Emerging from a period of deficit reduction, which brought about a re-examination of its role and had a significant impact on its employees, the Public Service of Canada is now looking to the future – and its own capacities to act. With the fluidity of Canadian governance today, driven by a variety of factors such as globalization, new technologies and a more active and critical citizenry, government is confronted with the task of redefining itself. To effectively fulfill their mandate to provide professional, impartial and relevant public service, public servants are defining new ways of working that are in tune with this new environment.

In the information age, organizations depend more than ever on their people. In past years, many initiatives, notably La Relève/The Leadership Network, have begun to recognize this point. But, after years of cutbacks and reforms that have led to distrust and cynicism, the challenges are significant and much remains to be done.

At the June 1999 Symposium of the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX), public sector executives, academics, journalists and private consultants gathered to discuss today’s challenges and resolutely looked ahead. While it is an impossible task to summarize two days of stimulating discussions among hundreds of people in a mere few pages, the debates held at the Symposium brought to light the crucial nature of one central task: investing in the people who are the Public Service of Canada. We have therefore drawn comments from those who presented at the APEX Symposium and have organized them in a fashion that attempts to convey the principle messages generated by this year’s forum.

The Clerk’s view

The tone of the Symposium was set by the Clerk of the Privy Council and Head of the Public Service, Mel Cappe. In his inaugural speech, he offered the audience a privileged view of his emerging priorities for the Public Service. Reviewing some of the challenges facing...
the country from national unity to economic growth and social challenges, the Clerk noted that an impartial, professional and representative Public Service is essential to ensure the development of Canadian society.

To be prepared to play its role, the Public Service must meet both management and policy challenges. In the Clerk’s view, both sets of challenges are intimately related by a common underlying condition: the necessary leadership of employees. In an era where the answers are no longer obvious or widely accepted, nurturing the creativity, adaptability and resourcefulness of employees is crucial.

For the Clerk, an agenda of renewal and investing in people must entail action at all levels.

The **mission** of the Public Service must be rewarding and stimulating. Knowledge workers are attracted by challenging and interesting work.

**Work processes** must be improved. The Clerk pointed out that many surveys show that the main reasons for people leaving government are excessive bureaucracy, cumbersome processes and insufficient autonomy.

**Personal development and continuous learning** must be a critical focus. The Public Service of the future will need new leadership competencies to build an effective learning organization.

The Clerk felt that in his role as head of the Public Service, leading this evolution may ultimately be the most important part of his job. He underlined that all public sector executives should also view themselves first and foremost as people managers. If they are successful in getting the best out of their employees, they will also be successful in their substantive areas, whether it is as policy advisers or in service delivery.

**Emerging governance challenges**

Much of the discussion during the plenary sessions and workshops centred on the need to understand the critical governance issues in today’s socio-economic and political environment, and their consequences for public servants. In terms of the thematic challenges reshaping government and its relations with other sectors, three main sets of critical issues emerged. They are: **openness and transparency** – how to manage in an environment where information is increasingly available to all stakeholders; **access and new technology** – how to effectively engage citizens and private and civic sector partners in new models of both policy making and service delivery; and **empowerment and flexibility** – how to institute effective knowledge management with a workforce characterized by higher levels of education, expectation and mobility.

**Openness and transparency**

On the issue of transparency, the testimonies were almost unanimous: public management in the information age requires that public servants acquire skills to manage in the open and learn to build a great deal of transparency into their operations. Moreover, to deal with public scrutiny at a time of crisis means acquiring effective and regular communication practices and building a good working relationship with the media.

Lynda Cranston, CEO of Canadian Blood Services, shared some lessons derived from her experience in re-establishing trust with the Canadian public in the wake of the contaminated blood tragedy. Cranston emphasized the key structural features of a new organization dedicated to openness and transparency: clear lines of accountability, a representative Board of Directors which conducts its business in a very open manner, regular safety audits conducted by an independent body that releases its findings to the public, and extensive consultations in making policies. Nonetheless, Cranston acknowledged that managing in the open is still very much a learning process.

Jim Judd, Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence, spoke about the challenges posed by dealing with the Year 2000 (Y2K) computer problem. In preparing for a potential emergency situation, there is a fine line between assuring maximum awareness by the population and creating unnecessary alarm. As such, communication has become the number one challenge for managing Y2K emergency preparedness. Based on his experience, Judd offered three rules for managing in the open: maximize transparency, favour timely information over a perfect and comprehensive message, and be adaptive and responsive to the changing context.

