



TOP OF MIND

Answering the Call,
Adapting to Change.

2022
SUMMARY REPORT

PRESENTED BY



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FOREWORD

Today, a plethora of negative forces are sowing the seeds of social polarization and eroding trust in democratically elected governments. The pandemic has accelerated, or potentially magnified, these trends in Canada. More recently, citizens have been moved to individual and collective action outside of government processes to effect change.

The Institute on Governance and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government have partnered to examine the impact of these negative forces on a select group of public officials responsible for managing organizations at the municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal levels. Their role is to support elected officials in effective decision-making and to ensure that citizens receive essential programs and services.

As chief administrative officers, deputy ministers, and those in other capacities, public officials find themselves on the front line responding to an ever-changing operational environment that is becoming enormously complex, divisive, and increasingly difficult to navigate. Their relative success or failure can either strengthen democracy in Canada or contribute to its further decline. This begs an important question: What are they thinking about? How are they responding to the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought, and where do they see opportunities to make positive change to regain the fragile trust of citizens?

Top of Mind is a two-part study designed to provide rare access into the thoughts and views of senior executive public service leaders. Confidential and anonymous, participants from the federal, municipal, provincial, and territorial governments were interviewed and/or surveyed on important questions regarding the environment in which they serve to better ascertain their views on what is needed to respond effectively. Their responses provide an important roadmap that needs to be studied closely.

Both the Institute on Governance and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government thank those who participated in this study for their time, insights, and candour. We believe *Top of Mind* provides a unique and valuable contribution to Canada's ongoing debate on good governance, public trust in our institutions, and the future of our democracy.



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The participants, senior municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal executives, including deputy ministers, chief administrative officers, and assistant deputy ministers.

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INTRODUCTION

The impact and presence of the public sector in Canada is substantial. Overall, the public sector—including all three levels of government—represents roughly 40 per cent of Canada’s GDP and an estimated 20 per cent of its workforce.¹ It supports citizens in areas as diverse as education, health, social services, infrastructure, immigration, environment and climate change, security and defence, resource and economic development, the administration of justice, and many others. Many of these responsibilities are shared by multiple jurisdictions.

Historically, responsible liberal democratic societies have relied upon the effective relationship between those elected to represent citizens and a professional, non-partisan public service to ensure the delivery of programs and services to the public that is reliable, predictable, and reasonably managed. The public service also supports effective decision-making structures by those democratically elected to form government and to respond to the challenges facing citizens and their communities.

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

In spring 2021, the Institute on Governance (IOG) and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government (Mulroney Institute) launched a study to probe the insights and perspectives of senior executive leaders at the municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal levels of government on the issues and challenges affecting their ability to deliver effective public services to citizens and their elected officials.

PROJECT CHALLENGE

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, democratic institutions around the world were surprised by outcomes in referendums (the 2016 Brexit vote in Britain) and national elections (the 2016 US presidential election).

COVID-19 spread across the planet at lightning speed, resulting in a pandemic not witnessed since the 1918 Influenza. International travel came to a halt virtually overnight, borders closed, and health officials scrambled to introduce and implement a host of protective safety measures and guidelines.



In Canada, a coordinated lockdown saw jurisdictions across the country close businesses, and, when possible, employees were encouraged to work from home. Soon after, a patchwork of restrictions emerged across the country involving varying degrees of lockdown and public health restrictions.

Through the early days of the pandemic and the accompanying lockdown, the public turned to the government to keep them safe and to protect their economic security. All three levels of government collaborated to ensure public safety, and in many cases, were “rewarded” with higher approval ratings. In three provincial elections, the incumbent party won a majority. Yet, one year after the lockdown, public attitudes shifted, and trust in public institutions began to wane.

Top of Mind engaged senior executives in the spring and summer of 2021. Public support was beginning to shift, with incumbent governments being defeated (e.g., the provincial election in Nova Scotia) and an electorate becoming more unpredictable in advance of an expected federal election.

PROJECT METHOD

The study focused on three components. Part 1 involved one-on-one conversations with over 42 high-level public sector leaders from the federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments. Part 2 surveyed 2,353 public servants in the same organizations with a response rate of 7 per cent. These products are intended to help and inform the work policy experts in universities, the not-for-profit sector, and in other organizations undertake in the broad field of public administration and public policy. Part 3 is a summary report drawing on a sample of the dominant themes and findings extracted from the two reports.

¹ Based on pre-pandemic numbers (Statistics Canada 2011; Public Policy Forum 2014).

