

## **New Governance and Public Administration: Towards a Dynamic Synthesis**

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## **Opening Remarks**

It is an honour and, indeed, a very great pleasure to come before such a distinguished audience to speak about matters of governance and public administration.

For 35 years there have been the closest of contacts between the Australian and the Canadian governments about public service and public policy matters. In that time, around 250 Australians have come to Ottawa for assignments in many departments and agencies of the Canadian federal government for periods of eighteen months to two years.

Likewise, a similar number of Canadians have crossed the Pacific to work in Australian departments and other government organizations. They have certainly found the work stimulating. And it perhaps goes without saying that they thrived in your sunny climate.

It is very good news to learn that these mutually rewarding associations are being refreshed and revitalized. New generations of Australian and Canadian public servants will now enjoy the benefits of such valuable cross-fertilisation of knowledge and experience.

During the past few weeks it has been my good fortune, as a Fellow of ANZSOG, to have wide-ranging discussions with a diverse range of officials, State and federal, as well as academics from a range of disciplines.

On a more sombre note, being here in the aftermath of natural disasters – the tragic fires throughout Victoria and the devastating floods in Queensland – has shown government and community in action in a manner that the character, the fortitude, and the mettle of the Australian society.

Yesterday I toured the New and Permanent Parliament House, now two decades old, and sampled Question Time in both the House and the Senate. As in Canada, these were robust occasions, though I think for liveliness and combativeness, it is Australia which is perhaps ahead by a nose or two.

Tonight I have the honour to stand before you in this charming and dignified building – the centre of Australian Government for 60 years. It is a delight for its time-honoured elegance and intimacy – and for its particular Canadian associations. The President's chair in the Senate chamber was a gift from the Canadian parliament.

Where the House of Representatives is concerned, I have learned that the longest-serving member of the Australian Parliament, who sat for a quarter-century in the House of Representatives chamber in this building, was William Morris Hughes, your Prime Minister from 1915 to 1923. Among his many honours

was membership of the Privy Council of Canada, an appointment he received while in Ottawa en route for London for an Imperial Conference in 1915.

Unfortunately this was somewhat before my time so, in my own associations with the Privy Council, as Clerk and member, I did not have the pleasure of meeting him except whilst pausing briefly before his bust outside in King's Hall!

## **Introduction**

Public administrations vary from country to country, as do their reform processes. They reflect different circumstances, different needs and different philosophies about the role of government in society. Nonetheless, public sector reforms since the 1980s in many countries have shown some important similarities. For example, governments have

- focused on improving performance, efficiency and productivity;
- implemented citizen-centered approaches to service delivery;
- striven to increase user satisfaction;
- focused on cross-cutting issues; and
- Tried to become more open and inclusive in their relationships with citizens (Bourgon 2007).

These transformations nevertheless represent an *incomplete journey*. The pace of reform is not about to abate because public sector organizations and their administrations are not yet aligned, in theory or in practice, with the global context or with the complex problems they are expected to address.

Future public sector reforms will go beyond the traditional relations between governments as providers of services *to* citizens to explore how governments can work *with* citizens, to produce results of high public value. This is a key way in which governments and societies will move forward in addressing complex issues in increasingly uncertain environments. It is also the way governments will help their societies turn challenges into opportunities, seize the benefits of breakthroughs and bounce back from unforeseen shocks and crises.

These reforms will require a broader definition of public results, an expanded view of the role of government and a dynamic understanding of the field of public administration. They will likely need support from a “*new*” *synthesis of public administration* that takes into account the solid foundations inherited from the past; the current realities of practice; the lessons learned over the last quarter of century as well as new insights from other disciplines.

This paper explores what these reforms and supporting ideas may look like. It also proposes some concepts that will be important in a “*new*” synthesis to guide elected officials and public servants in facing the challenges and dilemmas of

serving citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, starting with the familiar topic of government performance.

## **Redefining Performance: Achieving Public Results**

The performance of public sector organizations in democratic societies is directly related to their capacity to achieve results of high public value in a way that advances democratic principles (Van Dooren, Thijs & Bouckaert 2004). Efficient organizations with high productivity and customer satisfaction are considered a success in the private sector.

