

CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES:
Serving From 2025 to 2050,
the Midpoint of the 21st Century

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Constraints and Opportunities

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You do the work that I like most. You have chosen “the public service.” This choice comes with the heavy responsibility of serving your fellow citizens in the context of the governing system that Canadians have built north of the 49th parallel and in the circumstances that prevail at this time. You are serving at a pivotal moment for the future of Canada.

Public Administration: Theory and Practice

Most days, public servants are not getting up every morning thinking about public administration as a discipline and domain of practice. Let’s make this an exception.

Public administration is an applied discipline; this means that it becomes real in practice. This is the case for other applied sciences like engineering, architecture, cybernetics, bioengineering, pharmaceutical, etc. Implementation reveals the ideas at play in a governing system.

Public administrations have existed from time immemorial, from the Chinese imperial era 4,000 years ago to the Roman military empire 2,000 years ago, the monarchies and the colonial empires of the 19th century to the modern democratic societies of the 20th century.

Public administrations reveal a concept of life in society, the parameters around the exercise of power and the relationship between citizens and the State. They adapt to changing circumstances. They are malleable to the influence of the people who take hold of the levers of the State through whatever means.

Whether they are democrats or autocrats, professionals or elected officials, public office holders have exclusive access to the levers of the State. They can tax and spend, make laws, change them and enforce them even by coercive measures, set priorities that affect everyone and mobilize resources in support. It is the position they hold that gives them this power irrespective of how they got into these positions (election, military coup, competition under the merit principle or patronage).

You are part of this select group of people. The question is *what will you do with the levers of the State available to you?* What will be different for Canada and Canadians in 1, 3, or 5 years from now because you were in the position you hold?

You are serving at a pivotal moment. Serving is contextual and circumstantial. There are unique characteristics to serving currently north of the 49th parallel.

Serving North of the 49th Parallel in 2025

Some topics were not high on my list of priorities when I served as Deputy Head and as Clerk of the Privy Council for Canada. For instance, the need to protect democracy and to defend the governing system Canadians have built over time north of the 49th parallel were not on my list of priorities. Today, these are at the top of my list.

Protecting the Canadian Governing System

Canada is a modern, democratic and inclusive society. Democratic societies are small miracles that deserve protecting and fighting for.

The countries that achieved the highest levels of development *in the 20th century* are those that, like Canada, used a governing system that blends democracy, equality of all under the law, a society governed by the rule of law and reliance on a market economy. It would be a mistake to assume that it will continue to be the case in the future. Today, 75 % of the population

of the world lives under authoritarian regimes. The number of democratic countries has been declining since the early 2000s.

China has demonstrated that it is possible to build a prosperous middle class and to reconcile economic progress with authoritarian regimes. The western world has underestimated the capability of authoritarian regimes like the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and others to achieve rapid economic and technological progress.

The appeal of authoritarian regimes and illiberal states increases when democratic states underperform or lose sight of the factors that have contributed to their successes. The western world has been *underperforming* for quite some time. The financial crises, the real estate crisis, service breakdowns and corruption cases have undermined people's confidence in the capacity of governments to serve their needs and to address concerns of interest to them. The western world is also losing sight of the principles that have made it possible to govern a modern and diverse society, such as equality of all under the law because of our shared humanity.

In the second quarter of the 21st century, democratic societies are vulnerable. The irony is that democratic societies provide the tools for their opponents to accelerate their demise - excessive use of the recourse to advance self-interest at the expense of the collective interests; entrenching differences at the expense of protecting the equality of all citizens under the law; freedom of speech turned into an instrument of propaganda and demagoguery; the loud voice of money overtaking the weaker voice of citizens, etc.

South of the border, Canadians are witnessing in real time how a democratic society is being transformed by authoritarian forces that chip away at the public institutions that were designed to serve the collective interests.

By geography, because of its proximity to the USA, due to its own history and emerging circumstances... *Canada's governing system will face strong winds from the outside and inside to weaken key elements that have made its success.*

The Canadian system has blended in an original way economic prosperity, social solidarity and fiscal responsibility. This balanced approach has made it a peaceful society and a magnet for talent. Preserving and modernizing a Canadian way of governing has economic and fiscal dimensions.

