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## A Most Meaningful Time

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*A Public Servant's Voice*

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Thank you, Taki, for very kind words and the Canada School for hosting this event. I am most grateful.

Gathering here is especially meaningful for me. The school was once called the *Canadian Centre for Management Development*; the result of the joint effort by Robert René de Cotret then minister for the Treasury Board and Paul Tellier then Clerk. It became the Canada School of Public Service in 2004, at the initiative of PM Jean Chretien and due to the efforts of your humble servant. Taki Sarantakis brought the Canada School into the 21st century by expanding its technological, digital and AI literacy.

If you are here today, in some ways we are family:

- You are members of my immediate family; or
- the stars in one of the chapters and therefore a member of my extended family; or
- you are a member of my professional family. You are senior public service leaders doing the work that was and remains the passion of my professional life. This book is for you.

Allow me to introduce the young man to whom this book is dedicated: *Mr. Xavier Bilodeau*, my grandson. We all have professional and personal reasons for building a better future.

He is accompanied by his parents *Francis Bilodeau* and *Andrée Deslauriers* and his grandfather *Michel Bilodeau*. Michel read six drafts of this book at various stages of preparation. This, ladies and gentlemen, is love!

I also want to recognise *Mr. Corin Tentchoff*. He was involved at every step of a project that led to the transfer of my personal documents to Library and Archives Canada and ultimately to this book. I could not have wished for a better partner.

There are people in this room whose names appear in various chapters of the book. Behind every change, large or small, one can find a small (sometimes very small) number of people who believed in it enough to take action to make it happen. Their names are not always known to the public, but their contribution was invaluable.

- *Ron Bilodeau* was Deputy Clerk when I served as Clerk, but he is also the deputy most knowledgeable about the ins and outs of the 1995 referendum;
- *Robert Giroux* as Secretary to the Treasury Board contributed to ensuring a peaceful transition in the workplace in the midst of unprecedented workforce reductions;
- *Louis Ranger* was a key architect of the most ambitious realignment of the role of the department of transport;
- *Michael Wernick* played a key role in the Charlottetown constitutional negotiation.

The public sector transforms ideas about life in society into a reality that we experience collectively, and when the political will to bring about change converges with powerful ideas and the capacity to make it happen, the course of events may forever be changed.

- On the banks of the St. Laurent, there is an international-calibre oceanographic research centre that would not exist without the efforts of *Pierre De Bané* and a team of young managers at Fisheries and Oceans Canada.
- *Pierre Blais* led the most ambitious reform of market framework laws, ranging from

bankruptcy law and competition law to intellectual property rights.

- *Doug Young* spearheaded the reforms that became the origin of program review, now held as the gold standard.

Powerful ideas are not born fully formed at the top. They take shape at all levels and find their ways to the top. As a wise person once said, “there are no windows of opportunities for organisations that have nothing to propose or no ideas to put forward.”<sup>1</sup>

Institutional memories matter.

- The Public Service of Canada knows how to lead ambitious structural and taxation reforms. This is one of the lessons from the 80s under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.
- It knows how to eliminate a sizable deficit to build the capacity to invest in the future. This is a lesson from the 1990s under Jean Chrétien. It led to 12 years of re-investments.
- The Public Service of Canada knows how to provide public services of high quality. In the early 2000s, Canada was a world leader in providing services online.

Everything that came before is part of the DNA of the public service even when some of the skills have not been used for some time. This book is a modest contribution to the institutional memory of the Public Service of Canada. Institutional memories distill ideas from experience so that they can be operationalised when needed. It helps to gain momentum and to do better faster.

## A Most Meaningful Time

I did not write this book to praise the past but with a view to the future. My most important insight writing the book was how much we already knew about the challenges Canada is facing today.

Someone once told me that it looks good to read from a book during a book launch. So here it is: This book was written “*before the results of the presidential election in the United States of America were known and before the resignation of Prime Minister Trudeau*” - and I might add today, before the trade war initiated by the US, before the election of PM Carney and before the third Gulf War.

*“I chose not to rewrite any of the chapters because the text as written before these events bears an important lesson: many of the challenges Canada is facing in the early days of 2025 have been in the making over a long period of time. A lot was already known that we chose to ignore or that was left unattended. What remained unknown was the scope, scale and speed of change once a point of inflexion is reached. Now we know.”*

*“Other points of inflexion and tipping points of even greater importance will soon be reached.”* This includes climate change, AI and other technological innovations, the impact of an aging population, population migration, and so on.