Figure 1: Achieving Public Results



These results are also necessary, but insufficient, to ensure high quality performance in the public sector where performance include achieving public policy *and* civic results, as represented in Figure 1.

### *Public Policy Results*

In government, no organizational unit, agency or department works alone; no activity, service or program is self-sufficient. In most policy areas, governments achieve results through *a mix of instruments*, such as laws, regulations, tax credits, transfers and social marketing (Salamon 2002). Governments also achieve results by working through *vast networks* of organizations—some inside government, many outside—towards common policy outcomes.

In achieving high quality results, public administrators must never lose sight of the big picture. Individual program and agency results are important (they link inputs, such as taxpayers' money, to outputs and user satisfaction) but the true

measure of success is how much a program or agency contributes to the performance of government and society as a whole (Bourgon 2008a).

For instance, the best performing school is not necessarily the one with the highest individual results. A particular school may have lower individual performance indicators but actually make a greater contribution to the overall performance of the education system. Similarly, high user satisfaction with a particular medical service is not necessarily a sign of success if these results are achieved using scarce resources that could be allocated to meeting higher health priorities.

Departmental successes achieved at the expense of government-wide results do not demonstrate performance or quality. Indeed, the results that are most relevant to citizens and elected officials usually extend beyond the scope of single programs, distinct services and individual organizations. Agencies and departments must weigh the value of their own results against the achievement of *system-wide* and, perhaps more importantly, *societal* results.

One challenge for governments and public administrators is thus to move government programs, services and activities up the *value-added chain of results*. At the level of societal results, public administration and democracy converge most meaningfully. These are collective results achieved by all agents, whether from the public and private spheres or civil society. They reflect to citizens and governments the state of their society and help to shape collective interests that, in turn, inform government actions.

Public servants can play an important role in improving the quality of public administration by considering how their work contributes to the results that are most relevant to citizens and by exploring ways of improving the performance of the public sector as a whole.

Governments in different parts of the world are starting to pay greater attention to system-wide results. A few have focused on societal results. These trends suggest that system-wide and societal results will feature more prominently in public sector reforms. This would be a more promising avenue than the proliferation of micro-performance indicators that has been characteristic of the past 20 years.

### *Civic Results*

Public sector organizations in democratic societies are expected to live up to the ideal of democratic principles, and they do so in many ways. These democratic principles:

- provide for parliamentary oversight ;
- ensure holders of public office are accountable for the exercise of power;
- encourage transparency by guaranteeing access to information;

- disseminate information to encourage awareness of public policy issues;
- facilitate access to government; and
- encourage participation in the policy cycle to ensure greater buy-in and support for government initiatives.

These principles and related measures constitute what the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) calls “open and inclusive government” (OECD 2008), towards which much progress has been made over recent years. All but one OECD member country has enacted access-to-information legislation. All member governments have leveraged communication technologies to improve service and encourage greater access. Most are regularly using satisfaction surveys. Some countries have created client service centres to drive interdepartmental co-ordination and provide integrated service delivery. Many have experimented with various forms of citizen engagement and deliberative participation.

All this progress has not meant fulfillment of the task. The challenge for government is to achieve public policy *and* civic results—not one or the other, and not one at the expense of the other. Public policy results build the credibility of governments; civic results increase their legitimacy. In combination, credibility and legitimacy enhance citizens’ trust in governments, public institutions and public sector organizations and bolster public confidence in public-office holders as stewards of public trust.

In recent years, a great deal of emphasis—perhaps too much—has been placed on the challenges of citizen engagement in *new policy initiatives* (e.g., OECD 2008; United Nations 2007). The array of initiatives that support more open and inclusive government has generated some concerns and confusion (Bourgon 2009). These include

- concern that citizen consultation may *delay* decisions and prevent timely action (Irvin & Stansbury 2004),
- concern that consultation processes may be *hijacked* by single-interest groups,
- confusion among public servants about what politicians and citizens expect of them, and
- concern that participation becomes a dogma such that *more* citizen participation *is always seen to be better* and is viewed as the *one best way* of doing things in government.

These are all legitimate concerns and there are ways of addressing them. More important, is that throughout any government’s term in office, there will generally be a small number of *new* and significant policy initiatives of broad public interest while the government delivers thousands of programs and services (under existing policies and existing laws) that account for the vast majority of government spending. These continuing activities are the result of the political

will, political decisions and policy choices made by successive governments to express the collective interests of citizens. Most of these activities could benefit from some form of citizen involvement to improve performance and with it the quality of civic and public policy results.