Anthony Wilson-Smith, Editor of *Maclean’s*, discussed the Public Service’s relationship with the media. He stressed the importance of establishing effective relationships with
the media. A professional, ethically appropriate relationship based on mutual respect and trust can minimize the potential for misinformation and misperceptions. Wilson-Smith argued that unnecessary secrecy is only likely to drive journalists to use alternative, perhaps inaccurate, sources of information. He therefore offered a four-pronged strategy: i) make better-informed, front-line employees directly available to the media; ii) ensure that your web site is updated frequently with timely information; iii) establish informal relationships based on trust – before crisis situations occur; and iv) identify those journalists who are dedicated to your area of work – in short, get to know them.

Marie-Josée Nadeau, Vice President of Hydro-Quebec, spoke of her organization’s experience in dealing with last year’s ice storm. The storm offered a formidable challenge: approximately one half of the province’s population found itself without electricity for two to five weeks and, at the peak of the reconstruction effort, about 10,000 people were at work on Hydro-Quebec’s infrastructure. Yet, during the crisis, polls showed that 94 percent of Quebeckers thought that the utility was doing a good job. Nadeau argued that Hydro-Quebec’s success owed much to its systematic approach for dealing with the crisis, to the resourcefulness of its employees and to an effective (and extensive) communication effort.

A concurrent session addressed many of these themes from the complementary perspective of managing in times of controversy. Jean Boyle, Vice President, International Business Development, The Boeing Company, reflecting on his experience as Chief of Defence Staff, underscored the need for senior managers to understand and keep separate public and private forms of scrutiny. With unavoidable challenges to a manager’s judgement, public servants must be prepared not only to attempt to avoid controversy but to know how to address it when such situations arise. Boyle argued that it is crucial to ensure the trust of your subordinates, as well as those charged with the task of assisting in the execution of your leadership duties.

Gwen Boniface spoke to public servants about the centrality of leadership. As the first woman to be appointed Commissioner of the Ontario Provincial Police, Boniface has confronted the complexities of restructuring police forces that have been transferred from provincial to municipal control. Boniface put forward the view that a key dimension of leadership involves the clarity of the process, as well as the ability of senior managers to communicate effectively and openly with all parties.

David Levine attempted to focus on the organizational impacts of his appointment as President and CEO of the newly amalgamated Ottawa Hospital. He felt that the external events, driven largely by media coverage served to rally both internal staff and the Board of Directors, and he emphasized the need to draw from this unity and act decisively in moving the organization forward. While external events must be managed and addressed, they cannot overtake managerial responsibilities and the need to provide leadership and direction.

The common themes permeating these sessions – information availability, transparency and controversy – underline that public servants are confronting a very different environment today. In the past, our Westminster-inspired parliamentary model ensured both clear and vertical lines of political accountability and bureaucratic autonomy. In the future, public servants will be more visible, more scrutinized and more engaged with a variety of external stakeholders.

**Access and new technology**

A key driver of openness and transparency is the dramatic impact of new information and communications technologies. Today we understand that technology involves more than making current processes and programs more efficient. New technologies permeate all aspects of governance, creating new organizational models, new types of services and very different policy challenges from those we have known traditionally. In a keynote speech, Don Tapscott, Chairman of the Alliance for Converging Technologies, addressed the impacts of digital technologies and new forms of electronic exchange. These impacts, according to Tapscott, extend to all aspects of our economic, social and political models.

The explosive growth of the Internet and electronic commerce is an increasingly strategic focus for government which must balance its role as both a regulator and a catalyst of these new forms of wealth creation and distribution. Tapscott lauded the work of the Canadian federal...
government as an international leader in many areas such as Public Key Infrastructure and the promotion of accessibility on an expanding information highway. Yet Tapscott also foreshadowed significant changes to every aspect of the public sector – including democracy, decision making and service delivery. He pointed to on-line citizens, young people in particular, as individuals likely to demand more direct engagement in democratic processes, as well as more personalized and tailored forms of public services facilitated by a digital infrastructure.