From the early 2000s onward we knew that the trajectory of the world was not inexorably toward more democracy. Today 70 % of the population of the world is living under authoritarian regimes and illiberal states are on the rise.<sup>2</sup> We knew that the international systems that the

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1. Dixit J. Bourgon.

2. *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (Gothenburg, Sweden: V-

western world had weaved together since WWII were fraying.

We knew that not all was well on the domestic front. In 2021 my team prepared a paper entitled *Is Canada Fit for the Future?*<sup>3</sup> Major economic indexes, competitiveness, fitness, complexity (except for social indexes) were on a downward trend. Other countries were making progress faster on multiple fronts. In the public sector a number of indicators were also flashing red - in the health sector in particular but also in public infrastructure, technological capacity, service delivery and more.

In a word, the Canadian economy has been underperforming for quite some time and the public sector across Canada displays weaknesses at a time when it is most needed.

This is not a picture from doom. This is in fact a *window of opportunity* on a scale I have not seen in a long time combined with an impetus for change that was lacking before. When a trajectory is unsustainable, this is when the potential for innovation is the greatest and when the role of government is most important.

This is *a most meaningful time* to be in government. The world over, public sector leaders are searching for ways to ensure that their country will be among the few that will successfully navigate through an unprecedented period of change. **Your** challenge is to make sure that Canada will be among them.

The question is what powerful ideas you will bring forward? And for the rest of us, the question is how can we help **you**?

You are serving in the second quarter of the 21st century, a more challenging time than when I was Deputy Minister and a more dangerous time than when I was Clerk.

At this most meaningful time, Canada is facing what I would describe as a **sovereignty moment**. Canada will need all at once:

- To regain its **economic sovereignty**, the capacity to ensure its future economic prosperity free of coercive measures.
- To ensure its **fiscal sovereignty**, the capacity to set priorities and to marshal resources in support;
- And to defend its **sovereignty and authority** over its land, sea, air, and cyberspace from hostile external and internal forces.

These streams are interrelated, and they will interact dynamically with each other. One way or another, they will play a crucial role in ensuring Canada's future prosperity and place in the world.

A strategy to regain Canada's economic sovereignty has started to emerge. International agreements are sending an important signal, but the hard work is still ahead. Canada needs to generate products and services the world wants at a price the world is prepared to pay.

The fiscal strategy is still in its infancy. Personally, I do not believe that the adjustments needed can be achieved through spending cuts alone. The coming months will shed more light on the magnitude of the adjustments needed. In the meantime, consider the current spending

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Dem Institute, 2025), 12

3. Nisrine Dandache and Jocelyne Bourgon, *Is Canada Fit for the Future?* (Ottawa, ON: Public Governance International, 2021)

cuts a first step in the strategy.

These changes are challenging, but this is doable and the risks are manageable. The Public Service of Canada has all it takes in its DNA to manage these transitions successfully.

Looking ahead, I believe that the greatest risks for Canada's ability to successfully navigate through this period of change would be *self-inflicted*. As you know, Canada is exposed to a trade war as well as political and psychological warfare from its most important trading partner. It is vulnerable to technological warfare, too, and we may not have seen the worst of this yet.

At a time like this, unity, the capacity for collective problem solving, is an asset of critical importance. There are risks associated to living in a country where the *idea of secession* is an ongoing concern.

The *idea of secession* does damage to the fabric of a country.

- It transforms problems into grievances and erodes the capacity for collective problem solving.
- It frames collaboration as a zero-sum game - your gains are my loss - instead of pooling resources and capabilities to propel society forward.
- It generates political instability that affects long term investment decisions.

One lesson from our recent past is that to stay silent for fear of making things worse helps no one. There is a need to voice and explain how the *idea of federalism* is part of the solution for facing the challenges ahead.

Canada is a modern, democratic, law-abiding, inclusive society. At the scale of the world, this is a remarkable achievement. Canada is lacking some of the mechanisms needed for co-managing a modern and complex federation. This is not an insurmountable difficulty.

A strategy for defending Canadian security has begun to take shape, but it will need more than heavy weaponry, submarines and fighter jets. A *unity strategy* is needed to protect the country Canadians have built north of the 49th parallel against external hostile forces and internal centrifugal forces that are detrimental to Canada's interests.

## Conclusion

*A Public Servant's Voice* is a helping hand extended to those who shoulder the heavy responsibility of serving Canada and Canadians.

Institutional memory helps to prevent amnesia and to see what we might otherwise choose to ignore. Its greatest potential is when *ideas and voices from the past* blend with *today's ideas and voices* to propel a country forward.

This is the project ahead. Meanwhile, this is a time to enjoy each other's company. Thank you for being here.





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