An *explicit* commitment to improving civic results would entail exploring an enhanced role for citizens along a number of vectors, as listed below.

- Transparency and accountability: Expanding the concept of accountability from process accountability for the exercise of the powers of office to public accountability for system-wide and societal results. This would entail implementing and sustaining a comprehensive public reporting system, such as a national scorecard, that allows comparisons with countries at a similar level of development. A further refinement would be a system of shared accountability for results when multiple actors are involved.
- Access: Building on progress (largely with e-government and access to information legislation), enabling citizens' access to government (including knowledge held by government) on their terms and according to their needs. This would further the development of a modern and collective knowledge infrastructure to serve citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This infrastructure would facilitate networking, encourage collective innovation and allow governments to tap collective intelligence.
- Voice: Expanding the avenues for integrating citizens' voices in the most relevant aspects of government programs and activities to drive innovation and create public value. As well as traditional satisfaction surveys, this may include exploring the potential for integrating feedback into program evaluations and the performance improvement cycle; building communication platforms that enable citizens to hear each others' voices and to interact with each other as well as the service providers to improve results. This would also entail removing barriers to hearing the voices of the most vulnerable, including the less literate, the poor, the young and the elderly.
- Choice: Extending options available to citizens beyond the choice of service provider and/or channel with which to access government. Every government program and most government activities include varying degrees of flexibility to respond to different needs and circumstances. Public servants exercise this discretionary authority *on behalf of citizens*. The challenge is to allow citizens to exercise discretion *on their own behalf* within the law in a manner respectful of professional and political accountabilities.

- Action: Recognizing that democratic performance relies on an active citizenry (which itself is the ultimate measure of democratic results), the challenge for governments is to encourage the active role of citizens as *value creators* and as *active agents* in producing public goods. This will require actors, government, private sector, civil society and citizens to collaborate and co-ordinate their decisions and activities.

Optimizing public policy results and civic results is a difficult balancing act. It can only be worked out in practice, in the reality of a particular public service, taking into account mission, context, culture and circumstances.

The challenge for governments and for public administrators is to ensure that citizen-centered thinking and options for citizen engagement are *embedded* in all government activities.

In summary, many governments have made great strides towards achieving better results and being more open and inclusive. But they worked from an *incomplete definition* of public results and held *too narrow a view* of the potential contributions of citizens. They must expand their perspectives, roles and relationships to serve effectively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Government Authority and Collective Power**

Traditionally, government is seen as the *primary agent* in serving the public good and defining the collective interest. According to this view, governments set the agenda for change, propose new laws and enforce existing ones. Governments are the providers of public services, the problem-solvers, the arbiters and the decision makers. As a result, many public sector reforms have focused on the *direct* service delivery role of government *to* citizens. However, using this basis for reforms will be insufficient to prepare governments for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kettl 2002). A number of developments already make this clear:

- The importance of direct delivery is declining. Today, indirect tools such as transfer payments to individuals and other levels of government, tax credits, vouchers, grants, loans and indirect service delivery through third parties or public-private partnerships account for the bulk of government spending and have reduced the use of direct service delivery (Salamon, 2002).
- Governments are not acting alone. Increasingly, governments must reach out to others—other governments, the private sector, civil society and citizens—to achieve many of the results such as food safety, national security and poverty alleviation that citizens really care about. In these cases, it is more appropriate to think in terms of *governance* than of *government* (Denhardt & Denhardt 2003).

But as governments share responsibilities, risks and power, their role becomes even more difficult to play. Their role is to build on the strength of others while providing the necessary oversight to ensure equitable risk sharing between the public, private and civil spheres.

- Citizens and other stakeholders are active agents and creators of public value. An increasing number of public policy issues require the active contribution of citizens and other stakeholders in creating common public goods (Bingham, Nabatchi & O'Leary 2005). This is the case when policy issues exceed the legislative and regulatory power of the state or government's ability to act or when the issues require a change in individual and societal behaviour.

