

Paul G. Thomas, “The Continuing Journey to a Professional Public Service in Manitoba”

I Introduction ---Two Related Topics

When Emmet Collins asked me to make some brief remarks he mentioned that the Manitoba IPAC chapter was interested in exploring a theme related to the 150th birth of the province.

I decided to present some comments in two parts.

On the principle that it is helpful to know the history and traditions of organizations, I will first provide a compressed history of the Manitoba civil service; soon to be officially renamed the Manitoba Public Service.

Clearly the Manitoba civil service changed drastically over the past 150 years. Compared to the tiny, fledgling institution of the 19th century, today's civil service is a relatively large, specialized organization that performs a wide range of tasks. The civil service is one of the biggest employers in the province and its workforce is comprised of multiple occupations and professions.

This leads me to a second discussion of whether it is accurate and helpful to regard the contemporary public service as a professional organization.

The language we use to describe organizations and their activities matters in both practical and symbolic ways.

Language shapes the perceptions and behaviours of employees and the internal cultures of organizations. Language also influences external perceptions and confidence in those organizations. Calling the public service a bureaucracy conveys the image of a rigid, rule bound entity whereas describing it as a professional public service carries a more positive message.

We know that professionals from various fields work in the public service, but can we assert that all public service employees are engaged in professional work? On what basis would we make that claim? How do we measure the degree of professionalism? In the current turbulent environment, how do we continue to develop the professionalism of the public service?

As I proceed with my remarks, you will see that I have more questions than answers.

II History of the Civil Service: From the Quill Pen and Visor to Computers and Smart Phones¹

Not having been present at the birth of the province, I had to do a bit of historical research.

The distinguished historian Gerald Friesen describes how at the time of its founding in 1870 the so-called “postage stamp” province was a tiny outpost in the wide commercial British

¹ This condensed history draws heavily on Doug Smith, Jock Bates and Esyllt Jones, (Manitoba Labour Education Centre, 1993) and M. S Donnelly, The Government of Manitoba. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1963.)

Empire. The population was about 12,000 persons, ninety percent of whom were Metis.

The territory had been under the absolute control of the Hudson Bay Company since 1670. Almost overnight from July 14 to July 15 1870 the territory was transformed, without much planning, into a self-governing province.

Initially, control was concentrated in the hands of Adams Archibald the first Lieutenant Governor. He arranged for the 24 members Legislative Assembly and an upper house called the Legislative Council (which was abolished in 1876) to pass a series of laws that laid the foundations for the growth of a provincial government and the growth of provincial society.

In the 1870s the civil service was a tiny organization comprised of five departments: Executive Council, Treasury, Public Works, Agriculture, Statistics and Health, and Attorney General.

A responsible minister, who was supported by a “permanent” officer called the “Deputy Head”, led each department. Like today, the deputies were order-in-council appointees who served at pleasure, but unlike today they could be removed only after written reasons had been given to the Legislative Assembly.

There is an obscure book (I found it for free on Google Books) titled “A political manual of the province of Manitoba and the North west” written in 1887 by the provincial librarian John Palmerston Robertson.

Robertson explains that the Clerk of the Executive Council, Mr. Sadlier, provided support to the premier and cabinet for which

he was paid \$1200.00. This job also entailed overseeing the civil service. He also served as Clerk of the Legislature for which he was paid \$800.00 As Clerk of the Legislature he was responsible for planning and executing elections.

In summary, back in the 1880s Manitoba paid one senior public servant \$2,000 to perform three jobs. Today, four senior public servants –the Clerk of the Executive Council, the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, the Civil Service Commissioner and the CEO of Elections Manitoba- perform those jobs.

In 1885 the administration of Premier John Norquay passed the Civil Service Act. The Act divided the civil service population into two components: the approximately 20 employees who worked in the departments and a larger group of so-called outside workers who performed seasonal tasks on a part-time basis.

In the 1880s a typical department consisted of a Chief Clerk, in some cases a senior clerk in charge of a branch of a department, one or two, often part-time, clerks, and one or two messengers.

The establishment of the civil service was happening at the same time that party politics was taking hold in the province. As partisanship gained strength, civil service jobs went to friends of the governing party.

There was a civil service board (consisting of three deputies, ministers) that set job qualifications, Successful candidates for jobs had to pass tests in spelling, penmanship, bookkeeping etc. However, the real requirement for entry into the civil service was the endorsement of the local political boss, especially if he was a cabinet minister.

Given the limited scope of government activity, the reliance on patronage to fill the small number of civil service positions probably did not greatly impair the daily functioning of government.