SUMMARY AND THEMES

This summary report was prepared by the Institute on Governance (IOG) in partnership with the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government (Mulroney Institute). Its purpose is to generate discussion, debate, and, ideally, a roadmap to assist public institutions and those in key leadership positions to respond more effectively, responsibly, and creatively to complex forces facing Canadians and their democratic institutions. This summary touches on the following:

- 1 Trust, Political Discourse, and The Federation**
- 2 The State of “Fearless Advice and Loyal Implementation”**
- 3 An Economic Reckoning on the Horizon**
- 4 A Path Forward: Public Service Renewal and a New Public Administration**

TRUST, POLITICAL DISCOURSE, AND THE FEDERATION

The strongest and most common of threads across the participants was the clear decline in trust in our public institutions and the implications this has for senior executive leaders to support program and service delivery, policy development, and decision-making by elected officials.

A deeper examination of this phenomenon reveals three dimensions of this issue: Trust itself, the tenor of political discourse, and the inherent conflicts that arise within a federated system of government.

73%

of survey participants believe Canadian democratic institutions remain robust.

94%

of executives surveyed believe that misinformation is increasing.

TRUST

Three quarters (73 per cent) of survey participants believe that Canadian democratic institutions remain robust. Senior executive leaders understand and acknowledge that trust is at the core of all liberal democratic institutions, including a professional public service, elected officials, an independent media, the judicial system, and, of course, an engaged and energized civil society. For example, signing a free trade agreement with another country, adhering to public health lockdowns, or accepting the ruling from the Supreme Court of Canada would not be possible if the population did not believe or trust the decisions of those institutions.

However, of those who participated in the survey, a clear majority (81 per cent) share the view that declining trust weakens their governments' ability to implement good public policies and programs and/or to deal with important challenges.

Misinformation appears to be a contributing factor. Executives surveyed were almost unanimous (94 per cent) that misinformation is increasing and contributing to adverse social trends, such as polarization. As well, they agree (94 per cent) that adverse social trends—media misinformation, polarization and tensions, and international interference—inhibit democracy and trust in governments.

Study participants observed that the COVID-19 pandemic magnified many pre-existing conditions already eroding trust in public institutions, including polarization, misinformation, and foreign interference.

Participants felt ill-equipped to navigate a changing societal landscape where evidence and fact are constantly being challenged by misinformation disseminated through social media. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories of rational and reasoned-based decision-making that underpin public policy-making and public administration are not keeping pace with democratic needs in the twenty-first century.

Leaders were probed about the trends and status of Canadians' trust in their governments and the associated consequences for the public sector's ability to deliver programs and deal effectively with a host of social policy issues. Their views were notably diverse and, in some instances, somewhat divergent.

On one hand, some participants are more optimistic and indicate that effective government action, such as the response to the pandemic, have increased peoples' appreciation for the role of government and strengthened their confidence. On the other hand, there were many more who said, "trust is declining, and the population is less knowledgeable on government issues. It is a tough one. I would layer on that, when the going gets tough, the public disputes between levels of governments undermine public trust."

Another participant had this to say,

“ I think there is a glib answer [re: trust] which is, I am not sure there is much you can do. We have been through a pandemic and went through shutdowns, and we still have 30 per cent anti-vaxxers. There have been real-life people that are dying, and yet we still have a bunch of people that say that does not prove it for me. We are living in an environment where trust is going to be hard to build.”

“ **I think we all know that trust leaves on horseback but comes back on foot.**”

“ **Executives believe (91%) the actions of governments and elected officials are key and can either aggravate or mitigate adverse issues. Executives also felt (79%) the public service should be more active in mitigating the effects of deleterious social trends.**

There was a sense among many that governments across the country could have done a better job “getting in front” of both the pandemic and the many issues being raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. One participant made the following point:

“ We were ticking along in such a reserved manner until George Floyd's death. ... I received an email from an employee saying, 'your silence on this matter is deafening.' ... Later, when it was too late, we put out a message, and then we had a day with all our black employees, and I felt very naïve, and it was very sad.”

Another participant added,

“ **What we could have done better is having the ability to assess and identify a little earlier how different that [the COVID-19 pandemic] was than any other crisis. The whole world had it, and only some countries got it right out of the gate. When new threats present themselves, you need to not bring old lessons into it.**”

Participants also observed the importance of governments providing effective and clear communication with citizens, particularly during times of heightened unrest and social upheaval.

“ Make stuff less about the announcements and actually make it about the issue. Communicate with Canadians on that front—what is the problem you are trying to fix here? I am dismayed by the lack of understanding in [the] leading journalism of public service. People have the basics wrong, and it leads to bad discord.”



Senior executives agreed that increasing public awareness of important issues, outlining clear and common expectations of what the government can offer, and instilling and reinforcing trust in democratic institutions are necessary but insufficient conditions for good governance. According to participants, policy choices must also address citizen's expectations by implementing appropriate solutions and delivering tangible results.

However, misinformation is a significant barrier to cogent public policy development. The majority of executives surveyed (94 per cent) agreed that misinformation is increasing and contributing to adverse social trends such as polarization. Moreover, they agree (94 per cent) that adverse social trends—media misinformation, polarization and tensions, and international interference—inhibit democracy and erode trust in governments.

