

The Future of Public Service

Robert Fonberg, Deputy Minister of National Defence,
looks forward

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Paul Ternamian is a second year Master's student at the School of Public Policy and Governance. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto having studied Economics. His areas of interest include foreign policy and Canadian politics.

This past summer, I accepted an internship position at the Department of National Defence (DND) in Ottawa. Seeing first hand the day-to-day operations of DND helped me put into perspective the policy-making theories I had learned as a student. With 26,000 employees and annual budget of \$18 billion, this department has two large and complex organizations in the Canadian Forces, including the Reserves, and DND.

One of the major challenges of working at DND was to understand the structure of accountability and authority within the defence establishment. In 1972, following the unification of the Canadian Forces and DND, the Federal Government decided to establish an integrated National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ). With military and civilian personnel working together under the leadership of the Deputy Minister and the Chief of Defence Staff, this approach was expected to be more effective in providing policy advice and support for the Minister. From an operational standpoint, the integrated NDHQ creates a unique opportunity where two different groups with two distinct perspectives must draw on the complementary skills of civilian and military personnel to manage our defence operations.

This internship was designed to allow me to experience the inner workings of two different programs within DND. During the first half my internship, I worked under the Assistant Deputy Minister of Policy in the Policy Planning Division. I was assigned to conduct research on topics related to Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security. The second half of my internship was spent working under the Assistant Deputy Minister of Infrastructure and Environment. As one of DND's four priorities, Infrastructure and Environment supports and modernizes the CF while also contributing to the economic foundation of communities across Canada. I was stationed in the Unexploded Explosive Ordnance (UXO) and Legacy Sites Program. This program is designed to reduce safety risks posed by UXO at all "legacy sites" across Canada.

My experience at the UXO program allowed me to take full responsibility in conducting a risk assessment for a particular high risk site. Consulting upper level managers and experts, communicating and coordinating with various stakeholders, and conducting a site visit in Vernon, British Columbia were all crucial in developing effective policy. It was this experience of working on the ground that made me realize how important consultations and site visits can be when researching and developing policy.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Robert Fonberg, the Deputy Minister of National Defence, to discuss a changing federal public service.

Paul Ternamian: *One of Canada's leading scholars of public administration and governance, Donald Savoie, states, "Nineteenth century bureaucracy is ill suited to address any of the problems likely to be thrown at government in the future." Do you believe that there is some truth to this statement? What are some of the challenges that future leaders of the federal public service can expect to encounter that weren't necessarily present in the past?*

Robert Fonberg: I guess I would take exception to the notion that our current bureaucracy is similar to that of the nineteenth century. The public service is hugely organic. There is nobody that can write a textbook on how decisions are actually made. People have certain accountabilities and that when combined with leadership leads to advice followed by decisions. However, I do think, like in the private sector, it is incumbent on us to be deeply understanding of what leadership means in the 21st century. Leadership in a world where knowledge is ubiquitous and access to knowledge is instantaneous. If you want to talk about bureaucracies that are ill-suited for the world of the 21st century you can just look at what happened with the financial markets over the last couple of years and how leadership did or did not actually work. You could argue of course that the bureaucracy itself was not positioned properly to figure out where the regulatory weaknesses were located. Bottom line, can we get better? Yes, we can always get better. Is the machinery of government structured in such a way as to be perfect for the 21st century? I don't know. In whatever manner you organize your government today, it will be redundant and out of date tomorrow. Basically, it's increasingly becoming how we work together in the public service of Canada to get advice to ministers recognizing that many files are horizontal in nature. Some of the challenges future leaders can expect to encounter may revolve around representation, diversity, language, technology, and communications but I think they are challenges that leaders in any sector will face. I think the biggest challenge in

some ways in the public service is to make sure people are deeply imbued with the public service ethos so that they understand what it means to be in charge with the public trust which starts at a pretty early stage in someone's career.

***PT:** Canada's federal public service is old and predominantly white. According to Statistics Canada, 52 percent of the core public service is over the age of 45 and only 10 percent of new hires are members of visible minorities. What do you think can be done to attract, retain, and diversify the next generation of policy thinkers and leaders in the federal public service?*

RF: Well first of all the face of the public service and the demographics are changing, but like in any organization that has 200,000 to 250,000 employees, changes at the margin that will actually alter the average will take some time. We have to be extremely vigilant on the diversity question and I think, over the last two or three years, that we have laid in a whole variety of recruiting methods to actually attract visible minorities into the federal government, from aboriginals all the way to those who represent Canadian society at large. We also have learning plans, mentorship programs and we have worked hard at making sure that the next generation of visible minorities feel comfortable in the public service but it's something that we have to continue to work hard at. The Clerk of the Privy Council and the Deputy community is completely committed to it and we have to make sure that everyone below us is deeply committed to it as well. It is our future, if we don't have the diversity that is required we won't get the kind of advice for ministers because we will see Canada through a lens that is not complete.

***PT:** Globe and Mail columnist, John Ibbitson, writes, "The Canadian public service is particularly rigid, and resistant to change primarily because our government doesn't have a Plum Book like in the United States." (The Plum Book lists the 7,000 positions within the U.S. federal public service that the president and his personal advisors appoint without competitive examination) From your experiences is this an accurate assessment and can we learn anything from the American system?*

RF: I guess I would have to hear what John has to say about why the Plum Book reduces rigidity and resistance to change in the United States. Everybody in Canada who has an order and council appointment has public information about them. I'm appointed without competitive examination, but I'm known and it's no secret. So I'm not exactly sure if the issue here is more that each incoming administration is able to

appoint all of the senior ranks in the public service. That is a slightly different issue, that does bring innovation and it does bring alternative views and a churn in the administration every time there is a presidential election. But we have a different kind of system and there are pros and cons to appointing people in these positions. We are a professional public service from top to bottom. Does that create some rigidities? Yes, but it also has some benefits as well in terms of continuity. We are smart enough to figure out that we need to go out and create a churn where it's not created by this kind of a mechanism. We need to embrace different views of the world, different ideas, and we need to figure out how to innovate. Those of us who fail in that regard, it is evident because there are so many checks and balances around visible minorities around the generation of ideas. However, to get these 7,000 positions in place it will take Obama, I'm told, a little over a year or so you have a bit of a vacuum in the mean time which is a challenge in itself.

PT: *The Public Policy and Governance Review will be predominantly geared towards an audience of the best and brightest of the next generation of policy-makers. In closing, what advice do you have for those that are preparing themselves for life in the federal public service?*

RF: Ultimately, there is a certain tool kit that you need to develop whether it's a deep understanding of how government actually works or how decisions are actually taken whether it is developing a challenge function or framing an issue. In terms of preparing for life in the federal public service, those who will have the richest experiences are probably those who will think about why they are coming to the federal public service. What does this entail? How is this different from the academic world? How is this different from other jobs that I might be offered? How is this different from the provincial public service? You have to think your way through it. My strongest advice would be 1) to think about this and what is really driving you into a world of public service and, 2) to think about what is driving you into a world of the federal public service. At the end of the day, if you don't crossover to the point where this is more than a job, you'll have less than the fullest experience you can have at the federal public service, but that takes time.