

Leadership in a New Government Environment

remarks by

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If you came anticipating some tantalizing revelations about our new political leadership, I may well disappoint. Besides, the electorate at large rendered a verdict on that issue recently, and far be it for me to question the wisdom of Canadian voters. (But I may hint gently at the acumen of that verdict.)

As for Dean Graham, well she is really why I am here tonight. It is undoubtedly a reflection of both leadership and salesmanship on her part – a good combination anytime. However, since I also teach in the faculty over which she presides, you might also think of this as a “command performance.”

Carleton has asked me to consider teaching a course on leadership, so you are, in a sense, a focus group, to help determine if any of what I have to say might become the basis for a course. There will not be a test at the end, however, so you can relax, but your reactions would be welcome, nonetheless.

I begin by saluting each of tonight’s winners. Their individual achievements are as diverse and compelling as the constituencies and the ideals they have served. Each has made a personal commitment to make our country and our global society better, and there can be no more noble enterprise.

I was struck, however, by the fact that none is directly involved in government – though some, like Stephen Lewis and Rick Mercer, are well ‘of’ government. We are actually acknowledging the distinct roles of people from outside government, which, if you think about it, is something that only flourishes in our form of democracy. We may take it for granted but activities by private individuals and NGOs are the building blocks for a real and vibrant democracy – the essence of what is now called “civil society.” Totalitarian states and those bordering on theocracy or worse have little tolerance for this kind of grassroots effort and their societies are poorer in every sense as a result.

In Canada, we recently experienced a peaceful transfer of political power - something we may also take for granted and certainly an opportunity not all citizens in our global village enjoy. It, too, is the essence of democracy. You do not have to look far beyond the headlines to realize just how precious this aspect of our civil society truly is. I was privileged to play a part in that transfer of power, and some of what I want to say reflects that experience.

I believe that a periodic change in political power is refreshing in itself and not for partisan reasons (really!) but because it provides an opportunity for healthy change both in the direction and the implementation of policy.

And, who knows, if the results are positive, a future Kroeger award may go to someone from government!

Leadership in government flows first from clear political direction. Focus, a sense of purpose, a short list of priorities and the stamina to stay the course are the ingredients. There will always be – as Harold MacMillan once said – unanticipated “events” that command attention and compel a prudent change of course but, if leaders operate from a platform of clearly defined goals, they will have a rudder of sorts to navigate even the unexpected shoals of governance and remain more or less on course.

The virtue of a clear agenda can be as powerful as that of a good idea. And, when elected politicians actually do what they said they would do, they can earn respect even from some who disagree with what they are doing. Credibility is derived from conviction. Attempting to be all things to all people – saying what you think your audience may like to hear rather than what they need to know – is not the way to gain credibility or respect. Because, when everything is a priority, nothing really is.

The single, biggest challenge for most newly elected Prime Ministers is to shift from an Opposition style of leadership – selective attack under spasmodic media exposure to statecraft – blending a precise offence with a careful defence under constant media scrutiny. It helps when the Prime Minister has a definite idea of what he wants to achieve and why.

It is all too easy for a leader to be distracted, diverted, or overwhelmed by issues of the day. It takes discipline to rise above the pressure of ‘events’ and maintain a consistent focus on a core agenda. (By the way, I am not sure that this is something that can be learned from a course of study. First-hand experience and the demands of high office tend to be the best teachers.)

Effective political leadership also involves a hefty degree of teamwork. The Prime Minister is, of course, first among equals in our Parliamentary form of government. But the test of that leadership will be the ability to establish collegial commitments from cabinet, sustain solid support from caucus, and find grounds for sensible compromise with opponents, when appropriate; not easy, particularly in a minority government.

Our system of government has suffered somewhat from muddled jurisdictions or function overlap – a lack of clear distinction and direction at different levels. (I refrain from adding an excess of government because we are, after all, in Ottawa.) The federal government taxes more than it spends; the provinces, by and large, and the cities spend more than they tax. To try to patch over the mismatch between responsibilities and resources, we have a jumble of transfers or one-off deals and protracted discussions, all captured at the moment in wonderful euphemisms – “the fiscal imbalance” or “asymmetrical federalism.”