That said, executives were asked if their government's policies and recent actions helped improve or impede social cohesion and trust in governments. A majority of the executives surveyed thought that the following areas had positive effects:

76%

Management of the pandemic

71%

Support for diversity, tolerance, and human rights generally

58%

Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples

It should be noted there were differences among the executives in Western and Northern Canada and those in Central and Eastern Canada on the "management of the pandemic" and "support for diversity." Executives from Western and Northern regions were notably less optimistic than their counterparts from Central and Eastern Canada.



POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Politics—and the actions of politicians at all levels—may also contribute to waning confidence in government. For instance, participants identified public disputes, lack of diplomacy, and poor collaboration between governments as undermining trust. Governments' increasing intrusions in the lives of their citizens, which was heightened during the pandemic, have also had an impact.

Over time, participants noted that official communications revealed a lack of collaboration, sometimes overt public disagreements, and political partisanship which tarnished public perceptions of governments' effectiveness. Participants recognized that citizens do not necessarily appreciate or distinguish between different jurisdictional responsibilities. However, it would appear that a lack of coordination, co-operation, and efficient delivery tarnishes all governments and citizen trust in those institutions.



“ I find it discouraging to see things are becoming more political than expert-related. This could only be rebuilt when there are political leaders willing to do that work. I think we have gone over the scale, and politics is what is leading us to this lack of confidence and trust in institutions.”

Participants' responses suggested partisanship negatively affects citizens' understanding of an issue and complicates the development of policy choices that have broad consensus. They also pointed to a worrisome dichotomy between a rising public awareness of the importance and challenges related to social inequality, inclusion and reconciliation, and the appropriate role for the government to respond.

This view is further supported by an account of "life on the inside":

“ We are in an era in which decision-making is so overly politicized that the role of the professional public servant has become diminished [from] what it should be. I think there is a broiling of political perspective about the role of the bureaucracy and the work that it does and is challenged to do, and the independence of that, in my view, is no longer understood or seen by a lot of political bodies, parties, and individuals for what it truly [is] supposed to be.”

In other words, there is a role for public servants to help increase awareness and understanding of issues. Awareness does not necessarily translate into the public's full understanding of all the factors at play, thereby challenging the ability to reach consensus. Specifically, executives believe (91 per cent) that the actions of governments and elected officials are critically important, and, depending on how they are handled, they can either aggravate or mitigate the development and implementation of policy solutions. Executives also acknowledged (79 per cent) that the public service should play a more active role in containing the effects of deleterious social trends.

THE FEDERATION

There is a sense from reading the responses that co-operative federalism is from a bygone era and is missed. One participant said,

“ I am lucky enough to have experience at the provincial, municipal, and federal level. Our jurisdictions are broken, and we are focused on jurisdictions and that is the issue ironically. ... If we view all our mandates from the community view, you would not know who is responsible for what.”

Study participants appear less concerned about which level of government is in charge and more about “who is in charge” and “understanding what the plan is to tackle particular problems,” and clarifying roles and responsibilities.

As indicated above, the sense among participants is that taxpayers expect governments to “figure it out” rather than to assign blame.

A clear message from the interviews was a growing recognition around the importance of working collaboratively with other jurisdictions. There was widespread consensus through the interviews and the survey that collaboration and coordination (both within and across jurisdictions) are central challenges. The study did not delve into the reasons why public sector leaders at all levels of government believed collaboration was in short supply, but they were unanimous in stressing the importance and value of serving the needs of Canadians and enhancing trust in public institutions.

91%

of executives believe the actions of governments and elected officials are critically important.

79%

of executives acknowledge that the public service should play a more active role in containing the effects of deleterious social trends.



Respondents pointed to the increasingly complex policy issues and challenges facing governments requiring multiple jurisdictions to address them cogently and responsibly. The management of the ongoing pandemic illustrated this point directly and inspired one interviewee to state that “the COVID situation underlined the fact that there are bigger problems out there that require collective action.”

Ninety per cent of survey participants indicated that coordination, both between governments and within public services, represented the most important challenge to effective public governance. Deputy ministers and chief administrative officers shared this perspective and went further to say that all governments benefit from citizen approval when that occurs. Pointing once again to the early days of the pandemic, participants recalled witnessing rare levels of collaboration across levels of government, the lessening of bureaucratic barriers, and an increase in responsiveness. These observations corresponded with public opinion polling indicating that trust in government during this time had increased.

Polarizing political discourse appears to be affecting the ability of the professional non-partisan public service to do the “behind the scenes” work to coordinate, share information, and exchange/co-develop ideas. The question that arises is, why?

Is it the “fear” of appearing to be disloyal to elected leadership by engaging jurisdictions with diverging political views? Or is it that intergovernmental relations have become more centralized in premier and prime ministers’ offices in recent years? Has this limited the opportunities for informal interactions among officials? Has the pandemic helped or exacerbated intergovernmental relations?