Regaining Canada's Economic Sovereignty

I have discussed this topic during the Manion Lecture,¹ so there is no need to expand much on this except for reminding you that a world governed by the rule of law is very different from a world governed by the law of the jungle.

The international system that contributed to 80 years of relative peace and an unprecedented period of economic prosperity is no more and what is left is unable to act. Canada is discovering that 30 years of efforts and investments to integrate the North American economic market are now a vulnerability. It is in this context that Canada must initiate a major course correction to regain its economic sovereignty.

I would like you to understand the scale of the effort needed and how hard it is going to be.

1. Jocelyne Bourgon, *Serving Canada in 2025 – Au service du Canada en 2025* (Ottawa, ON: Public Governance International, 2025)

Let's be clear, a country that depends on another for 75 % of its exports *has already ceded much of its sovereignty*.

To regain Canada's economic sovereignty means to generate products and services the world wants and at a price the world is prepared to pay.

- Canada ranks 39th on the Complexity index - the capacity to turn knowledge into high value products and services.
- 26th on the Fitness index - the capacity to generate products and services others would find difficult to emulate.
- 14th on the Competitiveness index and 31st in terms of productivity per hour worked among OECD countries.²

In short, Canada's proximity to the USA market and the abundance of natural resources has made Canada dependent on the USA and Canadians complacent about their future prosperity. *No one owes Canadians a prosperous future*.

The turnaround needed will be hard to achieve. It will affect every sector; every region and all Canadians will pay a price. Regaining Canada's economic sovereignty must work in tandem with responsible fiscal management. This ensures that a country has the capacity to invest in the future of its choice.

Prosperity, solidarity and fiscal capacity are inexorably linked. There is a need to create wealth to share it. In return, an efficient social safety net reduces uncertainties, facilitates adaptation and contributes to building a modern and dynamic economy. Responsible fiscal management ensures the overall balance of the system.

It is in this context that all governments (municipal, provincial, federal) are asking their public services to bring forward ideas to free resources to face the challenges ahead. This is a call public servants have a duty to answer.

Fiscal Sovereignty

The public service has a lot of experience in expenditure reduction exercises; this experience can be put to good use. We know what works and what should be avoided.³

We know that across the board cuts erode the quality of public services and citizens' confidence in government.

We know that attrition is the opposite of a strategic approach. It is essentially leaving the future of the public service to chance. Managing vacancies to redeploy resources is different from attrition.

We know that a public service that combines attrition with the layoff of skilled young people that were most recently recruited or that hold temporary positions is mortgaging its future.

We know that successful efforts to reduce the fiscal footprint of the public sector and to redeploy resources to face pressing needs depend on ambitious proposals from the public

2. For more on Canada's relative performance, see Nisrine Dandache, *Is Canada Fit for the Future? A PGI Working Paper* (Ottawa, ON: Public Governance International, 2021)

3. See also Jocelyne Bourgon, *Program Review: The Government of Canada's experience eliminating the deficit, 1994-99: a Canadian case study* (London, UK: Institute for Government, 2009)

service combined with the political will to make difficult decisions about the role of government in society for the future. The best knowledge about government programs and services resides with departments, but this knowledge will not get us very far without the political will to take action.

Successful expenditures reduction exercises have three dimensions:

- to preserve assets of critical importance for the future.
- to let go in order to free resources to face the challenges ahead.
- to invent new and better ways to ensure that the public sector will have the capacity to fulfill its public mission going forward.

To preserve: The role of public administrators is essential for the success of this phase because no one else has at their disposal the granularity of information needed to make enlightened choices.

What public assets of critical importance reside in the organisation you are leading? These may range from physical assets to expert networks, ecosystems, infrastructures, data bases, irreplaceable know how, and so on.

This work cannot be done without you.

To let go: The role of elected officials is essential to the success of this phase. It is a thousand times preferable to put an end to some public programs and services rather than to dust up cuts on every program and service. There is no alternative to making choices about the role of government in society for the future. These choices belong to elected officials. The elimination of a sizable deficit is a political exercise; this is not a managerial issue.