Patronage did, however, lead to widespread turnover when governments changed. Also, civil servants were known to show their gratitude to their political benefactors by attempting to gerrymander constituencies in favour the party that appointed them.

Beginning in the late 19th and early 20th century, population growth, fuelled by immigration, along with industrialization and urbanization, led to expansion in the role of government and growth in the civil service. However, this was mainly in areas like agriculture, public works and settlement services.

In the 1915 election, after scandals involving corruption on a number of fronts, especially in the building of the Legislature, the Liberals took over from the Conservatives.

Promising to clean up politics, in 1918 the Liberal government passed a new Civil Service Act that created a Civil Service Commissioner. The cabinet still wrote the job descriptions for civil service positions, the Commissioner certified that candidates were qualified, and the cabinet had the final word on appointments. Despite the semblance of a merit-based appointment system, ministers regularly by-passed the new procedures to hire their political friends.

In the interest of time, and fearing I will lose the audience, I will just highlight some developments over the ensuing decades:

- During the depression of the early 1930s, there were deep salary reductions but only limited layoffs from the civil service mainly because relief programs had to be delivered.
- For many decades the civil service remained a predominantly male institution. Women were hired, mainly in clerical positions, especially during WW 1, but the assumption was that men should be the main wage earners. Over many decades it was rare for a woman to be promoted out of clerical roles.
- With the passage in 1948 of a revised Civil Service Act political patronage in the appointments to the core civil service gradually disappeared. Friends of the governing party had to be satisfied with appointments to various boards and commissions.
- In 1951 the Civil Service Commission formally adopted as policy the long-standing practice that no married woman whose husband was living was allowed to enter the civil service. This policy remained in place until 1962.
- Rural-dominated governments, including coalition governments from 1928 until 1958, ruled on the basis of a philosophy of limited government intervention into the economy and society and the necessity for balanced budgets. This meant Manitoba fell behind other jurisdictions in developing policy and administrative capacity within its civil service.
- The election in 1958 of the Progressive Conservatives ended the coalition period and under the leadership of premier Duff Roblin, a transformation of the role of government began. Over the ensuing decades new spending and programming was introduced in numerous policy fields, such as economic development, education, health, social services and transportation.

- A little noticed factor in the growth and increased specialization of the civil service during the 1960s and 1970s was the availability of conditional grants from the national government. In order to design and deliver shared cost programs, the provincial government needed to hire and develop program specialists in major policy fields like education, health and social services. Over time, these same program specialists became more knowledgeable about program details, and were effective critics of Ottawa's policy leadership.
- The civil service grew from 4,417 people in 1958 to 8,882 in 1969. The civil service also became more specialized and professional with accountants, lawyers, planners, nurses, physicians and engineers being hired.
- From the 1960s onward, university graduates in the natural and social sciences joined the public service in growing numbers to help politicians meet the more complex policy challenges facing an expanded public sector.
- To this day, clerical and administrative support jobs are still central to the daily operations of the civil service but the content of those jobs has changed dramatically from the distant past. Better education and new skills, often updated on a regular basis, have become essential to the performance of such jobs.

By the beginning of the 21st century the civil service had become a large (in terms of employment compared to other employers in the province), mature institution comprised of a diverse mix of occupations.

We know that compared to earlier decades the modern public service employs more individuals with educational

backgrounds in the traditional professions- accountants, engineers, lawyers and health professionals of various kinds. According to statistics compiled by the Civil Service Commission, in 2018 there were 480 full-time employees classified as “Professionals” employed in the core civil service.

In 2018 the Manitoba General Employees Union represented 10,780 full –time employees in the core civil service. These employees performed activities that do not fall within the scope of a profession as strictly understood.²

There were 3, 261 employees in the Administrative and Clerical categories. An additional 2,264 employees occupied social science positions. There were 2,159 employees working in Corrections.

III The Contemporary Civil Service

To conclude this discussion of the history of the public service, let me make a couple of observations.

The civil service has never been an island unto itself; it has always been open to political, economic, social and technological forces operating in the external environment.

Because Manitoba is a smaller political and economic system, and is located in the middle of the country, the forces of change have tended to arrive on the doorstep of government somewhat later than in larger, more centrally located systems.

² I want to thank Charlene Paquin, Commissioner of the Civil Service Commission and her staff for gathering these figures for me. There are detailed categories of jobs in the Civil Service, but not a breakdown of the civil service population based on occupations.

And, the fact that the Manitoba political culture has been mostly moderate and pragmatic meant that public officials were not swept up by the hype surrounding fashionable governing and managerial approaches being pursued elsewhere.

