

OPINION

## Ottawa, we have a problem: the federal public service

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What on earth is going on in Ottawa? One day we are informed that a federal government department signed a [\\$670,000 contract](#) with a consulting firm asking for advice on how to cut back awarding consulting contracts. A few days later, two senior federal public servants pointed at one another to explain why contracts with a private sector firm went horribly wrong. Two federal public servants blaming each other raises fundamental questions about the principle of ministerial responsibility, which underpins our parliamentary system.

A few days later, we were told that federal government call centres, with an annual price tag of \$368-million, are [not meeting reasonable service standards](#), notwithstanding seeing the number of full-time staff going from 2,651 to 5,610 over an eight-year period. And a few days after that, Canadians were told that there is a [profound malaise](#) in Canada's diplomatic service.

We know that [the size of the federal public service](#) has grown by 24 per cent over the last eight years and spending on outside consultants has increased by a third over the past five years. But growth in the size of the federal government and the scale of government spending has not improved access to government programs and services. Public-opinion surveys report a growing frustration over the deteriorating level of federal government services: Nearly 50 per cent of Canadians report that they are "very unsatisfied" or "unsatisfied" with the services the federal government provides. We need to go below the surface to understand why.

## Out of service: How do we solve a problem like Canada's creaking bureaucratic systems?

The federal government has, over the past 40 years, sought to break down departmental silos, policy silos, budget silos and programs silos. Many federal government managers now need to look to other departments, other programs and other managers before they can strike a decision. Government managers cannot own what they do or even their mistakes. Breaking down silos goes against the grain, and against a machinery of government designed for a different era. It also leaves frontline managers looking for answers on how they are held accountable.

The federal government has established numerous oversight bodies, including several officers of Parliament. We have not looked at their impact on government operations and on the ability of government managers to manage effectively their operations. These officers of Parliament and their staff go to work everyday searching for things that have gone wrong. No wonder government managers are risk-averse and some turn to outside consultants to provide cover. No private-sector manager goes to work with nearly as many shadows on their shoulders. Letting the manager manage resonates in the private sector, but it does not in the federal government. Yet, the business community keeps asking: why can't government managers manage like it does? We know that dealing with non-performers in the federal government is extremely difficult, if it's even at all possible. Do we need to revisit the role and reach of public sector unions, given that they operate in a non-competitive environment?

Prime ministers and cabinet ministers have added numerous partisan advisers and assistants to their staff, with ministers going from a staff of three or four in the early 1980s to more than 20 today. Forty years ago, ministers looked to career officials for policy advice. Today, ministers have several politically partisan policy advisers on staff. There is little evidence to suggest that the shift has made for better policy or a stronger program-delivery capacity. It has, however, generated a great deal of make-up work for departments, adding staff. These 20-plus partisan advisers in each ministerial office are always on the lookout to play a meaningful role. They have made government operations thicker and more bureaucratic.

Prime ministers, ministers and their staff have no interest in looking at this issue, and career public servants have no mandate to do so. There are

important questions that need to be debated outside of the political arena and the public service. The federal public service can establish numerous committees of senior career officials to look at issues confronting the public service, but history tells us this will generate countless meetings and consultant contracts, and little else. The time has come to throw open the window of federal-government operations so that politicians and public servants can see out, and Canadians can see in.

The challenge is to define a process that involves Canadians to identify ways to strengthen this national institution, which is vital to Canada and its future. Hacking away at the federal public service out of frustration is not the answer.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-ottawa-we-have-a-problem-the-federal-public-service/>

Mr. Savoie again gives us what we need, an objective sober voice with a love of Canada speaking from vast public service experience, respecting the vital role public servants can play—have to play—in the governance of this impossible, imperfect, flawed country. There are things to throw away in this country, and things to keep, a functional federal public service being one of them.

How can the defenders of active government win? The brightest minds do not go into Government for public sector wages. Antigovernment governments regularly gain control and set to cramping, if not crippling, the funding needed to deliver solid, prompt government services. Governments still try to do too many things trying to appease every constituency. Unionized civil servants double down in their determination to do less—or to curb or sabotage ramping up expectations—for more, damn the fallout; everywhere, however necessary unions are, they focus primarily on the material interests and comfort of a dominant subset of members, rather than the profession or service or business they purport to serve first. This is especially pertinent with the federal civil service who are acknowledged to be the most miserable workforce in Canada. As well, government services tend to be unfairly compared with corporate operations, whom anyone who works in one knows have their own kinds of waste, willful blindness, and subterfuge in selling personal and public image.

Thus we end up with a public steadily more exasperated when they call in to the likes of the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). (This does not absolve the public of blame for the irrational agendas and rude behavior often unleashed in such arenas.) The lacklustre—if not outright incompetent—service they tend to receive—or think they receive—from the inexperienced or flummoxed agent (probably contending with organizational breakdowns of associated resources) just confirms for Jack and Jill Taxpayer that they should vote for M.Poillievre.