While these questions were not posed at the time of the interviews and survey, they, or some variation of them, are worth exploring further. Federal, provincial, and municipal participants were unanimous in the criticality of jurisdictions being able to work effectively together to do their job to serve Canadians everywhere.

THE STATE OF “FEARLESS ADVICE AND LOYAL IMPLEMENTATION”

Participants understand that politicians are responsible for making decisions on various policy fronts and that the role of the professional public service is to ensure these decision-makers are provided with the most accurate and reliable information possible so they can fulfill their responsibilities. The public service’s goal of working collaboratively and effectively with elected officials has been examined closely by public administration academics and practitioners alike.²

Top of Mind explored this critical relationship further. Roughly, two thirds of survey participants acknowledge that the interaction between elected officials and public servants represents an important challenge and requires more effective management. One in four believe it is somewhat important, and less than 10 per cent noted that it was not important. It was difficult to discern whether this sentiment was more acute in one level of government or another. However, there are some clues in examining some of the statements with respect to “main concerns.”

The main concerns revolved around the independence of the public service, the effectiveness of parliamentary committees, the loss and/or reduction of policy advice capacity, the role of political staff, the ability to provide “fearless” advice to political leaders, and the politicization of issues and debates.

One participant pointed to the parliamentary debate at the time of the study as indicative of blurring lines of accountability:

“**The last three months watching Parliament, it struck me, the blurring of the roles between the ministers and public servants. I think if you do not solve it, then it calls the question on the neutrality of the public service. Ian Stewart refusing to provide documents and defending the neutrality of the public service.**”

“**We frankly need less lawyers and processes and need to get back to key foundations of parliamentary democracy in Canada. ... If we think of Senator [Mike] Duffy’s hearing, it went on so long, and people were saying ‘what is going on?’ It could have taken way less time. ... I think people are looking for a ‘show me’ model. We seem to have gotten ourselves waylaid in ensuring ultimate fairness in the wrong way. We have lost substantial knowledge amongst the public generally on what these things should be doing. In [province redacted], there are many things in the parliamentary democratic system in Canada that people do not understand.**”



Another participant stated the situation in this way:

“**We are in an era in which decision-making is so overly politicized that the role of the professional public servant has become diminished from what it should be. I think there is a broiling of political perspective about the role of the bureaucracy and the work that it does and is challenged to do, and the independence of that in my view is no longer understood or seen by a lot of political bodies, parties, and individuals for what it is truly supposed to be.**”

Yet, participants also noted instances in which collaboration between politicians and public servants was positive and effective, particularly at the outset of the pandemic.

Take, for example, the following:

- Politicians were very engaged and accessible to talk to each other to facilitate decisions; and
- Politicians accepted public health officers’ advice on facts and science.

Nevertheless, the strong undercurrent is that the public service has “lost” an element of independence and is now expected to deliver on platform commitments rather than offering objective policy advice on the “feasibility of the commitment” or alternative ways to achieve the objective of the platform commitment.

“Speaking truth to power,” though important, seems less achievable to many participants. To this point, participants referenced fewer safe spaces for senior public executives to provide analysis or options that are unpopular or not sufficiently in tune with their government’s (political) position.

“**It was amazing to me how quickly it became politicizing [re: vaccines] ... Ultimately, it became a dogfight to get in a room and argue for allocations. ... I think we have gone over the scale, and politics is what is leading us to this lack of confidence and trust in institutions.**”

There was also a sense that political staff overextended their role and could impede and conflict with the deputy ministers’ responsibilities. According to one participant, “The public service is beaten down by the need to be responsible politically.”

The participants were not asked about root causes, but one participant did note that they thought that “accountability is a huge issue. The [Federal] Accountability Act has shifted a lot to deputy ministers but still limited that you still report to ministries.”

One participant summed it up by saying,

“**I am a big advocate of fearless advice and faithful implementation. I think we must reset the value of that matrix.**”

² For examples of the many studies that have examined the public service–political interface and related topics such as public service independence, see, among others, Aucoin and Jarvis (2005); the Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program & Advertising Activities (Gomery 2006); Heintzman (2014); Public Policy Forum (2014). See D’Aoust (2020, 104–5), Federal Public Service Management Reforms – Consolidated Views and Results, for a synopsis and full references.

AN ECONOMIC RECKONING ON THE HORIZON

Clearly, COVID-19 is a major factor currently affecting world economies, including Canada's. There are divergent views, however, on how well Canada is positioned for growth and recovery as—or when—it emerges from the pandemic.

Participants recognized—and welcomed—that extraordinary spending was needed to deal with the effects of the pandemic, to help save lives, and to keep the economy going. But perhaps more importantly, they worry that the resulting deficits and debt levels are unsustainable.

For some, the situation is more troublesome as it exacerbates long-standing economic concerns (low productivity was cited). Moreover, much of the new spending is not focused on investing in long-term economic growth and prosperity. The largest (most expensive) assistance programs were targeted to more vulnerable individuals, businesses, and industries impacted by COVID-19.

