Stop muzzling scientists, restore public service's policy capabilities, says former PCO clerk Cappe

By JESSICA BRUNO

TORONTO—Federal public servants know they are signing on to be "faceless bureaucrats" when they join up, but anonymity shouldn't mean muzzling scientists, cutting research and ignoring evidence-based policy advice, says former clerk of the Privy Council Mel Cappe.

"Governments get elected on platforms that are well flushed out in policy terms. They feel compelled to implement it, notwithstanding the contrary advice from bureaucrats, I get that," he said at the Public Policy Forum’s 26th annual dinner April 11, which celebrated the work of PCO Clerks this year.

"But what I don’t get is how they can proceed to implement a platform that flies in the face of analysis and evidence. Then to compound the problem, some governments replace evidence with ideology. When you have ideology, who needs evidence?" he added.

Mr. Cappe served as clerk under prime minister Jean Chrétien, from 1999 to 2002. He retired from the public service in 2006 after 31 years and a number of senior posts in the public service. He is now a professor of public policy and governance at the University of Toronto.

Scientists should be prohibited from talking to the public about policy. That’s the role of ministers. But they should be encouraged to talk to the public about their science and research, he stated, to applause from the audience of an estimated 1,300 assembled at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre on Thursday night.

In recent years, scientists, and researchers working for the federal government have been prevented from speaking to the public about their research. It has been reported recently that Fisheries and Oceans has changed its policy on scholarly publication of articles with research from government scientists to require departmental sign-off; even if the study is co-authored by a non-government academic.

The role of the public service is to provide sound policy research on the economy, society, science and the environment that takes into account Canada’s long-term interests, Mr. Cappe said.

“We need ministers to be doverminds of good analysis and good evidence for their decision-making,” he added.

“Some ministers are actually good at this, and others ... I’m being polite,” he said.

“Worse than replacing evidence with ideology, some governments have replaced the production of the public goods, of good science, good analysis, and good evidence to inform public policy,” he explained.

Among those listening to Mr. Cappe’s remarks that evening were current Clerk Wayne Wouters, former prime minister Paul Martin, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, and a host of federal Parliamentarians and senior bureaucrats. (Full disclosure: The Hill Times was one of the night’s sponsors.)

Mr. Cappe warned that if the public service becomes unaccustomed to providing evidence-based advice, they “will get out of the habit of serving the public interest.”

Former clerk Alex Himelfarb, who along with past clerks Jocelyne Bourgon, Kevin Lynch, and Paul Tellier were also honoured that evening, echoed Mr. Cappe’s concern.

“Public service is a key source of policy advice, different from those who are focused on re-election or who are committed to an ideology. Public servants try, at least, to suspend their biases, to provide advice based on evidence and direct experience. After all, they live and work in every part of Canada and the world, delivering our policies and programs. It would be strange—don’t you think?—not to want the benefit of that experience,” he told the crowd.

“Things seem different today. The public service is no less important, but it sure seems more than ever to be under attack from every side: less valued, less trusted, more under the gun. It must be less fun,” Mr. Himelfarb said.

There is constant and often contradictory commentary on what’s “broken” in the public service, and Mr. Himelfarb said mounting levels of distrust are hampering its effectiveness.

“You cannot build a resilient, lean, open, organization on a foundation of distrust. Distrust is everywhere, it’s a byproduct of ever more complex, often with no historical description, but trust me, it makes a world of difference ... It makes a difference because it reduces the cause of friction across a vast system of inter-relationships,” he said.

Mr. Bourgon, working under Mr. Chrétien, and implemented a major review of the public service, which cut 47,000 jobs and re-structured federal government.

He retired in 2007 after 33 years and now advises other countries on their civil service. She spoke via video link from Singapore.

“An increasing number of policy issues cannot be resolved by one department alone. We see that in every country,” she said, making the clerk’s job of bringing everyone in government together more important.

“The challenges public service faces today and into the future are more complex, more global and more interconnected than when I entered public service 37 years ago, and that’s not mere nostalgia,” said Kevin Lynch.

Now the vice-chair of BMO Financial Group, Mr. Lynch worked in the public service for 33 years, including 15 at the deputy minister level. He clerked for Mr. Harper from 2006 to his retirement in 2009.

Mr. Himelfarb also noted the increasing challenges of government.

“Today’s public issues are more complex, often with no historical precedent, with multiple poles of conflict,” he stated.

At the same time, effective public service is hindered by cuts and too much red tape, say the clerks.

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