

David Mitchell

## Don't write off the public service yet

David Mitchell

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**Wanted: public servant of the future**

- *Well-educated, with a strong liberal arts background and specialized professional credentials;*
- *Prepared to undertake additional training and development to meet the changing demands of a complex public service;*
- *Willing to make personal sacrifices and accept the professional responsibility to serve and protect the public interest;*
- *Well-developed and unwavering ethical standards;*
- *Prepared to relocate and work in temporary assignments across the country.*

This prospective job description for the not-too-distant future offers a hint of the changing nature of work in government. While it's commonplace to criticize bureaucrats for cushy jobs and comfortable benefits, such misperceptions are far from the daily reality of the often demanding work in the public sector.

And at a time when governments are trimming their budgets and reducing the size of the work force, many may assume that career opportunities in the public service are likely to be both limited and grim.

But based on work that the Public Policy Forum has been doing for the past couple of years with public servants at all levels of government in every region of the country, I believe this is far from the truth.

The ongoing re-evaluation of the state's role in the lives of Canadians actually makes this an exciting time to be contemplating a career in the public service. Although there will certainly be fewer public servants in the future, often doing different kinds of work and requiring different skills, they will continue to be essential to sustaining the quality of life we frequently take for granted.

In the past, many of the best and brightest were attracted to work in government out of a sense of idealism and a desire to help make Canada and the world a better place.

Governments are still able to attract large numbers of job applicants, but policy-making is no longer a primary focus. In fact, policy development in government has atrophied in recent years, with ideas increasingly coming from other sources, such as think tanks, industry associations, universities and, of course, political parties. Instead, most of the actual work in the public service is now focused on implementation of policy and the delivery of services to citizens.

This is not a bad thing. In fact, it's vitally important. Even as the role of government changes, its first responsibility is to support the safety and health of the public. And let's face it: In times of need, we all turn to government. We've recently seen vivid examples of this in the calamitous flooding along Lake Manitoba and in Quebec's Richelieu Valley, as well as the devastation wrought by wildfires in Slave Lake, Alta.

In each case, it was either provincial public servants or the military who were called on to help mitigate the loss of property, provide relief and ensure the safety and well-being of citizens. Even if this doesn't represent the traditional face of bureaucracy, it's an essential role of government.

Future public servants will increasingly be situated on the ground, in communities, providing such essential services. They will require superior communication and interpersonal skills as they engage with the public in new ways. Mastery of public engagement will emerge as a top priority, and successful public servants will be conveners, facilitators and experts in building networks. Because of large-scale generational change, they will also be younger and sufficiently tech-savvy to assist with the timely dissemination of information.

Perhaps first and foremost, the public servant of the future will be a relationship manager, able to build and co-ordinate complex partnerships. Where policy skills shaped the careers of past public service leaders, the ability to manage partnerships – among all levels of government and with other sectors as well – is likely to inspire promotion and a ticket to the top.

Governments have been changing in recent years. Although perhaps not rapidly enough, they have been growing more responsive and seeking to become more efficient. The current period of restraint, featuring cutbacks and challenging reductions, can lead to greater innovation within a more dynamic public service. And this will only be accelerated by an influx of new talent, with new ideas.

Smart, young and ambitious job seekers interested in making a difference in people's lives shouldn't write off the public service yet.

*David Mitchell is president and CEO of the Ottawa-based Public Policy Forum.*

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