Governments cannot address an increasing number of *complex policy issues*, ranging from global warming or the global financial crisis to obesity, illiteracy to racism by working alone. Issues such as these require the active participation of citizens and the contribution of multiple stakeholders without which government initiatives will falter.

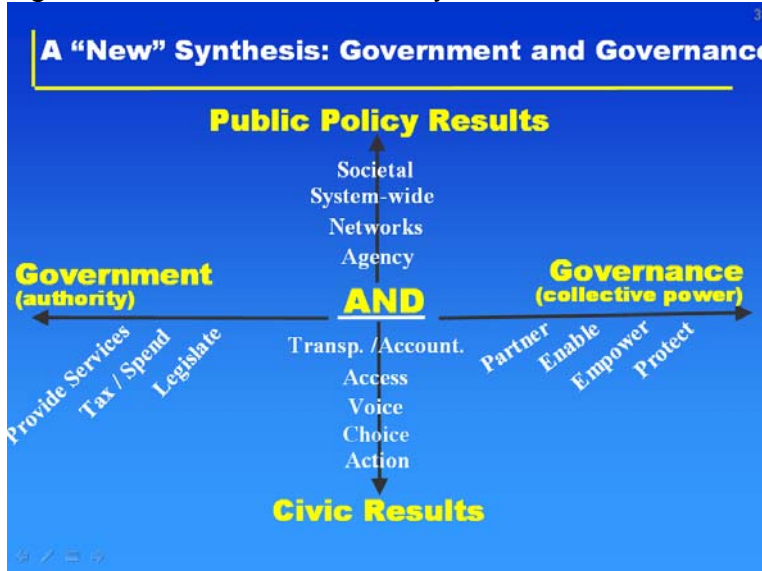
Recognizing they need to harness the *collective power* of society, many governments are beginning to complement traditional ways of governing with new ones that enable and empower others. As governments move towards producing results *with* others, they have expanded the repertoire of roles they can play (Lenihan, Milloy, Fox & Barber 2007). Governments have sought to act as

- *partners* using the power of the state to support and encourage the contributions of others;
- *enablers* within a framework of collective responsibility;
- *facilitators* with the capacity to convene stakeholders to build communities of purpose;
- *collaborative* actors working with and empowering others to achieve common public purpose;
- *stewards* of the collective interest with the power to intervene when necessary and to course-correct when the public interest demands it; and
- *leaders* to achieve convergence and a common sense of purpose.

As a result, governments have opened up a broad continuum of options, ranging from acting alone with direct authority to exercising their authority to lever the collective power of society.

Public administration takes place in an expansive space of possibilities (see Figure 2). Seen in this light, public administration is not a structure or a set of discrete systems. It is a dynamic, open and flexible system where the diverse authority of the state is used in *different ways* to achieve *different public purposes*.

Figure 2: Government Authority and Collective Power



**Towards a "New" Synthesis: Serving Beyond the Predictable**

An expanded definition of public results combined with a broader view of the role of government provides the creative space where a "new" synthesis of public administration can take shape (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Key Concepts in a "New" Synthesis



Any new approach to public administration needs to recognize the importance of history, traditions, and conventions. It needs to identify past developments that have enduring value. Central among these is the focus on "compliance" which is

the touchstone and hallmark of good government, and from which it is important to retain and value

- a respect for the rule of law and democratic institutions;
- due process, including fairness, transparency and accountability for the exercise of powers and expenditure; and
- an expectation that public servants, in serving the public trust, will exhibit integrity, probity and impartiality.

Since there is no such thing as *good governance* without *good government* and *well performing public sector* institutions, it is also important to retain the sharp focus governments have placed on *performance* over the last two decades. A new synthesis should, at minimum, preserve and value

- the internal drive for making government more productive, efficient and effective;
- the attention paid to improving service delivery and the need for continuing improvements in response to the expectations of citizens and to changing circumstances;
- the focus on sound governance that incorporates other sectors and actors; and
- the power of modern information and communication technologies that is transforming the role of government, the relationship between government and citizens, and the role of public servants.

I have questioned whether the contribution of “compliance” and “performance”—that is the combination of the classical model of public administration and the improvements brought about by the New Public Management—would be enough for governments to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bourgon 2008b).

