report is useful. It is the leader’s statement, and it is a *leadership* statement. It is legislatively framed as their own report and successive Clerks have used it as a key public platform.¹⁴ It lays out priorities from the top of the public service for public servants, parliamentarians, and the public to see, and keeps all stakeholders updated on an annual basis. What it is not, however, is a report on the state of the public service. Nor does it have to be. If Canada delinks the need for a report on *the state of the public service* from the desire for *an annual report by the Clerk-as-Head*, there is an opportunity to preserve what works - the Clerk’s report on priorities, preferably renamed to better reflect its scope - and to build something new and separate that better addresses the need for a rigorous periodic review of public service fitness and functioning.

Such a report, separate from the Clerk’s annual, would be free from the legal requirements in the *Public Service Employment Act* - not constrained by the need to be written on an annual basis, not constrained by the need to be from the Clerk-as-Head of the Public Service, not constrained by what *is*. This is an opportunity to rethink these constraints and freely build on the foundation laid thirty years ago.

Rethinking Constraints: Timelines

When designing a new periodic report, there are several choices to make. One is about timeline. Reporting is labour-intensive and time-consuming. It is telling that the annual IfG *Whitehall Monitor* lists well over a dozen authors, and that the brand new New Zealand report

13. Jack Worlidge et al., *Whitehall Monitor 2024* (London, UK: Institute for Government, 2024)

14. Dennis Grube highlights how novel it is to have this public face for the public service, in the context of public speeches: Dennis Grube, “Public voices from anonymous corridors: The public face of the public service in a Westminster system,” *Canadian Public Administration* 56, no. 1 (2013): 3-25.

on the state of the public service, introduced with decades of Canadian experience to draw from, is to be every *three* years.

A baseline three-year cycle, taking inspiration from New Zealand, would give time to do solid work while reporting often enough that readers will be reasonably up to date. It places the report approximately on an average Parliamentary life cycle,¹⁵ allowing governments time to act while keeping parliamentarians in the loop. As with New Zealand, if whoever is responsible for the report decides reporting more often is necessary, it should be possible at their discretion to report sooner.

Rethinking Constraints: Who's Responsible?

Another question is larger: who would be responsible for the report? The original report was assigned to the Clerk alongside the little-defined role of Head of the Public Service, tying tracking the public service's state (however defined) to at least symbolic leadership. Since then, alternatives have emerged, and been put in practice around the world.

A person or organization bearing responsibility for the report does not necessarily mean they will directly write it; merely that they are responsible for making sure it is completed and brought to the relevant minister or Prime Minister. The Clerk-as-Head could task a person or a committee of officials to bear the burden of preparing the report, but retain a supervisory role and house know-how built up report after report. It matters who is responsible.

Clerk and Privy Council Office

It is natural to consider the original intended home of a report on the state of the public service - the Clerk-as-Head and the Privy Council Office. The Clerk holds an important central position with significant service-wide influence as the highest ranking member of the public service and the head of an office closely linked with the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Clerk has a traditional role as a public service leader, and successive Clerks have been responsible for public service-wide reform programs - the original State of the Public Service report was part of one such program. With the new report not required on an annual basis, it would not likely overburden the Clerk and PCO.

Treasury Board Secretariat

The Treasury Board Secretariat may seem like a natural choice if the Clerk is not in charge of the new report. Treasury is the statutory employer of the public service, it is the management board, and, in addition to its titular role of managing expenditures in general as a "budget office," it plays a major role in human resources and is the home of the Chief Human Resources Officer. This position in the human resources management ecosystem is what led Justice Gomery, in his 2006 report on the sponsorship affair, to recommend transferring the post of Head of the Public Service to the Secretary of the Treasury Board.¹⁶

TBS is already in a position where it has to balance being a voice for managers and increasingly being a voice for those working under those managers. Donald Savoie has drawn attention to TBS's awkward balance of roles, noting that a small minority of TBS's staff - 302 of 2,202 - are assigned to spending oversight, Treasury's *treasury* role, less than half as many as are assigned