What all this really reflects is a flaccid federalism and the true victim of all the confusion, overlap, and interminable debate is not one or other region or level of government - (where no-one is really responsible or accountable) - but the beleaguered taxpayer.

Beneath all the rhetoric these days looms the biggest imbalance of all - 'the one that dare not speak its name' - the "A" word - Alberta, the burgeoning exception (or anomaly) to any concept of fiscal balance in our federation.

Instead of striving for some magical redress in which every government would get more while contributing less, what we need is a bold, 21st century re-alignment of taxes and roles that would ensure greater clarity in terms of responsibility and greater certainty in terms of results. As Peter Drucker observed "Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results."

There is no shortage of ideas on how to redress the so-called "imbalance" and I will refrain from offering you my own prescription. But a reasonable way to start might be to read and then respect our constitution. Too radical, perhaps. Some suggest we need a Royal Commission to provide wisdom and spine – a mechanism that has helped inspire bold action in the past. But consultations and more study are not ends in themselves. In the absence of follow through, they represent a triumph of process over purpose. After all, if you place a blotter on the body politic of Canada what it will likely reveal is a patch of ink spots, meaningful perhaps to someone named Rorschach but not to many others. The real answer is leadership.

Governments have a responsibility to lead and shape public opinion, to move beyond rhetoric and the fad of the moment, exercise political will in a concentrated fashion and inspire more efficiency and more accountability at all levels. In a federation such as ours this requires a commitment on which several political leaders, not just one, are prepared to take a stand and make common cause. Better by far than one-off deals that may satisfy demands of the moment but simply place expediency above principle.

Decisions on how best to restore some balance or a better method of equalization in our federation will not make everyone happy and will ultimately involve some compromise. That, too, is the essence of democracy – notably in federations – but I believe that choices clearly articulated and defended by resolute political leaders would attract a degree of respect and ultimately support.

While conviction and clarity are vital in terms of leadership on domestic policy, the same ingredients are also crucial in foreign policy (and that is, of course, more familiar terrain for me). Let me illustrate with two examples.

Until very recently, Canadians were essentially unaware of the reasons for our involvement in Afghanistan. The initial decision was taken in the immediate wake of 9/11, ostensibly as a commitment against global terrorism. But, when Canada accepted, almost by stealth, a much larger, more risky role more than a year ago to take charge of the multinational force in the volatile Kandahar region, there was little explanation, debate, or leadership at the time. Some suspected that it was meant primarily to help temper U.S. criticism of our decision not to engage in Iraq. Whatever the rationale, a leadership gap became more apparent.

Not surprisingly, polls confirmed some confusion and growing apprehension about what we are doing in Afghanistan and why. Canadians may be proud of the role we used to play as

blue-bereted peacekeepers but they seemed less certain and less proud of the more dangerous role we are taking on as peacemakers and nation builders. As the deadly nature of our task became more visible from graphic media reports, that unease gained traction.

The Prime Minister tried to resist this trend not only by visiting our troops in Afghanistan but also by articulating specifically to Canadians why we are there, what we are doing and why he believes that we should stay the course. He said that we are not only fighting the scourge of global terrorism. We are also helping the Afghans rebuild their shattered country. Both missions are consistent with Canadian traditions. He added that “you cannot lead from the bleachers” and that “cutting and running is not my way and not the Canadian way.” Strong stuff, but it seems that many Canadians liked what they heard. Better to explain late than never, I suppose. There are still questions and will undoubtedly be some rocky days ahead for us in Afghanistan but it does tend to prove that communication based on conviction is an essential leadership ingredient. You cannot expect public support for any government initiative unless you explain why it should be important to Canadians. (And, as of yesterday, we have even had a debate in Parliament!)

Clear communication can be a strong motivator for any form of leadership. Letting people know what you are doing and why and how their individual roles can be critical to success is how you ultimately get success - in government, or in the private sector.

I believe that similar leadership lessons apply to the manner in which we manage relations with the United States.

No relationship has more impact in shaping and determining Canada’s well-being and yet no relationship has suffered more from a leadership deficit in the past decade than this one. The vacuum has been filled by a troubling tide of anti-Americanism and juvenile reflexes at home that go beyond expressions of understandable differences on issues or personalities of the day.