Participants' views reflect current economic uncertainties and, to some extent, the diverging economic policies of different governments and political ideologies (at least, conventionally). Nonetheless, the importance of a strong economy in dealing with society's many demands is not in dispute:

“Fiscal sustainability is another challenge. We have the federal and provincial governments that need to pay for all kinds of challenges. What is the fiscal plan to get us out of this deep hole that we had to create? It will require sacrifices along the way.”

“People trying to have conversations about ‘what does balance mean’ are being shut down. Hopefully, we do not sit here five years from now and say, ‘too bad that happened.’ We shut ourselves off and made ourselves an economic island, and we have no market for our resources and our health care system is shutting down.”



Economic success will rest on the federation's ability to address these challenges and for the three orders of government to work together and reach some measure of consensus and consistency on economic priorities and policies:

“What is the fiscal plan to get us out of this deep hole that we had to create? It will require sacrifices along the way. ... We have a hell of a fiscal hangover coming out of this pandemic.”

Participants reported a growing disconnect between the public's expectations and the corresponding revenues and resources needed by governments to address them. This was compounded by low interest rates at the time of the study, which facilitated borrowing.

Existing structural deficits before the pandemic have not gone away. Closing the socio-economic gap of Indigenous peoples in Canada as well as addressing health care, transportation, and climate change all require investment.

Senior executives recognize that they will need to work closely with elected officials on options and strategies to reconcile spending reductions and economic growth. Clearly, the relationship between elected and non-elected officials will be key to the success of Canada moving forward.



A PATH FORWARD: PUBLIC SERVICE RENEWAL AND A NEW PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Top of Mind provided a rare snapshot of the views and opinions of Canada's senior public service cadre on how their work has changed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Without question, the pandemic has brought into sharper focus both underlying issues of declining trust and the challenges facing public policy formation and good governance. By examining what was said among senior municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal executives, a "Road Map" emerges on a potential path forward.

This "Road Map" has five key landmarks:

- A better understanding social cohesion;
- Redefining risk and streamlining reporting/control frameworks;
- Embracing the future of work/hybrid opportunities;
- Updating the fearless advice and loyal implementation matrix; and
- Investing in policy capacity and modernizing federalism's collaboration tools.

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL COHESION

Without question, polarization and the erosion of social cohesion is affecting public policy formation at every level of government. The solutions are not evident, and participants have noted the struggle in developing and delivering policies and programs in this environment. Publicly funded research into this subject could assist various public services to better connect with citizens and to avoid adopting measures that unintentionally divide.

Going forward, the IOG and the Mulroney Institute recommend new research funding dedicated to furthering the understanding of improving social cohesion at the local, provincial, and federal jurisdictional levels in Canada and avoiding or minimizing the effects of division, including the use of misinformation.

REDEFINING RISK AND STREAMLINING REPORTING/CONTROL FRAMEWORKS

There is a growing sense that risk and control frameworks need to be adjusted to address increased policy and program complexity. More reporting, oversight, and tighter accountabilities do not necessarily deliver better outcomes. In fact, some participants have indicated that the opposite is true, and such measures are barriers to agility, innovation, and collaboration.



Pointing to pandemic-inspired innovations, participants were unanimous in wanting to hold onto streamlined approval processes, flattening hierarchies, the relaxation of administrative, human resource, and financial controls, and the use of interdisciplinary teams. Many telegraphed the Clerk's Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service, paraphrasing their interest in avoiding the "elastic snapback" to the pre-pandemic rule-heavy environment which impeded rapid progress and delivery.

While public service accountability remains an essential tenet, recent experiences have demonstrated that less process, fewer approvals, and reduced red tape are possible and beneficial. Leaders expressed the fervent need to retain this lesson.

Going forward, the IOG and the Mulroney Institute recommend a comprehensive review of the pre-pandemic control framework for human resources, administrative procedures, and financial management for opportunities to streamline decision-making, enhance collaboration, refine accountability, and reduce the reporting burden to unlock the full potential of innovation within the public service.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE OF WORK/HYBRID OPPORTUNITIES

At the time of the study, there was little consensus on the future of work for government employees at either the municipal, provincial, or federal levels. One participant put it this way, "There is a lot of bias around it: 'I do not know what my employees are doing; I am not sure how productive they are.'"

Other participants noted that,

"A few years before the pandemic, there was someone who said there is no way we can work from home because our people cannot access our sensitive data. That all changed in a weekend, and all these myths were busted. We have proven so many things we were wrong about. ... We proved that working from home is feasible and does not affect the productivity of the workforce. It caused increased supervision, and managers must reach out to their employees. We would never go back to our old ways. ... One major lesson is that we can work from home efficiently without affecting any of our services."