Beyond the political choices about what programs should be maintained, curtailed or stopped, there is a broad space of possibilities open to public administrators to reduce the cost of government and improve services. Using service to citizens as the anchor, every manager can identify systems and practices that hinder the capacity to generate results of higher public value. These may include... reports that no one reads, evaluations that do not improve decisions, controls more costly than the benefits, regulations too costly to administer...

Expenditure reviews are an opportunity for the public service to free itself of a burden it is unable to bear and of constraints that have accumulated over the years without consideration for how they all fit together in the end.

To reinvent: Every program and service benefit from the opportunity to be reconceptualized to take account of changing circumstances, new knowledge, new technologies and acquired experience. This is the most exciting phase!

Yes, it is possible to re-invent passport management, refugee claims, airport security, passengers' complaints, medication approval, translation services, accounting, access to information and so on.

For this work to be successful, there is a need for a compass and a center of gravity. The future is your North Star; service to citizens is the center of gravity of the public sector. The main constraint to innovation and adaptation to changing circumstances is not financial; it is the limits of our own imagination.

The world over, public sector leaders are exploring what can be done to ensure that their

country will be among the few that will successfully navigate through an accelerating period of change; *your challenge is to make sure that Canada will be among them.*

There are no windows of opportunity for public organizations and public administrators that have nothing to propose. Public administrators have a responsibility to put forward ideas to ensure that the public service is fit for the time and the challenges ahead.

Public Administration and You

I have worked in several countries over the last 20 years. This gave me the chance to learn from public sector leaders leading ambitious reforms in very different contexts and circumstances. Despite differences, they display some common characteristics. Some of these ideas may resonate with you.

They display the capacity to focus on the future and to frame issues in societal terms.

The role of public administrators extends well beyond the position they hold. They serve a public purpose; framing it and articulating it brings clarity of purpose to their actions and encourages mobilisation.

Framing issues in societal terms expand the range of options opened to government. What will be different for Canada and Canadians in the coming years because you hold a public position and have access to the levers to fulfill your public mission?

They work on multiple scales.

Working across boundaries is a defining characteristic of public organizations able to address issues of increasing complexity. They develop the skills of their team for managing interdependence and multiple interfaces vertically and horizontally. Public safety, public health, an aging population, and homelessness are examples of complex issues that exceed the capacity of any individual organizations working alone.

They work on multiple timelines.

What needs to be done in the short term to build the capacity in the mid-term to achieve better societal results in the longer term? Short term electoral mandates present difficulties but this is not an impediment to making progress for those who know how to manage along multiple timelines.

They practice a leadership of proximity.

Leadership does not roll out from the top to the bottom; it is practiced at all levels. Public administrators *take charge* to address issues within their sphere of influence. They are expected to go to the limit of their authority unconditionally.

This requires a word of explanation. It is easy to convince oneself into inaction. One would act if... others acted first, if their boss asked for it, if more resources were available, if they had more time. Practicing a leadership of proximity unconditionally means:

What can be done in the position that YOU hold currently with the resources available to YOU and nothing more, to make things better and to generate results of higher public value for society going forward?

This is the *Factor-YOU* of public administration.

Conclusion

Serving in 2025 is to serve at a pivotal moment. In many ways you are serving at a more challenging and dangerous time than your predecessors.

So my brilliant advice in closing is: take charge! Do not ask permission for what you have the power to do, and go to the limit of your authority and of your leadership ability to fulfill your public mission.

The society that Canadians have built north of the 49th parallel is an achievement worth defending.

You are asked to contribute to a collective effort to regain *Canada's economic sovereignty*. This is worthy of your efforts.

You are called upon how to reconcile economic prosperity, social solidarity and fiscal capacity in contemporary terms. This is exciting.

A balanced approach has contributed to Canada success in the past and will be necessary to keep this country united in turbulent times. Bring forward your most powerful ideas.

You are asked to reduce the fiscal footprint of the public sector to free resources to face the challenges ahead... this can be done, and it can be done well.

Public administration is an applied science. It depends on the capacity to invent a better future but above all on the capacity to make these a reality that citizens experience collectively. The magic is in *the doing*. This is where the public sector shines. This is what builds public confidence in government and trust in the capacity of the public service to fulfil its public mission.

It is **YOUR** turn to shine.



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