For the most reforms introduced to the cabinet, the Legislature and the civil service were designed to fit the scale of government. There was a strong emphasis on the practicality, on changes that were feasible and would work in the Manitoba context. This is not to claim that the machinery of government worked perfectly or that there were never unforeseen consequences arising from changes.

Compared to four or five decades ago, the contemporary civil service operates in a much more complex, interdependent, turbulent and risky environment. Previously, it's main interactions were with the political side of government in a relatively simple, straight line, top- down direction, control and accountability relationship. That relationships persists but is now supplemented by an extensive web of horizontal relationships both inside and outside of government.

Here are some of the trends that have produced a more challenging and demanding environment for the civil service. These trends are happening everywhere but as mentioned they have been slower to arrive and have registered less impact on the "middle province."

In an interconnected world there is more insistence on a whole of government approach that overcomes the limits of compartmentalized decision- making along departmental lines

There is a strong expectation that public servants will consult with those groups and organizations most directly affected by government actions. The number of interest and advocacy groups has increased there are more stakeholder relationships to be managed.

There is less public and political trust and confidence in the public service as a source of policy advice and the efficient implementation of programs. There is an insistence on greater accountability and politicians are more willing to name public servants when something goes seriously wrong.

Public servants are less anonymous than they were decades ago. Through appearances before legislative committees, speeches at conferences, meetings with organizations and interviews with the media they become better known at least within their specialized policy communities.

The media system has become more diverse and aggressive, aided by freedom of information and whistleblower protection laws. The ongoing information and communications technology revolution and the reliance on social media for both internal and external communications mean that very few matters remain confidential for very long. In an era when campaigning has become almost non-stop, communications has become central to the development and execution of policies and program delivery.

Contrary to the popular negative stereotype, the civil service has not resisted change when it was needed to meet the challenges of changing external environment. As a mature, professional organization, it has helped to bring Manitoba and its people through wars, a depression, floods, forest fires, the development of the post-war social welfare state, the

constitutional debates of the 1980s and 1990s, several serious economic downturns and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

When demanded by its political masters, the public service has coped with recurring cycles of budgetary expansion, restraint and downsizing by undertaking the appropriate actions.

In this our sesquicentennial year we should be celebrating the past, present and future contributions of the civil service to our shared safety and security, our economic and social progress, and our collective and individual well being.

IV Debating the Concept of Professionalism

Let me turn now to a question: Does the soon to be renamed Manitoba Public Service qualify as a professional organization and what do we mean by the label professional?

The name change to public service for the core departments of government will come as a result of Bill 19 the Manitoba Public Service Act, which was introduced in the Legislature in December 2019.

The proposed act seeks to modernize the statutory framework governing the public sector. It is also intended to send the symbolic message that today's public service is a professional, competent, representative, responsive and trustworthy institution.

Bill 60 flows out of the 2018 document "Transforming the Manitoba Public Service" that offers a vision of the future of the public service. The term professional is used many times throughout the document.

Professional and professionalism are “magic” words that make us feel good about institutions and individuals. Better to be called a professional public organization than a public bureaucracy, with all the negative connotations of being inward looking, unresponsive, siloed, secretive, wasteful and unaccountable that the latter term implies.

If governments want to adopt positive words to describe their activities, we should ask them to be at least somewhat precise in describing what they mean.

Two things may happen when governments fail to clarify what they mean by a professional public service.

First, confusion about the concept reduces the likelihood that the conduct of public servants will be influenced by the rhetoric calling upon them to act professionally.

Second, confusion about the terms and what they imply in practice potentially undermines public trust and confidence in the public service.

Being an academic, I went in search of the meaning of professionalism. From the literature I identified five features that seemed to be most commonly associated with professionalism:

- A profession is based on a distinctive body of scientific theory and knowledge.
- Professionals have authority, subject to some limits, to set the scope of their practices and to exclude other disciplinary specialists from their fields.

- Entry and advancement in the profession is based on demonstrated competence.
- Professionals are mainly self-regulating and are granted significant autonomy to run their individual professional affairs.
- Professionals are licensed/registered to serve the public interest and can be removed, temporarily suspended, or face other sanctions for violating strict codes of ethics and/ or failing to meet prescribed standards of performance.

Other notions are sometimes associated with the label of professionalism.

Professionals are said to engage in challenging work that requires ingenuity to solve problems. However, people working in other occupation also confront challenges.