However, it was broadly recognized that working remotely is not the solution for everyone nor for all organizations. Depending on the nature of work and the services provided, some activities simply cannot be done remotely such as border services, municipal enforcement, corrections, first responders, and park operations. And some regions, such as the North, also have limited broadband access.

Nevertheless, the benefits of remote work—when it is available—cannot be ignored. The benefits include the following:

- Reductions in greenhouse gas emissions due to a decrease in commuting;
- Healthier work-life balances and more flexible hours; and
- Human resources (HR) benefits, such as wider geographical staffing opportunities.

Consequently, while the tendency may be to have all employees “return to work” at the earliest opportunity while respecting public health guidance, some study participants are counselling to maximize the benefits of remote working and limit disadvantages.

Going forward, the IOG and the Mulroney Institute recommend the development of short-, medium-, and long-term departmental plans to address “return to work” post-pandemic with a view to maximizing the known benefits of hybrid and remote working arrangements and to mitigating known challenges.

UPDATING THE “FEARLESS ADVICE AND LOYAL IMPLEMENTATION” MATRIX

Michael Wernick, former clerk of the Privy Council and author of *Governing in Canada: A Guide to the Tradecraft of Politics*, advises ministers that, “You don’t need to like your deputy minister, but you need to be able to work with this person. ... Open, honest two-way communication is the key.” *Top of Mind* participants were consistent in observing two trends that could impede, or are impeding, this relationship: the overpoliticization of policy-making and choices, and the lack of opportunity to constructively challenge political direction.

Gordon Robertson, former clerk of the Privy Council, described ministers and their offices as “partisan, politically-oriented, and operationally-sensitive. [Robertson described deputy ministers as] non-partisan, operationally-oriented, and politically-sensitive.” In other words, deputies are the “linchpin” between a department’s professional public service and the duly elected executive. Both former clerks infer there is a role that each has to play for the critical partnership to be successful.



As mentioned above, *Top of Mind* did not delve into the underlying reasons for why participants believe the relationship has been potentially eroded other than one participant drawing a direct line to the Accountability Act, perhaps the largest public service reform omnibus legislation passed in this century. While the IOG has reflected upon the Act’s origins as being a response to the Sponsorship Scandal, it arguably went much further to include changing the role of deputy ministers to be the chief accounting officer before Parliament. Other IOG observations point to it setting the stage for other changes, such as the role of the Public Service Commission in executive appointments and proactive disclosure requirements on assistant deputy ministers.

While it could be seen as a stretch to connect the Accountability Act to any perceived challenges with the contemporary relationship between elected and non-elected officials, it is worth noting that no comprehensive review of the Act has been undertaken since its passage.

Whether real or perceived, the belief that senior public sector leaders are unsupported in providing “fearless” advice presents a problem for good governance. The potential “cascading effect” on assistant deputy ministers (and beyond) is unclear and perhaps worthy of further study.

Some federal provincial participants commented on the preoccupation with “announcements” rather than implementation. It is unclear whether there are more “announcements” today than there were in previous decades; however, federal participants have indicated that there is at least more emphasis or energy being placed on the communications environment and its management rather than ensuring implementation is sufficiently factored in to achieve the outcomes envisioned.

Are implementation challenges or mistakes being attributed to public servants within the hallways of government? Is there a potential relationship between “decision spaces” being squeezed for time to achieve political and communication objectives and timelines affecting effort spent on implementation planning?

Going forward, IOG and the Mulroney Institute recommend an examination into the factors necessary to create a “safer space” for fearless advice. Federally, this could include the Federal Accountability Act to understand if its compliance and reporting requirements have had unintended consequences either in practice or in culture affecting “fearless advice” or innovation. Such a review could take many forms, including the striking of a Senate-House of Commons special joint committee on the review of the Accountability Act.

FUTURE INVESTMENTS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS (SKILLS DEVELOPMENT, POLICY CAPACITY, AND MODERNIZING FEDERALISM COLLABORATION TOOLS)

PLANNING

Many participants referred to needing better tools to do long-range planning and forecasting to respond to today's challenges. The absence of such tools—or the use of such tools—may also be contributing to the strains on the relationship between elected officials and senior public servants. If senior public officials do not have sufficient information at their disposal to inform policy decision-making, then the risk of poor policy choices or execution increases.

Several participants identified the lack of continuity and long-term strategy and planning as a chief shortcoming of public sector governance. The normal four-year electoral cycle does not facilitate longer-term visions and implementations, and often, a change of government means a change in direction on key files. While not mentioned specifically, the cancellation and reintroduction of the long-form census survey may be one such example.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Participants were unanimous in their assessment that the proliferation of social media and the application of misinformation has changed public policy-making in Canada at all levels. And the impact is a decline in trust in our institutions and increasing socio-cultural divides.

“ Social media is very destructive towards trust in government. Its business model is based on negative emotions and that gets more clicks than positive ones.”

