

## **GOVERNANCE IS NOT LEADERSHIP**

BY

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*Govern (v) – (1) conduct the policy, actions, and affairs of (a state, organization, or people) with authority; (2) **control**, influence, or **regulate** (a person, action, or course of events); (3) serve to decide (a legal case).*

*Manage (v) – (1) be in charge of (a business, organization, or undertaking); run; (2) succeed in surviving or in achieving something despite difficult circumstances; cope;*

*Lead (v) – (1) show (someone or something) the way to a destination by going in front of or beside them; (3) be in charge or command of (a) organize and direct, (b) be the principal player of, (c) **set in motion**, (d) **start**.*

Let's assume that there is recognition and desire that government change; evolve; transform; recede; or what-have-you. The nature of the desire expressed has more to do with the person claiming it than the government being judged. All of these perspectives are answers to a condition and situation that describes government. (Some) words that capture the sense of urgency and the essence of the problem are: sclerotic, bureaucratic, inefficient, ineffective, unable, incapable, slow...

There is some truth to all these descriptions, and a lot of nonsense. Government is not monolithic, after all. There are pockets of (in)activity to represent every epithet. Under them all is the reality of circumstance.

First off, let's accept that the overarching conditions in which all levels of government operate are in flux. Even ignoring political impulses and fashions, the digitization and socioeconomic bifurcating of society, never mind existential natural threats

like climate change and pandemic, complicates the needs and perceptions of governments' roles. We would not be out of line to say the needs and demands of society are not diminishing while the impacts of the listed and other changes stress the system.

About the only thing for certain is that to attempt to resolve today's challenges by applying yesterday's thinking will fail. (Thank you Einstein.)

Recommendations for how government ought to change are perceptions. But, since all actual change comes from within, the only perception that counts is the self-perception of those comprising government itself. (As noted, government self-perception is not monolithic.) I would suggest these self-perceptions can be embodied in the distinction among the words identified above: *lead*, *manage*, *govern*. The contrast and tension between them is not to be sloughed off casually.

The distinction between the words—particularly between *govern* on the one hand and *manage/lead* on the other—is subtle. While both/all are about being in charge, making decisions, and embodying authority over some group or project, they come at it from vastly different places. I see the key distinction captured in “control... and regulate” for *govern* as opposed to “be in charge of...” for *manage*, and “set in motion... start” for *lead*.

Beyond the dictionary definitions provided, these words have been appropriated and are used (as dog whistles) by executives in public and private sectors. The words have a certain trendiness, with “leadership” being the most positive. “We are all leaders,” say senior executives and well-meaning HR people. If we extend the definition of leader to anybody in a (loosely) hierarchical position of authority over others, then it's true. If we focus only on the influence aspect or implication, it is also true. Even so, it's truly nonsense.

Since I think part of the issue with government is embodied in these words and their misuse, it's worth belabouring the definition a bit.

Let's begin with the most benign: manage. This word applies to what government personnel do and how they do it. The word is out of vogue, having neither the cache of “lead” nor the authoritativeness of “govern.” Yet, government is particularly appropriate for management with its implication of coordinating the effective implementation or execution of established approaches, methods, etc. Government, by and large, does not and should not have innovation and novelty—creation—as a core purpose. It ought to

effectively apply human resources and the polity's capital to the public good or public need. Government, in this sense, is the implementation proxy for the population. It managed on behalf of citizens (tax payers).

Before continuing, let me just say that this is an extraordinary responsibility in and of itself. There is more than abundant work here.

But government also has a special role in society as the referee. It governs throughout society to ensure that the will of society is being implemented by its participants. It makes sure everyone follows the laws (and that there are laws); that rules to protect those that need it are followed; that transgressions or externalizations are stopped and/or "punished." Government is supposed to keep society fair—at least as far as fair is defined by the citizens (tax payers). This is government performing its role of governance.

Governance can, however, become a pervasive approach. It's easy. It's about oversight and application of all those things that make bureaucracies... bureaucratic.

Even with a predominantly "managed" or "governed" organization, leadership is required. *Somebody* has to direct activity to some end. Without leadership, even the most progressive and active organization will founder and burn itself out. The absence of leadership in government—in a governance-dominated environment—may not be even noticeable in normal circumstances. If everyone is managing and the rules and conditions are unsurprisingly in equilibrium—the conditions are perfect for governance, and even plain management—the "machine" should just keep on operating unimpeded and uninterrupted.