The Americans have not helped by foot-dragging on sensitive trade treaty obligations, along with a growing protectionist mood in Congress and a super power penchant for unilateralism on global affairs.

There is no simple formula for a relationship as lopsided as this one. For one thing, Canadian attitudes about the United States can be as complex as the relationship itself. (When I served in Washington, I used to say that I had 30 million advisors because virtually every Canadian has a view of some kind on how best to manage the relationship.) When you live next door to someone ten times your size, you have an acute sense of vulnerability. Emotions about nationalism or sovereignty or inferiority are easily aroused and make even the most pragmatic agreement somewhat suspect. Sentiments are influenced by the tone from the top and, when both the tone and the direction of leadership on this relationship are erratic, public attitudes are affected accordingly. Regrettably, it is often easier to pander than to lead.

Sheer common sense suggests a careful, balanced approach and a civil tone is paramount to credibility on either side of that balance. After all, we are neighbours. We are allies. We do share similar values about government. Our economies are as linked as our shared environment. Our security as Canadians living on this continent is guaranteed whether we like it or not by the

United States. Nonetheless, and I quote, “Canadians want to benefit from the U.S. nuclear umbrella but they don’t want to hold onto the handle. To that extent, the knee-jerk anti-Americanism of some Canadians verges on hypocrisy.” Do you know who said that? Pierre Trudeau in an open letter to Canadians in 1983.

It is not a question of whether we are too close or too distant, too cozy or too cool, but rather how best to promote and defend tangible Canadian interests where we have the most at stake. Mature dialogue is likely to be more productive than capricious public rebukes.

We can and do have different views on some issues, different outlooks and different aspirations, but these do not justify ill-mannered communications or posturing.

The litmus test for Canada’s leaders is to find the right balance, asserting our legitimate aspirations to be sovereign, e.g., about our Arctic, while working deliberately to contain or resolve disputes, to build better rules and procedures and to define clearly how the scope for common cause with the U.S. – bilaterally and multilaterally – can be beneficial and can actually strengthen, not sublimate sovereignty.

The risks of pursuing common cause with the U.S on matters of common interest will always be higher for Canada, as will the potential benefits, but I would argue, based on experience, that if we establish a position of trust based on conviction we will enhance our ability to assert differences when they are genuine and when they may stimulate a constructive compromise.

I also believe that, if we are seen to be directing our most vital relationship sensibly and maturely, Canada will command trust and respect more generally on global affairs. If the objective is simply to underscore differences under the guise of “independence,” the dividend will be as fleeting as the effect in this age of “interdependence.”

The recent meeting in Cancun set a new tone at the top and a sense of purpose on key issues. We await with interest the prospect of substantive dividends.

So clear political direction and conviction are imperatives for effective leadership on both domestic and foreign policy. But implementation of that direction rests ultimately on the performance of the public service. The two go hand in hand. Neither will work exclusively on its own. The quality of that implementation seems to have fallen short in recent years in large part, I would suggest, because of the erratic nature of the political direction.

There may be many reasons for mediocrity but there should be no excuses. Just as new political leadership is being established, there is an urgent need to restore higher standards of excellence in a way that will raise not only the performance but also the attractiveness of public service careers.

Arthur Kroeger is synonymous with good public policy in Canada. (That is why the school carries his name!) He cares deeply about the performance of our public service and the quality of its leaders. He has been adamant about the need to rectify perceptions about recent

scandals and restore more harmony between political direction and public service delivery. Arthur has expressed concern that efforts to inject clearer accountability, ethics, and integrity in governance may become a licence for pointless rule making or procedures that will ultimately thwart efficiency in government. Let's hope that the new government is listening to his concerns. Because, to quote Drucker again, "There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all."

I am not trying to absolve the severity of the lapses, the mismanagement of funds, and the evasions of responsibility by senior public servants, along with their political masters. The sad reality is that when no one accepts responsibility or is sanctioned, the public becomes more cynical than ever about government in general. Years after the sponsorship saga, only one person stands convicted and, for his punishment, he was, until last week's appeal decision, obliged to teach at university – a bit unsettling for those of us who are also teaching!