“ COVID has created a great sense of the importance of government. There have been feedback loops... It accelerated society's view on government, and it has shined a light on bad government. It also accelerated the polarization of society whereby a conspiratorial national supremacist element is becoming stronger and more radicalized. You are seeing a [fraction] of that in Canada, which is way milder than the US. You can see it in anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers. It has shined the light on it and validated its role, and it has been amazing in showing the cause and effect and... [it is] radicalizing the society.”



While the pervasiveness of both social media and misinformation use remains a relatively recent phenomenon, the anecdotes, according to participants, may actually be found in reinterpreting or applying traditional concepts of good governance in more contemporary or digital savvy ways. These traditional democratic concepts include the following:

- Listening and giving voice to citizens;
- Promoting citizens' knowledge of key issues and government processes;
- Setting realistic expectations at the start;
- Maintaining transparency and accountability;
- Responding quickly to misinformation through science and objective evidence;
- Facilitating collaboration and co-operation between governments; and, ultimately,
- Delivering services, getting results, and making a visible difference.

Clearly, the communication environment, media, and expectations have all evolved considerably in recent years. Participants noted the importance of governments keeping pace and to examine how to best communicate and engage its citizens:

“ And if you don't understand Canada, we cannot serve Canada.”

“ I think communication with people and how we communicate with Canadians is important. We are now in such a different communication environment. ... We need to put more emphasis in that as effectiveness of communications is key. ... People are looking at ways on how to get the views of ordinary citizens into decision-making and policy-making. It went in the wayside, and people thought it could be dealt with on social media. But it has not proven to work because it divides rather than unites.”

While such ideas could be described as “common sense,” it would be a significant understatement to say that such an agenda for change would be straightforward. Significant innovation would be required in light of the intricacies between and among the forces influencing public policy formation and decision-making today. This challenge is real and requires an investment in new ways of engaging Canadians and keeping them engaged throughout the life cycle of public policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

Simply put, **“We need to find creative ways on how we get their views into Parliament and into policy- and decision-making.”**

Another participant noted the likely consequence of having more citizen-centred policy processes:

“You have to be prepared to accept that things are going to take longer to accomplish and to really reflect the goals and aspirations of Indigenous populations. You need to realize it will take a while and a lot of back and forth, and you must be patient with Indigenous groups and their capacity to engage, and constantly assist them to engage. It will not be accepted if you do not take time to work at their pace.”

NEW SKILLS

Participants also pointed to the relationship between being successful and the skills and talent they have in their organizations. The challenges and difficulties in securing needed staff and talent are indeed top of mind, and the situation was aggravated under COVID-19.

While the remote work environment may favour hiring from across the country and a larger pool of candidates, there are also growing impediments:

- The toll taken by the pandemic on the workforce (as well as vaccine requirements) will likely accelerate departures and early retirements;
- Government compensation is often not competitive; and
- For some, the public service is perceived as too bureaucratic, restrictive, and not well-attuned to the expectations of a young and more mobile workforce.

Under these conditions, the struggle to hire skilled resources, in competition with the private sector, will intensify.

The impetus to ensure public services' workforces are diverse, inclusive, and representative of the populations they serve will continue. While beneficial, this also adds complexity to HR functions, such as staffing.

Some HR bottom lines were clear:

- Accommodate staff where possible, and steer away from “one size fits all” approaches;
- Equip employees and tackle the replacement of legacy IT infrastructure; and
- Throughout the various changes and demands impacting the workforce, communicate and consult with employees regularly.

As one leader put it, “Whatever you do or however you do it, you must take the temperature of the staff.”

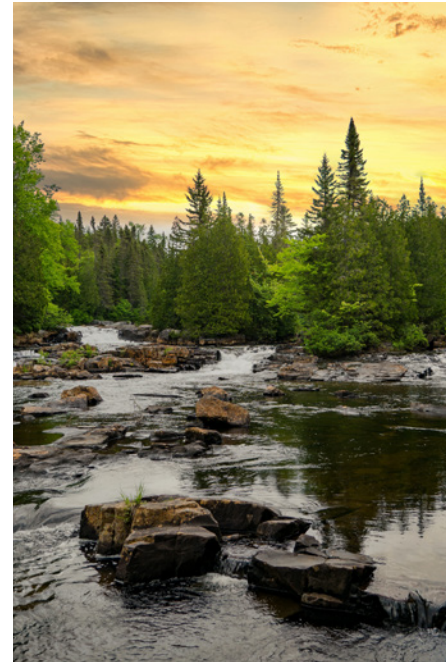
We asked leaders “What essential competencies, skills, or expertise will be most needed by senior public sector executives in the future?” The cumulative list of qualifications that leaders indicated would be required by future executives is as long and as diverse as the list of challenges they are likely to face. Nonetheless, some suggested competencies and requirements were more prevalent than others, such as the following:

- Critical, strategic thinking and a sense of the long term;
- People and talent management;
- Relationship/partnership skills;
- Communications; and
- Flexibility, pragmatism, innovation, and tech-savvy.