That Canada and the western societies were substantially in equilibrium through the last half or 2/3 of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century can be debated, but probably only at the margins. On most every count, through wars and economic fluctuations society was on a smooth, upward path. Progress was mostly incremental, the result of imperial expansion and (global) trade, continued technological incrementalism in energy, production, transportation, communication, and so on. For the most part, this constant trajectory survived demographic shifts and politico-cultural trends.

Internal combustion and fossil fuel economy was there when the century began. Air travel changed transportation and so on only beginning at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

The telegraph and telephone elaborated on a basic technological understanding through the 1900s until the 1980s. I could go on. All of this, however, is precursor to the change that began to root in the very late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and exploded in the 21<sup>st</sup>. The digital world. Its manifestations and impacts are too broad to even survey here. The important part of “digital” and the reason for this detour is that *digital. changed. everything.* It is the shifting sand on which government must operate. Its discontinuity is exactly the opposite of the conditions required for straight-forward management and pervasive “governance.”

Assuming you have not the time or playfulness to let the difference reveal itself, let me help. To control and regulate is about safely containing some process or activity. It implies action (underway) that could slip into chaos without firm restraint. A governor on a car or motorcycle engine will prevent a new driver with inadequate skills from accelerating too much, too fast and getting into trouble. Conversely, to be in charge of merely describes a social relationship or a structural feature. To set in motion... start assumes incoherence—or at least stasis. It is clearly about creating movement, through action (and guidance), without necessarily having an understanding where the process may end up. We assume both leaders and governors may—or may not—be in charge.

Governance assumes the end is at hand and is to be maintained. Leadership assumes the end is (far) away and requires movement to achieve. Governance restricts out of fear or at least an abundance of caution. Leadership expands with confidence that the unknown can be tamed.

Big deal. Semantics. So what?

Government is about... well... governing. So it's not without reason for government employees from top to bottom to litter their language with “governance” in all grammatical forms except article. Whether that is a cause or effect, it is obvious governance reverence permeates thinking and discussion. How ideas and actions will be governed seems more concerning than the thoughts and activities themselves. That clearly reveals the predominant government employee mindset to be about regulating which is, by definition, about restricting.

The leap backward from regulating to initiating is not small.<sup>1</sup> The transit demands a different skillset and, more importantly, a different mindset. It is a shift from protection to creation, defense to offense, restriction to expansion. Moreover, it is a shift of not a single mind but of the mind of the organization—that ephemeral, *collective* understanding. Unfortunately, irrespective of what others might recommend and how many change and transformation initiatives are launched inside government, there is a structural tendency toward one particular end of the <word spectrum>. That first has to be overcome. It's probably not as easy as changing usage.

The most insidious change of "digital" is that it *seems* like so much more of the same. Send paper? Now send email. Records were documents? Now they're PDF files (or data). It took a day or hours to conduct a transaction? Now it happens... faster. Used to go to the store for stuff? Now that store is as close as your browser. Read a newspaper or magazine or a book you got at the store down the road? Now you can read all those things online from a provider in "who knows where"?

Every one of those examples has extremely challenging novelties that demand new approaches and care. But they *seem* like variations on what exists. If you're governing today, it's too easy to apply governing to the new conditions. To try to preserve the effectiveness and efficiency knowledge and expertise gained over generations.

But digital is discontinuous. It *seems* like an incremental change, but it's not. There is nothing (relatively) to preserve and everything to recreate. The recent history of displacement by digital new of analog old is not restricted to Facebook, Apple, Netflix, and Amazon. The point, which is more fully developed in many other places, is that there is, for government as an entity, much less to preserve and much more to evolve.

What does this mean?

Among other things, there is an absolutely essential need for change in ways large and small. More germane to this essay, defaulting to an approach that is dedicated and calibrated to preservation is doomed. Leadership, not governance, is required. To conflate

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<sup>1</sup> To ameliorate the wound on innovators' and leaders' esteem, the direction relates to a lifecycle chart: initiate has to precede regulate. Ironically, it works that way alphabetically too.

the two—or worse, to assume that governance is, in fact, leadership—is obviously counter-productive and expedites the aforementioned doom.

Governance is not leadership. It's questionable whether leadership of governance is a valid nuance and valuable in the circumstance. There is no doubt that the preservative, regulating, stewardship that governance presents has a place. The question is whether, in the circumstance, it is a suitable alternative to or burden upon leadership of change.

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