The answer to this question arguably is “no.” Not because traditional approaches are not important and relevant—they are. But in their present form, the “compliance” and “performance” models are best suited to stable contexts, predictable tasks and a government-centric approach. However, the role of government today extends well beyond *predictable activities and circumstances*. It entails dealing with *complex issues*—many of which have the features of “wicked problems” (Ho, 2008)—in the *unpredictable* context of our modern global economy and networked societies, where *multiple players* are acting simultaneously.

A cursory look at the recent past (see Figure 4) should remind us just how unpredictable our world is. There have been

- major *breakthroughs* like the World Wide-Web, the mapping of the genome and, indeed, in governance with the creation of the European Union which is helping to entrench peace among half a billion people;

- *unpredictable risks*, like SARS crisis of 2003 or the tsunami in 2004;
- *global epidemics* like HIV or code red;
- *preventable failures* such as the electricity blackout in Oregon in 1996 that spread to many other parts of North America;
- *preventable global cascading crises* such as the breakdown of the global financial system in 2008 and the emerging global shortage of food.

Figure 4: Unpredictable World



Pressure is building on governments to augment their capability in leading and managing in the face of complex challenges such as these (Bourgon, In press).

In the last two decades, the world has become vastly more interconnected, more networked and, as some would say, more “flat” (Friedman 2005). Local problems can quickly become global, and global shifts have a wide range of local impacts. At the same time breakthroughs in one part of the world can lead to unforeseen opportunities in others.

People, groups and organizations make important decisions in an increasing number of *places*, resulting in *fragmentation*. Their decisions are influenced by the *decisions of others* and by their expectations of what others may do, creating a growing *interdependence*.

With fragmentation and interdependence comes *unpredictability*. Each decision and each action is of *limited effect* but the power of multiple decisions moving in a similar direction can change the course of events around the globe at the speed of light.

This condition is neatly captured in the famous “butterfly effect”, whereby the flapping of a butterfly’s wing in Beijing can change weather patterns in the Gulf of Mexico (Morgan 2006, p. 255). It can also be described as “*emergence*”—the

fact that new *patterns* arise out of a vast array of interactions and seemingly out of nowhere (Holland 1998; Goldstein 1999). These new patterns reveal the power of adaptation, self-organization and evolution (Middleton-Kelly 2003, p. 5). They also point out the limitations of “grand designs” no matter how well conceived such plans may be (Bovaird 2008; Westley, Zimmerman & Patton 2006).

The difficulties that arise for governments in facing complexity and uncertainty *are not* primarily due to a lack of knowledge, although this is often part of the puzzle. They do not arise because public servants are somewhat wanting in comparison to their predecessors. They come about because conventional approaches to governing and administering were not conceived or designed to deal with complexity and uncertainty.

Conventional practice has been to break down difficult undertakings into simpler tasks that can be tackled through specific policies and programs (Wagenaar 2007). This approach leaves government in a reactive position, not necessarily able to see *emerging patterns* in an ever-changing landscape and therefore unable *to intervene* ahead of time. It also means that government responds to calls to “do something” and “take action” with specific programs that are unlikely to achieve the desired public results, particularly when those results require the active participation of many actors, not simply government.

So what can be done?

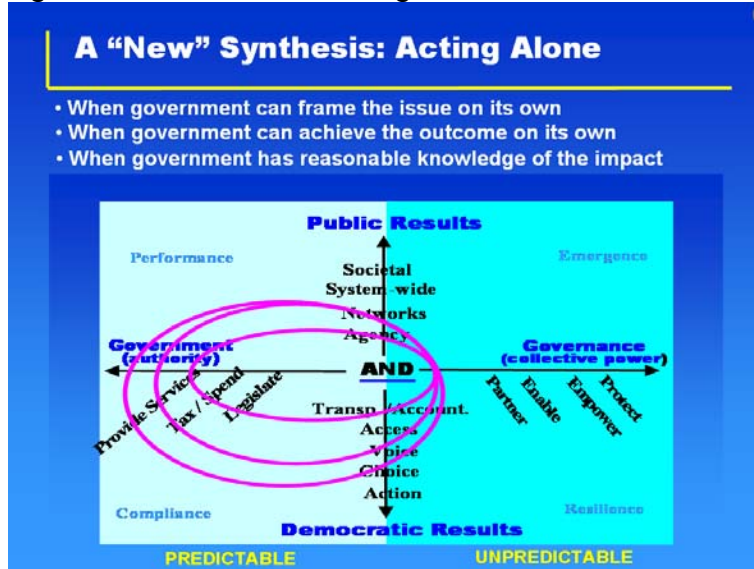
It is important to clarify that there are and will always be many instances where governments are well positioned and well advised *to act alone*, such as when they can competently frame the issue on their own, act on their own with a reasonable understanding of the consequences of their actions, and be confident of achieving the desired public outcome.