In the classic debate between experts versus generalists, there are no new insights, although one could interpret that there was a perception that generalists were more practical by nature and perhaps able to lead interdisciplinary teams.

As one participant stated:

“I am a fan of generalists. You need practical problem-solving. ... You need practical leadership to try to metal through. I don't think the deputy needs to be an expert.”



FEDERALISM AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL COLLABORATION

Like the engagement of citizens, an overarching consensus emerged from the consultations surrounding the necessity and benefits of better collaboration both within and between public sector jurisdictions. There is also broad agreement that this remains one of the most significant challenges in modern public sector governance (refer also to survey results).

In instances in which joint efforts and collaboration between jurisdictions were present at the outset, success was more evident. One leader noted the “Team Canada” approach to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations as an illustration. A few leaders observed heightened collaboration for some aspects of the COVID-19 response, particularly at the outset of the pandemic.

Municipal chief administrative officers described how several of Canada’s largest cities have been meeting regularly to discuss common issues and solutions in relation to the pandemic, and how their contacts with both provincial and federal ministries have intensified.



“The feds have assigned ADMs [assistant deputy ministers] and DMs [deputy ministers] to help us [cities]. When you have an aging population and under-investment in infrastructure and young generations wanting to go back to work, you need to be more deliberate in approaching these issues. ... Let us agree on the topic, we will focus on outcomes we are trying to achieve and respect the roles and responsibilities of each of us and decide what works.”

Again, there were silver linings during the course of the pandemic that senior officials pointed to as something to retain and build upon in terms of intergovernmental collaboration. Two quotes from different participants make this point.

“One of the strategic lessons we need to take on and harness [is] what is real collaboration and what underpins it? Is it sharing data, evidence, venturing out to find out what we have in common with non-traditional partners and how do we do that in a Westminster system? How can we harness and build on this?”

“We must re-examine the systems in which we work in. ... We must have a whole of government approach. I do not only mean on the provincial level we need to get better at reaching other jurisdictions.”

Again, the pandemic also provided more evidence of the ongoing structural challenges to intergovernmental co-operation and the costs associated with it:

“The challenging part about government is that everything that is important crosses jurisdictions and department lines. ... It crosses departmental governance. How do you make progress on issues that require multiple players around the table?”

“When there is a ‘Team Canada’ approach to negotiate things like NAFTA, you see people coming together and better intergovernment co-operation. But, for example, the COVID alert app, you could not even get an agreement from premiers to use the same platform. Moreover, vaccine credentials—for [them to] work, and for other countries to trust it, you need a pipeline from all jurisdictions and all premiers to verify these credentials.”

The size of the country and its various jurisdictions and peoples inherently makes us diverse, which more often favours decentralized approaches in different areas. However, this makes coordination both more challenging and necessary.

Going forward, the IOG and the Mulroney Institute recommend the following:

1. New investment in planning functions and policy development capacity at all levels with an emphasis on improving citizen and civil society engagement throughout the policy development process;
2. Investigating public service skill requirements and renewing approaches to recruitment, retention, and compensation; and
3. Creating an intergovernmental public service renewal strategy to determine ways to better improve intergovernmental dialogue and “digital federalism,” planning, data sharing, and citizen-focused problem-solving.

CONCLUSION

This summary report represents a sample of the rich insights and views of Canada's senior public servants on their work and their institutions. Readers and researchers are well advised to take the time and review the detailed reports more closely to draw additional lessons and insights.

What is clear is that senior public servants at all levels of government are concerned about the state of governance in Canada and the level of trust citizens have in our institutions.

Canada is a large and diverse country that has both natural and human barriers that make national unity a challenge. The pandemic brought to light many underlying issues that existed prior to COVID-19. As one participant put it,

“If you look at our federation and how it works, a lot of it is impeded due to the size of it. It is hard to get collective changes due to the factions of the government. ... We are not a cohesive country. We are a large federation.”

Another participant added that,

“In Canada, it struck me, we have fallen into coordination issues: municipal vs. federal vs provincial. There is a perception put out there where a lot of Canadians are fighting and blaming one another. [The pandemic] has raised some questions for me about the provincial and federal dynamics again. Who is responsible for what and what is the line between them?”

As noted by participants, complex problems cross jurisdictional boundaries, and there is not always tidy alignment with our constitutional design and divisions of powers. And citizens are increasingly challenged to understand who is responsible for what.

The IOG and the Mulroney Institute are pleased to release *Top of Mind* to the general public, public administrators, politicians, the academic community, civil society organizations, and the media. Our hope is this work can contribute to a critical debate on trust in Canada's public institutions. The “Road Map” contained here represents our humble interpretation of what senior professional non-partisan public servants have told us is needed to respond to the challenges they are facing to serve Canadians today.

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