On the potential for greater citizen engagement, other panellists expressed mixed views. Alain Dubuc, Editor-in-Chief of La Presse, warned that we should be aware of the current realities, and potential pitfalls, of greater citizen participation. In fact, despite the multiplication of avenues for public participation, citizens rarely participate directly in policy making. They tend to be represented by lobby groups that often have doubtful democratic and accountability structures. Parliamentary government thrives on confrontation and, coupled with the prevalent rights discourse, the overall system seems generally intolerant of the kinds of compromise that effective forms of citizen engagement would require. As a result, notwithstanding popular rhetoric, the results of contemporary public participation are generally messy and highly imperfect. However, noting that the desire for greater public engagement is unlikely to diminish, Dubuc emphasized greater citizen education and government transparency as prerequisites for positive changes.

Gil Rémillard, Professor and Counsel, Byers-Casgrain, also expressed some apprehension toward some forms of citizen engagement. After stressing the importance and value of an active government that is fully conscious of its distinctive mandate of serving the public good and of weaving ties of solidarity, Rémillard, a former Quebec Minister, expressed some concerns that, under the pretext of engaging citizens more fully, public administrations sometimes come to ask too much of their citizens. We should not forget, Rémillard pointed out, that it is the state that is serving citizens, not the other way around.

David Elton, President of the Max Bell Foundation, showed much greater optimism about our capacity to include citizens in policy making. For more immediate results, Elton emphasized the use of new techniques of deliberative democracy and the need for more meaningful attempts to engage the public. Despite common misperceptions about their lack of sufficient knowledge, time and interest, citizens are willing and perfectly capable to engage meaningfully in debates on public policy. For Elton, it is the Public Service that first needs to learn to trust the deliberative capacities of citizens and to show willingness to experiment with available approaches. At a time when 87 percent of Canadians feel that governments should engage citizens more extensively in decision making, such experimentation would appear to be welcomed.

Empowerment and flexibility

The Honourable Doug Young, a former federal Minister, stressed the essential value of the Public Service to Canadian society. He reminded us that Canadian politics is volatile and that citizens often forget how important the Public Service is in assuring continuity and professionalism in the conduct of our collective affairs. However, at a time when most people will go through five or six jobs in a lifetime, facing continuous change and pressures for innovation, the Public Service needs to keep abreast of changes and it must learn to do things differently. In this perspective, Young expressed concern about the lack of personnel exchanges between the private and public sectors as well as across all levels of government.

The Deputy Minister of Canadian Heritage, Alexander Himelfarb, placed the Public Service’s growing emphasis on “management-by-results” in the context of this new learning environment. He pointed out that management-by-results can be conceived as an inductive process of theory building. At a time when old paradigms of governance are giving way to a new focus on innovation and adaptability, management-by-results provides us with a continuous process for reviewing our objectives and assessing the effectiveness of our strategies. It is a management tool that will facilitate organizational and individual learning. It will also help change the discourse on public policy, which has too often focused on processes and programs, by bringing its fundamental objective – making a difference for the common good – back as its central consideration.
While less of a reliance on administrative rules and traditional processes and controls will create an environment where public servants can exercise greater autonomy, this new environment will also contribute significantly to the need for the parallel development of a values-based Public Service. Burleigh Trevor-Deutsch, a bioethicist and professor at the University of Ottawa, presented a short history of public ethics as guides to organizational behaviour. Underscoring the significance of the work of the recent Task Force on Public Service Values and Ethics, Trevor-Deutsch noted that a reflection on public service ethics is paramount to the future of public administration. Strong common values and ethics will not only assure greater cohesion in a time of employee empowerment, but they will also improve citizen-government relations as people buy in most when they feel their values are respected.

In a complementary session on the Knowledge Revolution, public servants benefitted from different perspectives on labour market patterns and how they are intertwined with the changing expectations of workers. In this context, Jim Carroll, author of Surviving the Information Age, celebrated his “10 years without a real job” and his more favourable circumstance of self-employment managed from a home-based office. Flexible schedules, contract- and project-based assignments, and home-based and telework arrangements are all characteristics of an emerging “nomadic workforce.” This new mindset is reflective of a cultural shift where employees — and in particular, knowledge workers — are increasingly sensitive to the impacts of work on all aspects of our personal and professional lives.

Gisèle Samson-Verreault, Vice-President at Newbridge Networks Corporation, endorsed this changing portrait of organizations and employees. She pointed to four critical needs of knowledge workers: learning, self-reliance, value for contribution and stimulation. She also underscored the commitment of Newbridge to understanding knowledge workers, as the company conducts exit interviews with every individual that chooses to leave. An important lesson from Newbridge, and high-technology companies more generally, is the need to become comfortable with more employee mobility and adapt human resources systems accordingly.