15. See Marc Bosc and André Gagnon (eds.), *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, 3rd ed. (2017), chapter 2, https://www.ourcommons.ca/procedure/procedure-and-practice-3/ch_02_3-e.html

16. Canada. *Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program and Related Activities: Restoring Accountability: Recommendations*. Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada. 2006. p. 151-152

to internal services and over a hundred fewer than assigned to the employer function.¹⁷

TBS's role in major projects also gives pause when considering having it report on the state of the public service. Multiple major projects have run into difficulties in recent years. The role of the TBS in public service-wide projects may skew a report on the state of the public service. It would be unwise for an organization with a heavy role in crafting and running public service-wide initiatives to be in charge of a report critically reporting on the initiatives it is leading. An organization more neutrally positioned, with less of an operational role, would be preferable.

Public Service Commission

Abroad, a third choice has become the standard: reports on the state of the public service are the job of the Public Service Commission. This was the path taken by Australia and New Zealand alike with Canada's years of experience informing them, and was South Africa's choice as well. Canada's Public Service Commission is an independent agency reporting to Parliament. In its own words, it is "responsible for safeguarding the values of a professional Public Service: competence, non-partisanship and representativeness."¹⁸ It runs recruitment programs as well, and tracks data relevant to its mandate. The *Public Service Employment Act* grants it wide powers over hiring and appointments (with, since 2003's *Public Service Modernization Act*, much delegation), as well as an ongoing expanding oversight and audit role.

The PSC is experienced in reporting on public service-wide issues. While its direct role in hiring declined with 2003's *Public Service Modernization Act*, shifting to more of an oversight/regulation/support role, its audit function - notably empowered to summon witnesses and require the production of relevant records - has expanded over time. The PSC conducts periodic system-wide and service-wide studies on subjects such as staffing and non-partisanship.

If the Clerk were to task the Public Service Commission with this report, it would mean tasking them with work that goes beyond their purview, but it is work that synergizes with their core role. The commission in charge of hiring may not normally oversee, for instance, the state of critical IT infrastructure or the strength of the public service's policy capacity - but they oversee the appointment of the staff maintaining that infrastructure or planning future policies. Building up knowledge of conditions on the ground will strengthen their ability to meet the public service's needs as overseers of hiring, to guide their recruitment programs and their job descriptions guidance, to help focus the search for employees where employees are most needed. Housing this knowledge inside the PSC should build its knowledge capacity for and beyond its audit role.

Ensuring Effective Reporting: Power and Support

The original 'state of the public service' report, the Clerk's annual report, was introduced almost offhandedly, without any additional support attached. Successive Clerks have made a report that works under those constraints, but for a deeper report truly showing the state of the public service, proper support will be needed.

One of Australia's innovations when they introduced their own state of the public service report mandate was to include a requirement that agency heads supply any information needed.

17. Donald Savoie, *Speaking Truth to Canadians About Their Public Service* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024), p. 70-71

18. "About us," Public Service Commission of Canada, accessed October 23, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/corporate/about-us.html>

Even if this power is not necessarily often needed, it clarifies the importance of providing information, justifies handing it to the author, and gives a level of certainty that information will be given. It empowers their Public Service Commissioner to write a report without worrying about the possibility that important details won't be given, and to schedule its writing accordingly. It would be a useful innovation to draw from Australia, one that would largely ease the movement of the report.

Also taking inspiration from Australia, and recognizing what is needed for a deeper report, a new report on the state of the public service could be done in collaboration between the responsible organization and elements of the public service more broadly. There are many key figures across the public service who should be brought into the loop, whose input would be particularly helpful. A few - an incomplete list - include the head of Service Canada, overseeing core public-facing services and well positioned to discuss service capacity; the heads of Public Services and Procurement and of Shared Services Canada, key for internal infrastructure and internal services; the TBS Chief Human Resources Officer on human resources; the Public Service Commission, leading hiring and recruitment; and the Privy Council Office machinery and senior personnel secretariats. Statistics Canada could be involved in the design and development of the report from the start, as rigorous, data-focused research is their area of expertise. Any detailed report would need data from Statistics Canada regardless, but bringing them in to assist with designing the initial report and having their input on each further iteration would help hold it to high standards.