When acting alone, governments generally rely on the roles, instruments and relationships that work best from a government-centric point of view. While this is a subset of the full range of their options, they still have a significant scope for providing an enhanced voice and an expanded choice to citizens and for positioning action further up the value-added chain of results (see Figure 5).

There will also be circumstances where governments are expected to act first and to enroll others as needed. This is the case, for example, in times of threat or crisis.

It is becoming clear, nevertheless, that some of the most important problems exceed government’s capacity if they chose to act alone. In fact, many results exceed the grasp of any single actor; emergent patterns and trends are difficult to see without the help of others; the risks to be mitigated are too large to shoulder alone.

Figure 5: Government Acting Alone



A different approach is needed to confront complex issues and wicked problems. While complexity cannot be controlled or managed in a conventional sense, it can be converted into an asset. But a new mindset is needed: one that understands that complexity and uncertainty are part of the normal state of affairs (Haynes 2003).

Approaching public administration as a dynamic, complex system and a space of emergent possibilities and potential opens up new potential for achieving results of high public value. It encourages public servants to work with others to make “smart interventions” (Klijn 2008, p. 313) that can influence desired shifts in the social system. These actions can help governments advance from a reactive stance to a more adaptive position.

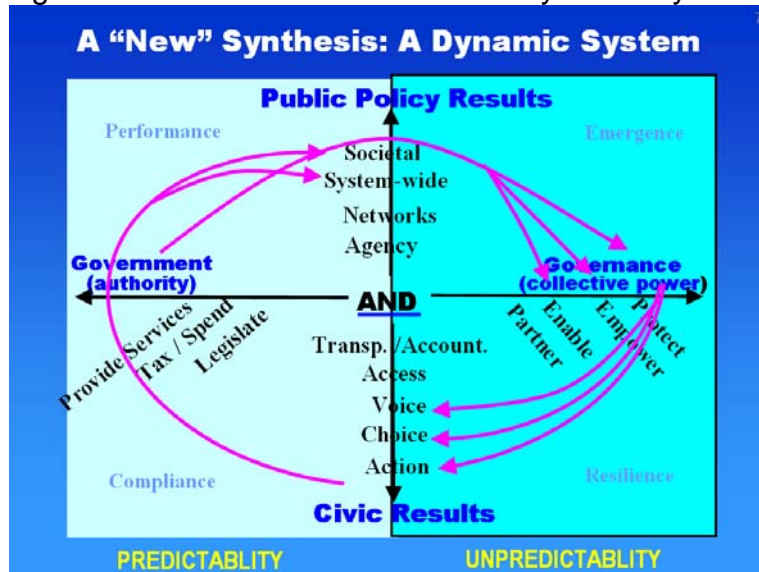
Governments can improve their capacity to tap the *collective intelligence* of society, to extract knowledge and meaning about emerging patterns and trends in the social system. Governments have access to an almost limitless pool of talent and ingenuity among their citizens.

In our unpredictable world, the capacity of societies to prosper derives from their capacity to innovate, to create new wealth and, equally important, to solve common problems (Mulgan 2007). *Networks* are powerful assets in generating new solutions. Government can leverage the power of networks to connect actors, problems, solutions and choice opportunities as a means to achieving public goals (Klijn 2008).

To access individual and collective knowledge and to spur innovation, governments need to continue broadening and deepening their approaches to governing *with* others and using their authority to unleash collective talents and

power. This creates a more dynamic approach to public administration (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Public Administration as a Dynamic System



A dynamic approach holds great potential because it

- helps to clarify when the public purpose determined by elected officials requires reaching out to others and engaging citizens;
- allows for a much broader range of choices in combining government authority and the collective power of society;
- increases the frequency and the diversity of interactions within the system, thus enhancing the reliability, timeliness and relevance of the information;
- captures new knowledge not otherwise available to government;
- stimulates creativity and innovation;
- allows multiple stakeholders to frame issues together, creating the possibility of a stronger commitment to action.

