



Memory, Momentum, Meaning

An Interview with Jocelyne Bourgon

The former head of Canada's Public Service has been a Fellow of the Civil Service College (CSC) since its inception as a statutory board. In conversation with ETHOS, she reflects on the role of public-sector learning institutions in uncertain times.

Madame Jocelyne Bourgon is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Civil Service College, and she has authored several works on public administration, including *The New Synthesis of Public Administration Fieldbook* (2017) and *A Public Servant's Voice: Through the Words of the First Woman Clerk for the Privy Council of Canada* (2026). She is also the Founding President of Public Governance International and President Emeritus of the Canada School of Public Service. She served as Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet during her time in the Canadian Public Service, where she led significant government reforms.

Madame Bourgon met with *ETHOS* Editor-in-Chief Dr Alvin Pang during her last Fellowship visit to Singapore in April 2026.

As governance grows more complex with the times, what do institutions such as the Civil Service College contribute to the work of public service?

Countries that have organisations dedicated to supporting their civil service in thinking, learning and disseminating knowledge are very fortunate. Such institutions internalise public service values, principles and practices. This cannot be learned from the private sector or provided from academia in the same way. Some countries, like the UK, have shut down their internal civil service college, only to reinvent it years later, because they realised there was no substitute.

These organisations — including CSC and the Canada School of Public Service which I created — are platforms for learning in real time, helping to accelerate how we serve, improve the quality of public service, and propel society forward.

A learning platform does several things. It brings practitioners together to extract knowledge, improve practice, and accelerate change. It facilitates a rendezvous of practitioners facing problems in real time to exchange with one another: "This is what I'm facing. What can I learn from you? What can I teach you?" This accelerates learning. Some of this knowledge can be deployed at scale across the public service.

Another purpose is to inculcate foundational knowledge; the core elements of being a public service professional. The faster the change process, the more important the foundational ideas – in terms of principles, values, ethics and ethos. This includes learning about public institutions: the role of the executive, legislature and judiciary and how it all fits together. What does it mean to govern and to serve in the 21st century? What does it mean to be a citizen of this country now and in the future?

A learning platform can bring the best minds from anywhere in the world to accelerate public service learning, in real time.

Another precious contribution of such institutions is to build institutional memory; the capacity to extract ideas and insights from past experiences and

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to operationalise them when they are most needed. Institutional memory helps us gain momentum, speed, and avoid amnesia. This is a vital part of institutional capacity building to face the complex issues of the 21st century.

In an environment of rapid and often disruptive change, what is the role of institutional memory?

I challenge the idea that everything has changed suddenly and become radically different in a very short time. In preparing my last book, *A Public Servant's Voice*[1], I had to gather documents I wrote over 50 years. What struck me was how much we already knew — 10, 15, 20 years ago — about some of the problems we are facing today: from geopolitical, economic and demographic trends to technology and climate changes. Many of the challenges we are facing today were in the making for a long time: we chose to ignore them.

Institutional memory helps to recognise the signals we missed, the problems we neglected, and the issues that were allowed to fester until it was too late or costly to correct them. It takes time to reveal the damage caused by institutional forgetting.

In a world where things move fast, institutional memory — remembering what was once known — provides a country with a comparative advantage. Amnesia slows down progress by repeating the same mistakes or reinventing the wheel rather than making use of what is already known. Building on what came before gives momentum. It is about using the past to invent a better future: understanding the essence of what was done before so that it can be operationalised faster and better to invent solutions for today's challenges.

Institutional memory must be nurtured. There is a need to deliberately capture and record knowledge and insights in different forms. This creates multiple layers of institutional memory.

How can a learning institution ready a public service for the future?

In Singapore, CSC has been a pioneer in getting the Public Service ready for

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technological innovation: it was a pioneer in embracing computerisation and digitalisation to increase productivity and improve service, long before many other countries did so. The next generation of public service leaders does not need to be experts in every single technological innovation that comes along. They need to know and understand what technology can do. In public sector organisations, some small AI applications may reap significant benefits quickly.

At the senior levels, Permanent Secretary or equivalent, the need is to think about the philosophical ramifications of technological changes. How does it transform the economic space, the social fabric, human nature or the environment. Instead of focusing on their technical competence, there is a need to develop their institutional capacity to build public organisations fit for the times.

Public administration transforms ideas about life in society into a reality citizens experience collectively. This requires an understanding of philosophical and ethical dilemmas, and an understanding of risk. This is not technical expertise, but about how technologies transform life in society; it is existential. It calls for a multidisciplinary way of thinking and an appreciation of how multiple systems interact together. At CSC, I have seen this take shape ahead of many other places; I am sure this has contributed to the high level of performance of the Singapore Public Service.

Generalists may need an understanding of the science of their age, and to develop an instinct or feel for what technology has the potential to achieve and the risks it might create. The 21st century presents us with a whole family of technological innovations that will challenge governments. This is not just about AI but also geoengineering, bioengineering, pharmaceuticals, robotics, transhumanism and so on. Are we going to train leaders in each of these technological domains? Or to ensure they can think about how to optimise benefits, set constraints, limits, and manage risks? This will not be achieved by serial technological training.

So how might a learning institution do this? Often the learning is in the doing — provided we make the doing itself a source of collective learning.

Every day significant events happen. If we turn these events into learning

moments and bring together events, responses, public administration, public institutions and public sector values — we can learn faster, gain momentum and improve the institutional capacity to adapt to a fast-changing landscape.

As we strive to deepen the capability of the public service, what must we not forget?

The role of the public service is to generate results of high public value, but to do so in a way that builds society's collective capacity to produce better results over time at a reasonable overall cost to society. The public outcomes we want to achieve are not only about what government can do; it is about what "we" can achieve collectively.

This means it is sometimes wise not to optimise short-term results if this gets in the way of achieving better collective results over time. For instance, it may be wise to invest time and resources in helping others to gain the capacity to act independently, even if it means slower immediate results.

Performance is contextual and in relation to society. The question for every public servant is: from where you stand, in the position you hold, with the team and resources currently available to you, what can you do to make things better for society and the people you serve?

Starting from a societal perspective helps to clarify team performance, individual performance, and institutional performance. Without a societal perspective, it is possible to meet performance targets with no real benefit for society.

To govern means making choices, setting priorities, moving resources, and building public support. Governments need to anticipate, innovate, try new things, and experiment. They need to build resilient systems and a resilient society, because no matter how smart we are, shocks and disruptions will happen, and communities, societies, and individuals will need to absorb shocks and prosper in unpredictable circumstances.

Looking ahead, we need to prepare people who will be managing at the intersection of multiple dimensions where complexity, technology, economy, geography, ecology, and demography converge. This is a time to rethink, reinvent, and reframe public policy challenges from a broader perspective. In such times, the role of government becomes even more important than before.

This is a most meaningful time to be in public service. ■

Notes

1. Bourgon, Jocelyne. "A Public Servant's Voice: Through the Words of the First Woman Clerk of the Privy Council for Canada" (2026) https://utppublishing.com/doi/10.3138/9781487574758