Building a New Report

The biggest set of questions comes in at the stage of designing the report. To an extent, many of the details will have to be determined during initial development, possibly with the involvement of the Chief Statistician. However, some of the broad strokes can be suggested at this point.

At the most basic level, some objectives should be kept in mind. At its core, a State of the Public Service report would be an ongoing fitness check: an ongoing series of reports tracking and following the overall health of the public service. Is Canada's public service fit for the challenges of today? Is it fit for the future? In the words of the legislation for New Zealand's equivalent, are public service leaders "promoting stewardship of the public service, in particular its long-term capability"?¹⁹ A revised, expanded report can become a tool in parliamentarians' and public hands to help answer these questions.

In a world marked by a rapidly accelerating rate of change, and a world where Canada and its public service face new and changing challenges, the report must be able to adapt alongside - it must be flexible. It must be able to, as New Zealand's legislation suggests, cover changing circumstances and immediate issues. It should not be constrained to a single set of topics and indicators; timely topics and whatever the author believes ought to come to Parliamentarians' attention should be included. This could include, among other things, immediate crises such as COVID, warning signs from particular departments or across the public service, general cross-cutting concerns, and mission-critical issues broadly.

However, in addition to being flexible, the report needs a stable, consistent core to allow interested readers to track of the state of the public service over time. This does not mean that the same indicators and topics need to be covered in every report. However, it is difficult to keep track of change without some consistency in what is reported.

19. *Public Service Act, 2020*, sch. 3, sec. 16 (New Zealand)

This stable core could be data-driven, building on the *Whitehall Monitor's* data-centric approach.²⁰ A report could collate key data from across the government - bringing, for instance, Public Service Commission hiring and promotion data, Statistics Canada public service survey results (similarly to Australia's annual report), Treasury Board employment and financial data, indicators from the various oversight commissioners, and so on into a single document. At the same time, data alone is of only so much use; it often requires interpretation - description, discussion, and analysis giving context to data, bringing meaning out of it, and making the report more accessible to a semi-/non-specialist audience.

There are some subjects worth considering for this core:

Service Delivery

Service delivery is at the heart of the public service's public role. It is an unending challenge. Public expectations change over time, circumstances (social, technological, etc.) develop and shift, and crises disrupt existing practice and force adjustments - for a recent example, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked extensive problems in the passport application process. The term covers a very wide range of activities across a very wide range of departments, but to some extent, broad, whole of government metrics will be identifiable - *Citizens First* may be of some help here.²¹ Are citizens satisfied? Are services being delivered as intended, when intended, in a timely manner? Are they being delivered where citizens want/need them delivered, whether on location or digitally? Beyond that, lessons learned from successes and from failures alike may be worth recording.

Underlying everything the public service does is its basic infrastructure. To keep track of service delivery capacity means keeping track of the state of this infrastructure - from IT systems to the availability of appropriately located work space. Is this infrastructure in working condition, and what is needed to keep it working? Are there areas that could be improved and/or modernized? Is it meeting public servants' needs, and is it meeting the public's needs? Internal infrastructure has been recognized as a major issue, particularly in IT, for decades; continued reporting on it will both show any progress being made and keep any needs front of mind.

Talent and Talent Development

Part of readiness for the challenges ahead is having and maintaining the talent to take them on. Understanding the state of the public service requires understanding the people of the public service. The Clerk's existing annual report has, for years, included a section of data on public service demography - a strong example that can be built on. Demographic information - representativeness, language use, age and its distribution, geographic distribution, etc. - is helpful, as is tracking mobility within the public service. Atop that, skills, training and knowledge development need tracking. Are public servants getting the training they need for their work and the development opportunities they need for the future, and are they satisfied with their training? Are they getting a diversity of experience? Are needs for particular skills (i.e. IT workers) being met effectively? This may also be an appropriate section to cover public service morale, drawing from the bi-annual Public Service Employee Survey.

