

REMARKS BY
THE HONOURABLE WAYNE G. WOUTERS
AT THE
PUBLIC POLICY FORUM'S
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Thank you, Premier (MacLauchlan).

Thank you to the Public Policy Forum for this recognition, and for bringing together – as you so often do – such an impressive cross-section of business and government, academia and the voluntary sector.

Il n'y a jamais assez d'occasions pour nous tous d'apprendre les uns des autres, et aucune organisation fait plus pour combler les lacunes entre nous que le Forum.

(There are never enough opportunities for us all to learn from one another, and no organization does more to bridge the gaps between us than the Forum.)

Je sais que nous avons hâter de voir des nouveaux et le plus grand succès sous votre leadership, Ed.

(I know we all look forward to new and greater success under your leadership, Ed. Congratulations.)

It's an honour for me to be with you this evening, and to be recognized alongside such remarkable public leaders.

Francoise (Bertrand), Jack (Mintz), Rob (Pritchard), and Taylor (Owen) – thank you for proving, each in your own way, that you do not have to be a member of the Public Service to do great public service.

And, on behalf of those of us who have been members of the Public Service: Thank you, Peter (Mansbridge), for the many hours of sleep you've cost us over the years.

There was a time, not so long ago, when Peter and his fellow newscasters were the great source of nightly anxiety for us public servants.

After months spent developing a new program or service, or advising the government on a major policy decision, you'd wait to see how it played on *The National* and in the papers the next morning.

If it went well, then you would normally expect praise from your colleagues and the gratitude of your political masters.

If it didn't, then you could call in sick and hope the politicians took the blame.

No, but those were the good old days.

Now, by the time you turn on the news at night, you already know how your big announcement has gone over. You've seen the tweets. You've read the emails. And perhaps, you've heard the long string of expletives from the Minister's office.

And so you pour yourself a drink, sit down on the couch –

And just hope that maybe someone on the “At Issue” panel didn't think it was a complete disaster.

The 24-hour news cycle is old news. It's even old news to the federal Public Service.

And yet, it will surprise none of you that governments have been slow to adapt to the social media environment.

Rather than embrace social media as a means to reach out to citizens in new and innovative ways, our political leaders have too often seen social media as a threat – something to be “managed” for fear it could “go viral”.

In government, things that “go viral” are rarely good.

In our Twitter world, governments have minutes, not hours to respond to breaking news, even as total disaster is only ever just one “Auto Correct” away. And good luck playing for time to formulate your response or even to think; when the public wants answers, all the Emoji’s in the world won’t save you.

Now I am old school, I admit. In fact, today, I have officially joined the ranks of Canada’s senior citizens. Yes, I turned 65 today! So I appreciate that the pace of decision-making in government has had to accelerate. But in our rush to react and respond, let’s not forget that certain public policy issues require time for reflection and analysis. Not everything can be resolved before Question Period.

So I encourage our political leaders – many of whom are here tonight - to reach back and re-embrace a skill we’ve seen in so many of our politicians over time. And that my friends is the ancient art of deflection. Time is a precious thing, and governments must find the time and space to do what is right for their citizens.

But what is right is often what is risky. And, in government, few things ever seem riskier than our drive for innovation. Innovation is the essence of good government. It allows government to adapt, to improve and to develop new policies, products or services to deliver better results and create value for citizens.

Yet, often some of the most significant innovations are invisible – until they're not. You can consolidate and streamline functions, like the government's massive IT infrastructure, but good luck getting anyone's attention. But just wait until something goes wrong – and guess who's calling? Peter and his friends!

Nothing slows the pace of innovation in government more than our aversion to risk-taking.

Across the federal government, I worry that there are not enough safe spaces for innovation and experimentation. This is no accident; we've designed our government institutions to perform reliably, not to adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

In the spirit of good public sector management, we've imposed a plethora of rules, procedures and reporting mechanisms on our public servants that are creating barriers to change.

We subject every creative impulse in government to so much review and oversight that, in the name of mitigating risk, we too often push reward out of reach.

Since the Sponsorship Scandal, followed shortly thereafter by the *Federal Accountability Act*, we've seen an explosion of financial, procurement and other management procedures across government. At the federal level, we now have 13 – yes, 13 – agents of Parliament or similar watchdogs who exercise an overwhelming level of oversight over everything from official languages, to privacy, to access to information, to lobbying, to auditing.

It is very difficult for public servants to try new things, to take risks and creatively approach problem-solving, when they constantly worry about what rules they may be breaking or who is watching over them.

And too often, public servants – and I include myself here – see rules as a way to deflect criticism. “Hey, I followed the rules!” becomes the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card.

So, when we talk about transformational change in government, we’re talking about work that will be required of everyone – of politicians and their staff who set the standards, of senior management who set the example, and of younger public servants who, more than ever, will set the pace, if we let them.

When I joined the public service nearly four decades ago, it was in the midst of a significant transformation of its workforce.

In the 1970s and 80s, the public servants who had entered government service after the Second World War were retiring. There was ample opportunity to gain broad experience early in one’s career. Upward mobility was within reach.

The same is true today. The baby boomers are retiring. The generation of public servants who are at the beginning of their careers could – and should – be the most innovative in history. When their classmates are off

building start-ups and inventing new technologies, they don't want to spend their working lives faithfully following the myriad of management directives.

There can be no more pressing priority for our governments than to harness their talent, to reward their industry – and, as much as possible, to get out of their way.

Every rule, every inch of red tape, every ounce of oversight could mean hundreds or even thousands of innovations that are stifled, of ideas that sit in desk drawers, and of risks that are never taken.

Now I am not so naïve to think that all these rules and processes can be eliminated. However, too often, we've chosen the certain cost of inaction over the potential cost of innovation.

This is all easy for me to say, of course. I'm retired.

But I'm also hopeful. I have enormous confidence in the women and men of the Public Service of Canada. They are among the finest public servants in the world. Building a more agile, more innovative, more

collaborative Public Service will be a formidable challenge. But we could not be in better hands.

My message tonight is that, for all their talent and experience and expertise, they can't do it alone.

As titans and tweeters, professors and politicians, each of us has a part to play in shaping the culture of our government, and in creating the space our public servants need to take the risks that our changing world requires.

That's why evenings like this are so important. It's why the Public Policy Forum makes such an important contribution to the good governance of Canada.

Because the more we learn from and listen to each other, the harder our respective bad habits will be to sustain – and the more we will do, together, to build a better future for our country.

I'm grateful to be part of it – and for the wonderful honour you've given me tonight. Thank you.