In a related panel, Dale Booth, Director of Economic Development at the Assembly of First Nations, pointed to the importance of a work/home balance to the upcoming generation of leaders and managers. Younger Canadians, he predicted, will be much less tolerant of a work environment that is often driven by artificial “urgencies” and that imposes unreasonable demands on employees. Booth also stressed the crucial necessity to adopt organizational practices that keep employees fully informed at all times. He emphasized the need for leaders to be different, to take more risks, to use fresh ideas even if they seem superficially silly, and to promote teamwork by knowing and inspiring people.

Many panellists, speaking to the challenges of knowledge management, echoed the Clerk’s view that the public sector may face unique challenges in competing for highly skilled workers. One variable may be the size of the public service and the inherent difficulties in transforming a large-scale organization. Another factor is the strength of public sector traditions which are not always conducive to more flexible patterns of work and more worker empowerment. Yet much like the Clerk, the panellists were also adamant that despite private/public wage differentials, government can compete successfully for knowledge workers. The key challenge is to find ways to ensure that the Public Service continues to be viewed as an employer of choice.

Making the public service an employer of choice

Many useful suggestions were put forward in response to the Clerk’s call for a people-centred agenda that will enable the Public Service to establish itself as an employer of choice. We have drawn from the specific points of some and utilized a synthesis from others to create a rough template of the thematic ideas proposed: attracting, valuing, caring and adapting.

Attracting

To attract and retain new workers, particularly young people, Jennifer Welsh, consultant and co-author of Chips and Pop: Decoding the Nexus Generation, spoke about today’s nexus generation as the managers and leaders of the future. Their styles and expectations will be very different from previous generations. Their loyalty is to people, not places. They are highly entrepreneurial, look for employability more
than employment and tend to “protest with their feet,” being more prone to leave an unsatisfying workplace. Welsh pointed out that government must rethink itself as an employer. Accustomed to a world of paradox and instability, young Canadians tend toward a “do-it-yourself” mentality and they are less appreciative of the public sector as a central institution in their lives. The Public Service must provide them with an environment for continuous learning, build a sense of community in the workplace, engage them by generating an emotional commitment to the organization’s mission, appeal to their altruism as well as their self-interest, and show them that they are valuable partners for the organization.

R. “Hoops” Harrison, former National Director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) turned entrepreneur, shared his thoughts on his generation and on the changing workplace. Drawing from lobbying experiences with CASA, Harrison spoke about the need for respect and belief in the ability of this generation to add value to policy development within government. What is needed now, according to Harrison, is a language of simplicity and action, where younger employees work in concert with more experienced workers. In this respect, reverse mentorship was offered as one way to integrate younger and older employees and thereby generate opportunities for organizational learning. Tapscott and others echoed this view, pointing to several leading American corporations already engaged in such initiatives.

Valuing

In her introductory remarks to the Symposium, Jocelyne Bourgon, President of the Canadian Centre for Management Development, pointed out that the proportion of knowledge workers in the Public Service had doubled over the past ten years, now representing 65 percent of the total workforce. This rising class of public servants, according to Bourgon, seeks a challenging and stimulating work environment where results are both recognized and rewarded.

Dr. Linda Duxbury of Carleton University’s School of Business told the audience that the key challenge for making the Public Service an employer of choice is to establish trust between employees and employers. First and foremost, people want to work for organizations that truly value them. But despite the recent encouraging discourse of senior public officials, Professor Duxbury warned, it will take concrete and significant actions to overcome the cynicism prevalent in the Public Service after more than a decade of reforms and public sector bashing. Valuing the contribution of employees and providing them with a stimulating environment requires that managers adopt organizational systems and daily practices that show respect for and trust in their employees’ abilities.

Another key challenge for government as a whole is the need for collaboration and new forms of coordination among departments, sectors, disciplines and cultures. Knowledge-intensive organizations must not only respond to external circumstances, but they must also align resources and competencies internally. While the unique aspects of government must be understood, many conference participants agreed that expanded dialogues and linkages across sectors would help equip the public sector with the tools and competencies needed to respond to increasingly knowledge-intensive activities.

Caring

A healthy work environment also becomes a crucial issue in organizations that value their employees and recognize that their future lies with their people. At the Symposium, experts stressed that the Canadian Public Service must shift to an approach that conceives workplace health and security issues as an integral part of the management agenda instead of as an after-thought regulatory burden. This is particularly notable as the empowerment of employees is not only a necessity for learning organizations but is also likely to help alleviate the impression of being out of control that is widely recognized as contributing to the stress-related problems of many employees.