A dynamic perspective holds promise because it allows governments, citizens and other actors to aspire to public results that could not be achieved by any actor working alone.

But even if government and others collaborate, unforeseen events will arise and unpredictable shocks will occur.

When all else fails, government will always be the *insurer of last resort* when collective interest is at play. While governments cannot plan for what they cannot know, they can work proactively to limit the impact of shocks.

The role of government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century extends to building the *resilience* of their societies to absorb change and prosper. This entails helping communities to

identify and mitigate vulnerabilities, and to build their collective capacity to learn and adapt.

Resilient communities have a number of characteristics including a critical mass of *active citizens*; and second, durable, diverse *networks of community groups* that can mobilize people and resources to respond to challenges (Dale & Onyx 2005)..

A participatory approach to public policy and decision making is a key element in building the adaptive capacity of society. Public participation, citizen engagement and shared governance contribute to resilience, particularly when they encourage actions and decisions at the community level (Lebel et al. 2006).

Resilience cannot be achieved by individuals, organizations or governments working alone (McManus et al., 2007). It cannot be bought or wished for when it is most needed.

Resilience stems from the bonds and relationships built over time among people, organizations, communities and governments that have learned they can work together and count on each other when they need to (Newman & Dale 2005). Resilience is based on the stock of trust, mutual understanding, knowledge and know-how that allows people to act, learn, adapt and evolve collectively.

Initial guidance on how government can foster resilience is emerging, particularly with respect to crisis management, security and emergency preparedness (Menon 2005). More work is needed. Ecology, environmental studies and social sciences, which all have a longer track record of research on resilience (e.g., Anderies, Walker & Kinzig 2006; Gunderson & Holling 2002; Holling 1973, 2001), are good sources of inspiration.

In facing complexity and embracing uncertainty, governments around the world are learning to tap collective intelligence, encourage social innovation and foster resilience. The challenge for practitioners, researchers and scholars is to advance this work, share it and integrate it into the dynamic theory and practice of public administration.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

It has taken centuries and much sacrifice to build the democratic societies that number among the great achievements of modern history.

But this does not mean that our approaches to governance and public administration should remain static. Building on the strength of democratic institutions, governments are called upon to play a more dynamic, more complex

yet less certain role: one that integrates government authority and collective power to bring about results of high public value in the face of uncertainty.

Public administration takes shape in a vast space of emergent possibilities, where decision-makers have an expanded range of choices. Their decisions will make a difference in their countries and will often have an impact, intentional or otherwise, beyond their borders.

Public administration was born out of constitutional law and political science. Over time, it embraced ideas and practices from business management, integrated findings from economics and public choice theory, and became enriched by social sciences and organizational development theories.

Public administration is once again exploring new frontiers as it begins to integrate ideas from many knowledge domains—from chaos and complexity to dynamic systems theories, from social innovation to network theories and from evolutionary biology and ecology. All provide important insight on the future of public administration.

As a professional endeavour, public administration has a unique internal coherence. But it is also called upon to adapt and evolve. Much remains to be done to provide useful guidance on how embracing public administration as a dynamic system of emergent possibilities transforms government and governance.

This work can only be done by the practitioners, academics and scholars working together.

- *Nothing is more useful than a good theory.* Properly done, a good theory is a repository of experience and corporate knowledge. It is a vehicle that moves knowledge and understanding about what is happening beyond anecdotes. It is an intellectual framework that helps to forge what might be.
- *Nothing is more dangerous than a theory that did not keep pace with the time.* Theory that is not enriched by experience and that no longer resonates with reality leaves professionals exposed and essentially uninterested. Practice gives the true measure of a good theory, and the insight that practice provides propels the field forward.
- Research and practice are *inseparable parts* of a common enterprise.

Much work remains, which can best be done with the support of some countries willing to enroll the support elected officials, professionals and scholars. The test of a good theory is also its capacity to respond to different circumstances, different needs and different cultures.

This is a worthy undertaking to which I hope Canada and Australia will contribute.

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