

## **The Governance Culture of the Public Sector is its 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Failing**

BY

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Helping government clients help themselves is challenging in ways helping private sector clients is not. The most intractable, underlying problems are cultural. Exploring just one cultural tendency at some modest depth makes it clear.

Maybe it's obvious that governance would dominate in this environment. It is, of course, important and we ought to acknowledge the value and origin of this cultural preference. Still, for any material change within the public sector, "governance" as *the* ultimate corrective has to stop.

To govern is to take responsibility and accountability seriously. Governance codifies decision making and vests it with the institution. Those making decisions do so by virtue of position, and the position's decision parameters are bounded. The prophylaxis of governance smothers (inevitable) rogue actions before they do harm. Governance structure also contribute to longevity, as such structures and conduct tend to be long-lived. These are all good because large institutions, such as nations and states, are expected to be stable and dependable.

The cultural trait is come by honestly: the whole point of government is to administer and regulate for all, providing stability, fairness, equity, transparency, and so on to laws and economy. If there is expertise in government, it is governance.

Critically, though, governance is always of *something*. The focus must be the something. Moreover, that something really needs to be understood and predictable. To point out the obvious, without something appropriately worth governing, no amount of governance will help. It will only amplify shortcomings. Governance is of no value to a thing in itself deficient.

If governing is valuable only when that being governed is stable and working effectively, then logically governance is anathema to innovation and transformation. These situations tend to be characterized as "VUCA" (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous), which seem to characterize the 21<sup>st</sup>-century so far—for government—demanding transformation in nearly every quarter. This is a dire incompatibility.

Here it is worth distinguishing governance from leadership. Governance is *not* leadership. An organization's "leaders" may be on a governance committee (Isn't it always a committee?), but in this capacity *they are not leading*. The actions and decisions required of leaders *leading* is vastly different than that of them *governing*.

Let's say the tendency toward governance in the public service is structural. The question remains: What is behind its persistence as a core driver of individual and group conduct? Of the many things it could be, I suspect three aspects of institutional memory.

Today's public servants are in so many ways coasting on work done generations ago. In Canada, major transformational changes to the civil service date to World War efforts, introduction of public healthcare, Constitutional restructurings, and so forth. In the USA, the presidencies of FDR, LBJ, and even Reagan are considered transformational periods.

With rare exception, the transformative work—the uncertainty of developing and designing, implementing, and working the bugs out of something, dates to people whose bodies and spirit are fertilizer.

The working lives of the people keeping the ship of state afloat have barely passing acquaintance with things transformative. In this light it makes sense that the primary directive of those tasked to protect the working structures of their forebearers would be to administer by governing assiduously.

Implicit in descriptions of the earlier generations are leaders with a strong sense of purpose who made leadership—not governance—decisions. They must have pulled the civil servants of the time out of their comfort zones, enforced the discomfort, and shouldered the responsibility of the likely initial failure, setback, and recovery without diffusing it through some governance body.

Today's approach for senior public service leaders charged to lead change and transformation—within strongly unionized environments—is to acquiesce to this governance culture. It is, of course, insufficient.

Culture's gravity is strong. Generations of informal peer pressure (and formal union rules) has undoubtedly had an effect. As does promotion from within, which assures cultural obeisance in the leadership cadre. Quietly powerful is civil service schooling. While giving lip service to what's *au courant* in the private sector from time to time, it categorically perpetuates the culture. In all, the public service actively propagates exactly the deep cultural biases its senior leaders profess wanting to change.

Ultimately, civil service leaders try to achieve the impossible: change the work, thinking, approach, and outcome of the civil service without changing the civil service itself.

The point is that the most material impediment to public sector transformation is the culture of the public sector, including the powerful labour union structures and conduct. If this is so, there are only three real options for achieving public sector transformation. I suggest the only viable alternative is to remove the public sector from the public sector to transform it. Allow me to explain.

The first of the three options, "Tear it all down," is a non-starter. The bungled but genuine effort made in the USA from 2016 to 2020 should put to rest any illusions of this being a cure that is better than the problem itself.

That leaves two core approaches. (1) Try harder to overcome and change the inhibitors and structural hurdles. (2) Avoid them.

For reasons I have elaborated elsewhere, it's probably not feasible to overcome, by which I mean to change the culture to one more appropriate to innovation and transformation. Although not without Herculean effort and inordinate luck. Besides, in the end it may not even be desirable. Some of the cultural attributes that define the public sector and impede its transformation are extremely valuable in the circumstances in which the public sector normally finds itself.

While transformation is undeniably the order of the day across the public sector, it will not be so forever. The conditions in which public sector culture operate will return to an equilibrium, at which point the prevailing culture will be more full throatedly valued again.

By process of elimination, the only choice left is to avoid the cultural issues to transform the public realm. It is an option not given sufficient consideration—even if the eventual conclusion is that it cannot be done.

How that might look is the subject of another contemplation because it is the outcome of our primary proven consideration here: governance culture is a key issue for public sector transformation.

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