The idea of serving “clients” is sometimes cited as another feature of professionalism. However, today nearly every activity claims to be client or customer focused. Even prisoners are described as clients.

Rather than keep you in suspense, in my opinion the civil service is a quasi-professional organization. Professionalism exists along a continuum, with some organizations exhibiting all the characteristics of a pure or full professional body while other bodies exhibit none or few of those characteristics. The civil service falls half way along that continuum. Within the civil service some occupational groups have a stronger sense of shared professional identity and greater horizontal organizational activity to support that identity.

There are several ways that the civil service does not qualify as fully professional.

There is no unifying theory and single educational background required to enter the public service. Even graduate education in public administration draws upon a wide range of disciplinary knowledge and perspectives.

The knowledge possessed by general administrators in government is mainly pragmatic rather than theoretical, and their knowledge and skills are acquired mainly from applied training and on the job.

The public service is not what the sociologists call a “closed profession.” General public administrators are not licensed and cannot exclude others from different disciplinary backgrounds from entering the field.

Unlike many traditional professionals, public servants are called upon to play many different roles: policy advisors, intergovernmental diplomats, service providers, law enforcement, information technology functions, administrative tasks (like hiring, budgeting and communications) and routine operational activities like maintenance of buildings.

The public service is inherently a multicultural institution. Because of its diverse roles, the development of a strong, overarching shared culture and a distinctive professional identity is a huge challenge. I suspect that most public servants identify primarily with their own occupational group rather than focus on the shared challenges and responsibilities of the public service at large.

Because of the fundamental democratic requirements for responsiveness and accountability to citizens, the autonomy granted to public servants can never match that granted to the self-regulating professions.

Another constraint on autonomy exists in the form of policy and administrative manuals that are meant to guide and constrain the exercise of discretion by public servants so that citizens are served impartially and fairly.

Codes of values and ethics and other official statements on the role of the public service have become popular as a way to guide and motivate employees across the wide expanse of government. Crafting codes is not easy because many principles and values have to be acknowledged and recognized.

Making codes living documents is an even greater challenge requiring many different types of actions. In particular organizational leaders must not only promote and uphold codes, they must embody their provisions in their behavior and work continuously to embed those provisions in the culture of their organizations.

V The Manitoba Civil Service as a Professional Organization

Let me now turn to the ways that the Manitoba Public Service today and into the future might be said to qualify as a professional organizations.

In an introduction to Public Administration Review's symposium, "The Nature of Public Administration Professionalism and the Future of ASPA," Professor James

Svara (2009) defined public service professionalism as: “The overarching knowledge, values, and standards of practice that apply to serving society and advancing the public interest and to securing sound, democratic governance” (p. 1,037).

That is, as they say, a mouthful, but I think that the sentence touches upon the key purposes and values that provided the foundation for a professional public service. Here are some of my own thoughts to hopefully clarify and refine Svara’s definition.

For me, public service professionalism resides primarily in the political neutrality of the institution. Regardless of the political party in power the public service stands ready to provide forthright advice on its policy agenda and to carry out the decisions of the cabinet and the Legislature to the best of its ability. The civil service represents continuity, experience, corporate memory and lessons learned. Unaided premiers, cabinets, individual ministers and even the 57 MLAs would accomplish little and would perform less effectively without the backing of a competent and professional public service.

An aspect of professionalism in the public service is the selection and advancement of individuals on the basis of merit, including educational preparation, relevant experience and accomplishments. Neither political nor bureaucratic patronage should be factors in successful public service careers. A public service that is impartial and professionally competent is able to serve successive governments, even if there are drastic shifts in policy and budgetary approaches.

A professional public service acts in the “public interest,” an elusive, value-laden, controversial notion. There is both a substantive and a procedural component to the public interest. Public servants can legitimately provide input into what “

ought to be done” and into “how some actions will be done”, but ultimately it is the elected and accountable ministers who have the final word.

In the anti- politics age in which we live, the phrase “ speaking truth to power” is frequently used to describe the essential role of the public service.

This is flattering to the public service. It implies that given the highly educated backgrounds of its members, and their continuity in office compared to transient politicians, career professionals are more likely to discover the truth.

There are at least two reasons why should be sceptical of this assertion.

First, the phrase presumes that objective facts represent the truth. In many instances facts are not the answer to a problem, but simply the starting point for a debate. In the complex and messy real world of government decision-making, there is seldom one truth or at least one truth that we can all agree upon.

Second, there is no overwhelming evidence that better decisions and better outcomes in society arise from the evidence gathering and deep thinking of professionals compared to the results obtained through the clash of values and interests that constitute the political process. Governments must not only make the “right” decision according to the evidence, they must also mobilize consent and support for those decisions. This latter task is what politicians are meant to be good at.