20. See also, on data-driven reporting, Jonathan Craft, "A Stewardship Approach to Policy Practice and Capacity Renewal in Canada," *Canadian Public Administration* 67, no. 4 (2024), 455.

21. See <https://citizenfirst.ca/>

Policy Capacity

Returning to a subject touched upon in many Clerk annual reports over the years, the State of the Public Service report ought to keep an eye on the public service's ability to do policy research/preparation/analysis.²² Are there significant knowledge gaps? Are there significant analytical gaps? This would also cover the public service's capacity to predict and prepare for emergent issues, through its dedicated foresight unit or otherwise.

Ethics and Integrity

A trusted and trustworthy public service is vital. Often, reports abroad devote a significant amount of space to issues of ethics and integrity. Sometimes, as with Australia's most recent report, this includes comments on the latest relevant public inquiries and task forces. In other cases, as in New Zealand, this deals with levels of public trust and their variation across the population, perceptions of corruption, and measures taken to improve them. It may be useful to cover this as well, perhaps with the assistance of relevant ombuds and officers of Parliament (e.g. Ethics, Lobbying, Public Sector Integrity).

Concluding Remarks

When parliamentarians passed the *Public Service Reform Act* of 1992, they introduced a Canadian innovation since adapted and built on abroad. They introduced an innovative report that has helped keep parliamentarians and the public informed, the annual report of the Clerk-as-Head of the Public Service. After over thirty years, however, it has become clear that there is room for improvement, keeping what works and building on it.

The existing report is and has long been a strong signal of the priorities of the Head of the Public Service. It gives a summary of the year in review, and in recent years, it has added a data component, focused mostly on demographic information, adding to its year by year value. However, as a tool for tracking the state of the public service, as a single stop to see how prepared the public service is for the challenges ahead, it is of limited use. It does not fulfil the promise of its title.

Other countries have similar dedicated state of the public service reports, some taking after Canada, and it is worth looking at what they have done. New Zealand gave theirs a tri-annual schedule and recommended subjects of coverage, both a core set of steady fundamentals and the time-specific circumstances. Australia empowered the author to gather information needed and deeply integrated the results of their annual public service survey. South Africa took a flexible approach to overseeing fundamentals. Meanwhile, the independent Institute for Government, in the UK, crafted an external annual report that collates and analyzes already public data, showing the value of bringing material together into a single data-driven report.

Canada could draw from these examples and the lessons learned over three decades of reporting on the state of the public service to build on its innovation and craft a new, expanded, deeper report - a one-stop shop for knowing how prepared the public service is for challenges to come, separate from the Clerk's annual statement of priorities. It would ideally line up with

22. "Policy capacity" is a term with many definitions, and is notably hard to measure. X. Wu, M. Ramesh, and M. Howlett give a helpful framework – X. Wu, M. Ramesh, and M. Howlett, "Policy capacity: A conceptual framework for understanding policy competences and capabilities," *Policy and Society* 34, no. 3-4 (2015): 165-171. Here, looking in particular at policy analytical capacity may be helpful – see M. Howlett, "Policy analytical capacity: The supply and demand for policy analysis in government," *Policy and Society* 34, no. 3-4 (2015): 173-182.

the suggestion in New Zealand's legislation - coverage of core fundamentals such as representativeness, stewardship and policy capacity, morale, transparency, and/or service delivery alongside the flexibility to cover changing circumstances and whatever the author needs to flag.

It is time to take another look at the idea of a report on the state of the public service. The existing Clerk's report has an important role in the complex and fragmented ecosystem of information on the public service, and it has strengths to preserve, but its title makes a promise not yet fulfilled. With lessons learned over decades, it is time to build on Canada's original innovation and the innovations that have followed. It is time to build a new single central report on the overall health of the public service and its preparedness for the challenges of the future - a report on the state of the public service.



Public Governance International
Gouvernance Publique International

Public Governance International
60 George Street
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1N 1J4

contact@pgionline.com
www.pgionline.com