



Public servants waiting to see which vision for the bureaucracy will prevail in 2014

BY KATHRYN MAY, OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 29, 2013



The Conservative government's public vision has been led by Treasury Board President Tony Clement, who has made numerous pronouncements and taken legislative steps to align the bureaucracy with the private sector.

Photograph by: Adrian Wyld, THE CANADIAN PRESS

OTTAWA — While their political masters develop a plan to make them more affordable and more like the private sector, Canada's public servants go into 2014 waiting for their bureaucratic boss to lay out a new "vision" for the workforce.

The Conservative government's public vision has been led by Treasury Board President Tony Clement, who has made numerous pronouncements and taken legislative steps to align the bureaucracy with the private sector.

Yet unfolding behind the scenes, in discussions with public servants across the country, is the dialogue for the vision in Blueprint 2020. Led by Canada's top bureaucrat Wayne Wouters, it is about "empowering" public servants in a tech-driven world.

The big question, then, is how the Blueprint 2020 action plan to remake the public service for the future will affect whatever changes Clement wants at the negotiation table in the spring when the next round of collective bargaining begins.

It is clear the Conservatives' budget cuts are forcing a rethink of the way the work in the public service is organized, managed, and compensated. This means anything could be on the table, from sick leave and pensions to job security, lower wages and layoff provisions.

So far, feedback on Wouters' Blueprint 2020 indicates public servants are gung-ho about the vision and its four principles. Some, however, are skeptical about whether the reforms will ever get off the ground. They also singled out their poor public image — stoked by Clement's insinuations that the public service is too big, overpaid and saddled with too many non-performers.

"Some skepticism was expressed about the implementation of the vision. Employees want to understand how this process is linked to changes already underway to respond to government priorities, particularly in terms of deficit reduction. They also see a need to improve public perceptions of the public service," said the recently released progress report, What We Heard.

Six months ago, Wouters took an unorthodox approach and asked public servants to have their say in their workplace of the future.

The online and in-person response was unprecedented — including 13,000 tweets, 63,000 page views on internal Wiki pages and 125,000 views of the document on the clerk's website. Comments and thousands of ideas are summarized in the progress report that will feed into a final action plan later in 2014.

"Never before have public servants been engaged so broadly, both in person and online... The

Blueprint 2020 dialogue is clearly resonating with public servants who are passionately participating in the process,” said Wouters in a letter to the Ottawa Citizen.

Wouters said this kind of grassroots discussion is critical because the reforms require a complete culture change that can't be done from the top-down. He stressed it also had the support of Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

“To be effective, renewal requires culture change and therefore must take place from the ground up. The challenges of the 21st century demand a networking leadership style, reflecting the Blueprint vision, not our traditional hierarchical system. That's exactly why we are engaging and empowering our employees,” he wrote.

Blueprint 2020 has its detractors, including many change-weary public servants who have watched other renewal exercises come and go with much fanfare and few results. There was PS 2000, La Releve, and Public Service Modernization. Then came the notion that “renewal” wasn't a special project and should be ongoing.

The report says public servants back the vision of a “nimble, professional and tech-enabled public service.” They zeroed in on five broad areas to better manage the public service from inside and outside, particularly its image and service to Canadians.

Wouters said a big theme emerging is that public servants believe the government could make better use of technology in their day-to-day jobs. They yearn for “opportunities and reasons to develop, pursue and practice innovative ideas.”

Technology, including social media, is widely considered the key to better communication collaboration and sharing of information both inside and outside of government, as well as providing faster and improved services to Canadians.

People management is a big priority. Public servants want training, skills and the tools to network, use social media and collaborate with others on shaping policy. They want new ways to manage and reward performance, more flexible ways to work and a healthier workplace.

They want to innovate and network, which means sharing information, to improve the way policy is developed, and services delivered. They argue taking more risks means politicians must accept that

new ideas could flop and mistakes will be made.

Public servants argue they could be more productive, saving time and money, if the red tape around approvals, planning, reporting and administration were cut and streamlined. Their image also has to be turned around so Canadians recognize their “dedication” and the public service can still recruit and retain top talent.

The report said public servants are still committed to their traditional role, which is to advise ministers, implement the decisions of Parliament and government and serve the public “in a way that is accountable and provides value for money.” They said good relations with elected officials are essential to helping support the government’s direction and priorities.

With all the talk of collaboration, one senior bureaucrat said public servants recognize they are no longer government’s key policy advisers, but they play a vital non-partisan role in analyzing policy options being considered.

The discussion continues, with deputy ministers submitting their final progress reports in February on what departments are doing. The board of management and public service renewal committee of deputy ministers, chaired by Wouters, will later come up with concrete steps in the final action plan.

What is Blueprint 2020?

The Blueprint 2020 lays out of a vision for a world-class public service based on four principles:

- An open and networked environment that engages citizens and partners for the public good.
- A whole-of-government approach that improves service delivery and value for money.
- A modern workplace that makes smart use of new technologies to networking, access to data and customer service.
- A capable, confident and high-performing workforce that embraces new ways of working and mobilizing the diversity of talent to serve the country’s evolving needs.

The progress report, What We Heard, found public servants back the vision and zeroed in on five broad areas to achieve it:

- Innovative practices and networking
- Streamline processes and empowerment
- Technology
- People management
- Fundamentals of public service

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