

“Leadership in a New Government Environment”

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In Canada, we recently experienced a peaceful transfer of political power - something we may take for granted and certainly an opportunity not all citizens in our global village enjoy. You do not have to look far beyond the headlines to realize just how precious this aspect of our civil society truly is. Periodic change in political power can be refreshing because it provides an opportunity for healthy change both in the direction and the implementation of policy.

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 among the key 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.

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, 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. 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. And, beneath all the

rhetoric these days looms the biggest imbalance of all - 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 once 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”. But a reasonable way to start might be to read and then respect our constitution. Some suggest we need a Royal Commission to provide wisdom and spine – a mechanism that has helped inspire strong 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. 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 is the essence of democracy – notably in federations – but choices clearly articulated and defended by resolute political leaders will 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. 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, more than a year ago, Canada accepted, almost by stealth, a much larger, more risky role taking 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 were 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 peace-makers 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 our troops and to Canadians at home why we are there, what we are doing and why he believes that we should stay the course. We are not only fighting the scourge of global terrorism but also helping the Afghans rebuild their shattered country. Both missions are, he said, 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. 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.

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 the private sector.

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. Instead of resolving irritants that affect our well-being, we have trumpeted “differences” and, in effect, pandered to emotional undercurrents.

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 lop-sided as this one. For one thing, Canadian attitudes about the United States can be as complex as the relationship itself. 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. Public sentiments are influenced by the tone from the top and, when both the tone and the direction of leadership on this relationship are erratic, attitudes are affected accordingly.

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 U.S. 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”. That is how Pierre Trudeau described our ambivalence in an open letter to Canadians in 1983 explaining why he had approved Cruise Missile tests in Canada.

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 and a sense of purpose on key issues. By the time the leaders next meet, in June, we may know whether there is much in the way of substantive dividends.

Clear political direction and conviction are imperatives for effective leadership on both domestic and foreign policy. But implementation of that direction rests ultimately with 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.

Morale has been badly damaged as well by the actions of a few. There is, therefore, an urgent need to rebuild a sense of pride and a quest for excellence in our public service in a way that will raise not only the performance but also the attractiveness of public service careers. More rules or regulations, more audits and auditors will not solve all fraudulent behaviour, either in the public or the private sector. Nor will lengthier codes of conduct guarantee higher standards of ethics or integrity. There is a risk that pointless rule-making or excessive procedures will simply hamstring efficiency in government. Because, to quote Drucker again, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all”. 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. 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. There is 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.

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 summarize, 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 have attempted to arouse 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.