

Institutional Memory and Doing Better Faster

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A Public Servant's Voice was written before the election of President Trump, the trade war launched in 2025 by the USA administration, the fifth Gulf War, the election of Prime Minister Carney and his now famous Davos speech.

The book was written to provide context to my personal archival documents being transferred to Library and Archives Canada. I did not write this book to celebrate the past but with a view to the future. The question that underpinned the book was: has the past something to offer to public servant leaders today to help them steer Canada through an unprecedented period of change?

The book blends memory, lessons learned in Canada and abroad with probing questions for the future. Along the way, it puts forward ideas and introduces concepts that may warrant a deeper exploration to make them more relevant to public service leaders in position of authority today. Some of these topics will be explored in *a series of short papers*. These are not academic articles, although they will draw from academic literature. They are written for practitioners. This paper expands on the idea of *institutional memory* that runs through many of the chapters of *A Public Servant's Voice*. What is it? Does it matter? What can be done about it?

Do Better Faster

My most important insight writing the book was just how much was known 10, 15 and even 20 years ago about the challenges Canada is facing today. This includes the erosion of the international governing system, the rise of authoritarian regimes and illiberal states, and the return of unilateralism in the USA. The Canadian economy has been underperforming for the better part of the last 25 years. Canada's social safety net expansion over the last 15-20 years was funded through borrowing rather than growth and productivity gains. This is unsustainable.

The public sector was also underperforming and lagging behind some of its peers. Canadians have witnessed public program breakdowns at the federal, provincial and municipal levels ranging from access to health and emergency services in a timely way, to the decay of public infrastructures, intolerable waiting time for the processing of refugee claims or renewing passports, the rapid decline of Canada's digital services, and so on.

These challenges were in the making for a long time. They reveal the signals we failed to see, the problems governments and the public service choose to ignore and the policy choices that put Canada on a declining trajectory.

The 21st century was challenging for Canada. Other countries did better and moved faster. Canada must now course correct.

Institutional Memory: Should We Care?

Institutional memory is the *capacity to accumulate* knowledge, experience and practices about what worked, what did not and what happened as a result. Over time, this knowledge becomes embedded in the organization and forms part of its DNA. This accumulated knowledge and know-how can be called upon to make better decisions and achieve better results faster. Institutional memory helps to *gain momentum*.

As Walsh and Ungson summed up, "organizational memory refers to stored information from an organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions." The "information

about decisions made and problems solved forms the core of an organization's memory over time.”¹ Corbett et al. describe organizational memories as “‘representations of the past’ that actors draw on to narrate what has been learned when developing and implementing policy.”²

Institutional memory requires *explicit* knowledge, the documents, the archives, the data - and *tacit* knowledge, the know-how, the craft, the mastery in the minds of individuals. Both are needed to extract insights from the past, detect early signs and patterns, anticipate and see beyond the curve to figure out what may lie ahead. Institutional memory is continuously reinterpreted as new knowledge emerges and the organisation gains new experience. It is a *dynamic process* that contributes to learning and building public institutions recognized for their capacity to adapt.

The starting point is to value knowledge; the next step is to preserve and make use of knowledge assets. It is my view that the Canadian public service has difficulty accumulating knowledge and that this is contributing to some of the challenges it is facing today.

The public service is quick to forget - it does not recognize its own achievements even when other countries emulate its practices to eventually surpass Canada. The public service is prone to repeating the same mistakes (e.g. expenditure reduction exercises).

The public service has a poor understanding of the reasons for the success or failures of past actions. It lacks an appreciation of the achievement of others. It relies on poor knowledge systems and weak archival systems. It does not have a tradition for writing and publishing as is the case in other countries. It has a weak historical and comparative perspective, and as a result is forgetful of its own trajectory and unable to detect when others are gaining momentum.

Public organizations with weak institutional memory are vulnerable to blind spots and have a distorted view of their relative performance. They are prone to reacting to crises rather than anticipating, acting proactively and course correcting as needed (e.g. renewing passports post COVID; replacing an immigration system that worked by one that misunderstood the inter-relationship between immigration, labor force demands, housing, etc.).