In the past it was sufficient for a professional public service to provide neutral competence in the execution of decisions made by their elected political masters. Recently, however, some governments have pushed their public servants to exhibit enthusiastic responsiveness and open support for their policy agendas.

This has been particularly true with respect to external communications. It is appropriate and valuable for public servants to explain policy, legislation and budgetary actions before committees of the Legislature, in dealings with the media and in semi-public forums like speeches to interest groups. However, neutral professionals must stop short of publicly endorsing or promoting government policies. It is no part of the job description of a public servant to directly help a government get re-elected. The public service improves the re-election prospects of a governing party only by offering sound policy advice and the competent execution of policies.

As mentioned, adherence to codes of conduct or codes of ethics is usually seen as a component of professionalism. Typically conduct codes are more legal in content and operation than ethics codes that express high level values and principles and are meant to be more aspirational and educational with less emphasis on enforcement and sanctions.

Beginning in 2003 the Manitoba government had a Guide to Values and Ethics for the public service. The Guide was a good first step, but it was not comprehensive, it was not heavily promoted and it lacked enforcement mechanisms.

In 2014 a study by the Auditor General reported a lack of awareness among public servants of the ethics framework, called upon the government to increase promotional activities

and to assign accountability to senior management for ensuring its provisions became embedded in the culture of the public service. A follow-up report from the Auditor General in 2018 criticized the government for failing to implement its earlier recommendations.

A Code of Ethics adopted in 2018 and Bill 19, the proposed Public Service Act, represent a stronger commitment to the achievement of a culture of integrity and accountability. More attention has been paid to enforcement, with provision for disciplinary measures for violations.

Statutes, codes, guides and formal mechanisms for accountability have limits in terms of shaping behaviour. Ultimately we must rely heavily on the internalized, subjective sense of responsibility that motivates the vast majority of public servants. True reflective professionals listen to the cricket voice of conscience in the back of their heads.

It is not naive to think that professional values and norms of behaviour matter to how public servants behave on a daily basis. There is a large and still growing body of empirical studies that measure something called a Public Service Motivation (PSM).

A simple definition of PSM would be that individuals enter the public service and perform their duties on the basis of a commitment to act in the public interest and to serve the public fairly. This positive perspective contrasts with the popular negative stereotype that assumes all public servants act in a calculated manner to serve their personal interests or the interests of their home organization.

It is widely accepted that there is an accelerated pace of change in the environment that surrounds the contemporary public service. The public service must become more open and responsive to a wide range of external forces, including the ongoing revolution in information technology.

The 2018 discussion paper on transforming the public service argues that, lacking the disruptive impacts of competition that private firms face, the public service must disrupt itself. It calls upon bold, courageous public service leaders to promote transformational changes to structures, procedures and the culture of their organizations.

With great respect for the authors of the transforming document, I would caution against going overboard in claiming the necessity and benefits of heroic leaders sponsoring sweeping changes.

Not all institutions that exist in society need to, nor should they, change at the same pace as commercial firms. The public service represents a source of continuity and stability in a turbulent and unpredictable world.

Careful empirical studies tell us that drastic overhauls of public service systems seldom deliver as much as was promised and sometimes bring unforeseen and unwanted consequences. Based on my studies of organizational change in the public sector, the most successful and enduring changes are taken one step at a time. Yes, there must be a sense of direction, even an aspirational vision, but bold ideas must be linked to concrete circumstances. Early steps and small victories are the most realistic path to improvement and success.

Public servants are not timid or defensive when they express scepticism and/ or concern about where reforms are headed. They know from experience that priorities in government shift frequently and that, despite rhetoric about the need for greater risk taking, politicians ultimately want innovation without errors.

Consistent with the historical content in the first part of the paper, I will close by urging public service professionals to be aware of and respect the history, traditions and foundational principles that have allowed the institution to support the political process and to serve Manitobans effectively over 150 years.

In accepting the necessity for change we must preserve the institutional integrity of a professional public service by ensuring that concrete reforms are consistent with its core values and principles.

Paul G. Thomas is Professor Emeritus of Political Studies, University of Manitoba where he taught for 40 years. This paper was meant to serve as the basis for remarks at the Annual General Meeting of the Manitoba Institute of Public Administration of Canada, remarks that had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. He hopes another occasion can be arranged and meanwhile he welcomes comments on the paper sent to Paul.thomas@umanitoba.ca

