

THE RENAISSANCE OF THE BRITISH PUBLIC SERVICE



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My arrival at 9:00 a.m. on July 7 to the chaos in Paddington Station has brought into focus, once again, the critically important role the public sector plays in our contemporary society. The remarkable efficiency of the London security, medical, transportation and police infrastructure has demonstrated, for those who are in doubt, how much we all rely on public services to guarantee our quality of life.

Interestingly, only one month ago, the Civil Service Commission of the British government produced a report that issued a challenge to the British public service to prepare for the demands of this new century.

The report, titled "Changing Times: leading perspectives on the civil service in the 21st century and its enduring values" was intended to celebrate the U.K.'s 150 years of modern public service by asking: What needs to change and what needs to be preserved?

In its 11 chapters, the authors, drawn from the United Kingdom and abroad, addressed a wide range of topics including privatization, outsourcing, regulation, the role of the media, merit and so on. Ironically, it does not contain a chapter on terrorism.

In one of the most interesting chapters, Sir Hayden Phillips, a former permanent secretary (deputy minister) in the British government argues that, despite media reports to the contrary, there has been a "revival of interest in the civil service as a vibrant component of public service." In fact, applications

for public sector employment have reached an all-time high, suggesting that there has been a "genuine interest in the business of politics and government and of finding work in which you could really try to make a difference."

It also appears that young job seekers are coming out of a period where for many the public sector was seen to be "unhelpful to the national interest compared to the private sector." In Sir Hayden's view, the civil service is moving to a period of renaissance.

The reasons for this change in attitude toward the civil service is probably a function of many factors, including a serious decline in reported ethical standards in the private sector as well as the dramatic scaling back in the growth of the technology sector. However, on the demand side, Sir Hayden identifies a number of factors that are going to make public sector work an attractive option for ambitious and energetic Britons.

First, he argues that the work of government is going to have an international component, regardless of the policy issue. There are not likely to be any purely domestic issues in the U.K. because of the growing importance of the European Union, but also because of globalization.

Next, the modern civil service will have to look outward by working in multidisciplinary teams. This new mode of work behaviour will be difficult to do, given our predisposition to silos and hierarchies, and the general inclination to protect "what is mine." It will also force 21st-century public servants to find new ways of sharing success and failure.

Third, it is anticipated that the exigencies of public service jobs will force the public sector to become more professional in terms of having more skills and a greater knowledge in all aspects of the work.

Another observation of relevance to Canada is the need for the renewed public sector to appreciate the value that lower orders of government bring in policy development and program delivery. A modern public service will need to appreciate the important "work at the sharp end" of the policy process by working more closely with municipalities and community groups.

From a Canadian perspective, there is real merit in knowing that, across the pond, the public service is an increasingly valued activity in the U.K. (and will be particularly after the tragic events of July 7). We have much to borrow in terms of best practices from the U.K. civil service especially since, at the federal level, the government of Canada has also launched a renewal process of its own.

Our effort is legislatively driven around the Public Service Modernization Act (PSMA) that comes into force later this year. It anticipates many of the changes that Sir Hayden has identified taking place in the U.K. But the test of its effectiveness will, in part, be its ability to stimulate a new sense of purpose in Canada's public sector and the reinforcement of Canada's well-regarded public service values.

An important lesson from July 7 was the way in which the various jurisdictions and services broke down their traditional silos and worked together to achieve a common purpose in serving the wounded and distressed. All levels of government should draw some inspiration from this by showing a willingness to cross traditional borders and to work as a team with a common purpose in responding to the unexpected twists of a modern society.

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