Some of these weaknesses did not prevent Canada from being the envy of many around the world. However, what may have worked reasonably well at a prior time will be insufficient to adapt to the velocity of change countries are experiencing in the second quarter of the 21st century. In the Canadian context, the need to build and preserve institutional memory is important due to rapid demographic turnover, successive waves of public service reforms, accelerating digital transformation and the increasing complexity of public policy challenges. The risks of erosion of institutional memory are greater in periods of fiscal restraint, restructuring and political transition as is the case in Canada today.

Some authors are of the view that institutional memory may at times limit innovation and adaptation and lead to organizations set in their ways.³ My experience in Canada and abroad runs in the opposite direction; countries with poor institutional memory are vulnerable to

1. James P. Walsh and Gerardo Rivera Ungson, “Organizational Memory,” *The Academy of Management Review* 16, no. 1 (1991), 61-2

2. Jack Corbett, Dennis C. Grube, Heather Lovell, and Rodney Scott, “Singular memory or institutional memories? Toward a dynamic approach,” *Governance*, 31 (2018), 558

3. On this view, see Walsh and Ungson, “Organizational Memory,” 71-2; Alastair Stark, “Institutional Amnesia in Government: how much is enough?” *Policy Quarterly*, 20, no. 1 (2024), 6-7

amnesia and inertia. Amnesia, because they don't remember what they once knew, what happened before and why, and inertia because their lack of memory prevents them from recognizing the early signs of significant changes until it is too late to mitigate the risks or seize opportunities. Countries and organizations I worked with over the years that display strong capacity to accumulate knowledge also displayed a strong capacity to adapt and the institutional capacity to *get things done*.

Institutional Memory as a Driver of Institutional Capacity

Institutional memory plays a key role in *governance*. It puts to productive use important and often irreplaceable public assets:

- the knowledge of previous policy initiatives;
- an appreciation of the political and administrative context;
- the know-how and procedural knowledge to navigate through the inter-relationships between the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of governments;
- an understanding of the shared responsibilities of departments and different levels of governments;
- the normative understanding of public service values and conventions.

These assets improve the likelihood of success of government decisions, actions, and interventions. Public institutions that accumulate deep reservoirs of knowledge and know-how are better equipped to evaluate alternatives, overcome implementation challenges and adapt to changing circumstances.

Institutional memory improves public policy decisions by avoiding repeating mistakes or recycling failed ideas that have been tested before.⁴ It improves the *likelihood of success* of government interventions by using accumulated knowledge as a foundation to gain momentum and invent solutions that work in practice in a timely way.⁵ Institutional memory helps to connect generations of public servants to one another; each one building on the contribution of those who came before to bring about change.⁶ Institutional memory contributes to institutional capacity building - that is, building public institutions fit for the time and the challenges ahead.

Governing and serving is never easy at the best of times. The second quarter of the 21st century is shaping up to be an especially challenging period for Canada and other countries. There is a need to lever public knowledge, to learn better and move faster.

4. Alastair Stark and Brian Head, "Institutional amnesia and public policy," *Journal of European Public Policy* 26, no. 10 (2019), 1528-30; Heidi Hardt, "How NATO remembers: explaining institutional memory in NATO crisis management," *European Security* 26, no. 1 (2016), 122-3

5. Corbett et al., "Singular memory or institutional memories?," 556-7

6. Barbara Levitt and James G. March, "Organizational Learning," *Annual Review of Sociology* (1988), 328-9

Strengthening Institutional Memory

So what can a reasonable public servant do to improve the institutional memory and build the capacity of the public service of Canada?

Use It or Lose It:

The surest way to undermine public institutional memory is *neglect*. Capacities that are underused diminish over time. Memory will falter when there is no opportunity to remember. This is the case when policy decisions that are made without expert knowledge input in the design of the policy or, worst of all, without the involvement of the organization that will be tasked with the responsibility to ensure implementation.

The separation of public policy decisions from implementation is one of the most frequent causes for public policy failures. Policy decisions and implementation are two parts of a unique cycle. When implementation considerations are not part of policy design, there is a strong likelihood that this will lead to a suboptimal policy, delayed implementation and frustrated users. This is the case when the announcement of a decision is given more value than generating results of public value. A breakdown of policy design and implementation is costly: it leaves government exposed, it leaves the public service set up to fail, and it undermines citizens' trust in government.