It is clear that morale has been badly damaged by the actions of a few. Just as there is a need to begin to restore confidence in our new government to counter the prevailing cynicism, it is also time to rebuild a sense of pride and a quest for excellence in our public service. More rules or regulations, more audits and auditors will not solve all fraudulent behaviour, in either the public or the private sector. Nor will lengthier codes of conduct guarantee higher standards of ethics or integrity. Fundamentally, it is not a question of rules or procedures – it is a question of character. We need more people of character and fewer characters with blind spots in positions of responsibility.

You cannot change a culture of cynicism and entitlements by edict. Ultimately, the culture of any organization depends not on what the decision makers say but on what they do – the standards and examples set by our political and public service leaders.

Human nature being what it is, no system of rules will ever be foolproof. When I served in Korea as Ambassador years ago, I learned a bit more about this. The foreign service was trying then to cope with black market activity by some of its personnel at some of its posts abroad. One bad example had prompted a draconian rule for many, including those of us in Korea. I was instructed by Ottawa to have each Canadian at our Embassy complete a form monthly for me recording each currency transaction – the date, the rate, and the amount. Spouses were included in the edict even though they were not government employees.

This new practice was a source of considerable heartburn for the two dozen Canadians at a far-flung post. Many were justifiably outraged by the presumption of guilt. One declared flatly that he would not comply because the procedure was an insult to his integrity. "You know," he told me, "that anyone here who is using the black market to exchange currency at an inflated rate will sign any number of forms."

He had a point, so I compromised, asking each employee to complete the required form but to send it to me in a sealed envelope to be opened only by the Department's Inspector General should he or she ever visit on my watch. It worked. The morale of my Embassy colleagues improved – a good thing too when you are 8,000 kms away from headquarters – and the spirit of the new rule was respected.

I have no idea what this heavy-handed procedure did in Korea or elsewhere to cure the black market problem but I gained the knowledge that, sometimes, effective leadership requires judicious compromise. My solution at least enabled us to get back to our principal work – promoting and defending Canadian interests in Korea.

Real change in ethics and integrity depends heavily on the standards and examples set by people with responsibility for government – both our political leaders and our senior public servants. Just as in the private sector, the tone at the top sets the example for others to emulate. If it is uncertain or hesitant or derelict, that will permeate down. If it is clear and unshakeable, that will register.

Bureaucrats, by instinct and habit, tend to be cautious, especially about putting their necks or those of their Ministers at risk. Nothing wrong with a degree of caution, but complacency in the bureaucracy can be deadly. Life can be a whole lot easier if you simply go with the flow, adhering strictly to the iron law of precedent or process. But we need more creative individuals – policy entrepreneurs – with a zest for results. Men and women of competence and confidence who accept that their role is not to challenge or obstruct the political direction of the day but to channel it most efficiently to the desired goal.

I know that the new Clerk of the Privy Council, Kevin Lynch, is committed to raising the bar of excellence for the senior public service. I understand that he is issuing mandate letters to the deputies to complement those given by the Prime Minister to each Minister. If nothing else, this should give sharper focus to what is being attempted and why. When you know what you are doing and why, it is much easier to inspire others to do the same. Because, as Yogi Berra would say, if you do not know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else.

Some say renewing the public service is a question of talent. Good management in government was once an indelible part of Canada's DNA but many of the 'best and brightest' in our universities no longer see public service as a career of choice. I sincerely hope that some new blood will be attracted to the senior ranks through more systematic interchanges with the private sector and other innovative recruitment techniques.

Much needs to be done by the senior personnel themselves. If they truly believe that what they are trying to achieve is worthwhile, they should be motivated to recruit good people to join the team. If they offload the task to others lower in the organization or set a lethargic example more generally, you will see a different result. That is the antithesis of leadership.

So, to conclude or sum up – especially for those still craving a test at the end – a change in political leadership provides the opportunity for new direction and for more efficient delivery of public policy. By featuring a few examples, I hope I may have aroused some appreciation of how and why we could do better in future. My basic point is that crisp and consistent political direction can inspire a better performance and higher standards of excellence from our public service, recognizing, as we should, the distinction between excellence and blind obedience. Public Servants who indulge that distinction will thrive in the new environment and, I believe, Canada will be the beneficiary.