Dr. Wayne Corneil of the Organizational Health and Safety Agency at Health Canada opened the session by stressing the impact that poor health can have on an organization, both on the well-being of employees as well as in terms of low productivity and performance. He cited numerous studies revealing that the employees of the Public Service suffer twice the rates of stress in Canada as those of the United Kingdom. Among the key factors identified to explain stress-related problems, Cornil cited...
the degree of control over workplace decisions and actions that employees feel they often lack as well as an absence of social support from supervisors. Added to a decade of downsizing and public relations difficulties, these factors have exacerbated the levels of stress and workplace unhappiness in the public sector.

Barry Malmsten, Chief Administrative Officer, National Quality Institute, pointed out that during the downsizing of recent years, it is not at all clear that the public sector’s productivity has increased. For having neglected the health and well-being of its employees, public sector organizations are paying a price. Through its work in conjunction with Health Canada, the National Quality Institute is aiming to change this situation by providing organizations with tools to develop health-related programs in the workplace. The Canadian Healthy Workplace Criteria, in particular, offer a framework and standard for developing such programs. These criteria are based on the premise that managing workplace health is an important management function and that the results of these efforts have a direct impact on competitiveness and the bottom line.

Tom Carson, Deputy Minister of Health for the Province of Manitoba, spoke about the real consequences of deficient workplace health and emphasized the effects stress is having on individuals across the Public Service. Confirming Dr. Corneil’s view, he explained how personal control is a key to good health. Carson made the case that it is imperative for senior executives to provide managers with the necessary background information and to make workplace health an integral part of their responsibilities. Establishing a health baseline for the organization and building workplace health into business plans are key elements of meeting that accountability.

**Adapting**

Conference participants agreed that there is no quick fix. The Clerk’s emphasis on the Public Service as a learning organization highlights the need for continual participation and adaptation as central elements of a new ethos of public management. The focus on people is reflective of an understanding of the crucial role of highly qualified, motivated and autonomous employees in adapting to the new information age.

On this front, other Commonwealth public services are now embracing a similar agenda. In a telling shift, the New Zealand Public Service is grappling with the importance of human resources challenges. In his 1998 State of the Service Report, Commissioner Michael C. Wintringham, head of the New Zealand Public Service, noted that after many years of radical public sector reforms, New Zealand had fostered a form of “restructuring culture,” turning to organizational restructuring for every problem. It is now urgent for the country, stated Commissioner Wintringham, to focus on rebuilding the “capabilities” of its public service and foremost on the agenda is its human resources. The New Zealand Public Service, announced the Commissioner, would turn its attention toward investing in people in order to build its long-term capabilities. Consequently, it would provide greater opportunities for skill development.

Similarly, in its *White Paper on Modernising Government*, tabled in March 1999, the U.K. government also underscores the importance of investing in public servants. While the White Paper touches on a wide range of issues, its last chapter emphasizes the need to recognize the vital role of the Public Service as an agent for change. Stressing the unfortunate legacy of years of popular denigration based on prejudices, the British government reaffirmed its commitment to modernizing the Public Service by investing in the vitality of its workforce.

The [former] Minister of Human Resources Development, the Honourable Pierre Pettigrew,* underscored this theme in his keynote address by referring to the similarities across countries in arriving at an appropriate balance between market, state and society. According to Minister Pettigrew, Canada possesses a unique opportunity to develop a “New Politics of Confidence” which requires the renewal of our public institutions to better serve citizens in a post-modern era. This renewal cannot be based on technocratic plans, but rather it must be a dynamic process by which government and other sectors adapt to changing socio-economic circumstances. In such a context, immigration and cultural plurality are strategic advantages, as the ability to manage diversity at home will allow Canadians to better compete and succeed abroad.

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*The Honourable Pierre Pettigrew was appointed Minister for International Trade on August 3, 1999.*
Conclusion – a point of embarkment

The requirements of knowledge-intensive and more accessible services, the needs of an increasingly informed and demanding citizenry, and the challenges posed by increasingly intricate and complex policy problems will all require much more than economy in management and service delivery. The new environment will require making the Public Service a creative, open and flexible learning organization.

The final APEX Symposium of this millennium would appear to have signalled an embarkment on a new course that will see the Public Service continue to serve Canadians – albeit in ways quite different from those of the past. An agenda of investing in people will determine both the quality and relevance of the government’s response.

Endnotes