Share It to Grow It:

Papers, records, record of decisions, research work, data bases, computer-based information systems, documents of all kinds are *memory carriers*. Record-keeping for the purpose of returning to records later, documenting decisions and ensuring accountability is a traditional responsibility of parliament, government and public organizations.⁷ There are also *memory institutions* - external archives, libraries and the like. The *Library and Archives of Canada Act* sees the role of the LAC to “serve as the continuing memory of the government of Canada and its institutions.” This is important, but only part of the story.

The other part is centred around *people*. An organization is a human ecosystem supported by systems, rules and feedback mechanisms that combines memories and facts, brings the best available knowledge in interaction with know-how, to invent solutions to the problem the organisation is facing in practice. Scholars sometimes talk about a split between two views of institutional memory, the two parts mentioned - Stark and Head speak of formal-institutional versus socio-cultural views of memory;⁸ Corbett et al. distinguish between a “*static*” view of memory held in documents, versus a “*dynamic*” view in which institutional memory is “a composite of intersubjective memories open to change,” one carried by people across the public service and shaped through their conversations and collaborations.⁹ The truth is, both are parts of the whole, and supporting institutional memory means managing both.

Digital transformation presents both opportunities and risks. Digital records may improve

7. Christopher Pollitt, “Institutional Amnesia: A Paradox of the ‘Information Age’?,” *Prometheus* 18, no. 1 (2000), 10

8. Alastair Stark and Brian Head, “Institutional amnesia and public policy,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 26, no. 10 (2019)

9. Corbett et al., “Singular memory or institutional memories?,” quote is on p. 556

storage and accessibility. They may also lead to information overloads leaving organisation overwhelmed with information of little value. Artificial intelligence and advanced knowledge-management systems may help to improve retrieval, pattern recognition and evidence-based decision-making but they will also generate new complexities. This, however, does not diminish the importance of the *tacit* knowledge embedded in personal experience.

Dedicated lessons learned processes and centres in organizations can play a role in keeping personal knowledge, but need to be designed with care; as Heidi Hardt found, a weak centre with no independence to release its own findings and little support for people who want to share their knowledge may simply fail, leaving knowledge-sharing dependent on worse means: gossiping, informal interpersonal conversations unburdened by facts, anonymous ‘draft’ papers.¹⁰

Institutional Forgetfulness

An organisation that depends on a few individuals for critical aspects of its institutional mission is vulnerable. In a period of downsizing, as is currently the case in the public service of Canada, an organisation could experience a steep decline of its critical knowledge assets and know-how. The rapid rotation of executives, the reliance on term positions and on external contracts may compound the problem.

In recent decades, there has been some (albeit limited) interest in understanding how institutional memory is *lost*. The work of Christopher Pollitt is worthy of attention. He describes some of the ways contributing to memory loss; in addition to the rapid rotation of executives and reliance on short-term employment mentioned above, two stand out:

- Reorganizations moving people around detached from their prior knowledge systems; creating new organizations detached from past records; moving organizations to new locations, etc.
- Changes in how records are managed and stored, such as digitalization of records and changes to associated software. With each shift, files may be separated, lost, or become inaccessible with the new software.¹¹

Later work by Alastair Stark, based on interviews with ministers, policy officials, and public sector leaders across Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, came up with other observations of practices contributing to memory loss including:

- Organizational churn, driven both by restructuring and by career advancement
- Willful amnesia prioritizing the immediate news cycle over learning from the last problem.¹²

Care must be taken to preserve memory even in times of downsizing and upheaval. Measures such as careful executive development and planning, mentoring, team building, inter-sectoral discussions and projects may come some distance in reducing vulnerabilities.

10. Hardt, “How NATO Remembers”; more detail can be found in her book: Heidi Hardt, *NATO’s Lessons in Crisis: Institutional Memory in International Organizations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), including ch. 3.

11. Pollitt, “Institutional Memory”

12. Alastair Stark, “Explaining institutional amnesia in government,” *Governance* 32, no. 1 (2019)

Conclusion

Every generation of public servants is responsible for leaving behind public institutions fit for the challenges ahead. Every generation must find its way forward in the circumstances prevailing at the time. Institutional capacity building is an individual and collective responsibility that requires everyone's effort.

Ultimately it is about learning faster and doing better. This provides a country with a significant comparative advantage in a fast-changing landscape. So, the question is what **YOU** have done and what will **YOU** do to make things better for those coming after you? The future belongs to **YOU**.



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