

School of Public Policy & Governance

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

A good time for public administration graduates

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It is a pleasure to address this gathering of current and former graduates of U Vic's public administration school, and some of their proud family members.

Let me again by congratulate all of you who have received your degree in public administration today.

In my Convocation address this morning to degree recipients in the Faculties of Business and of Human and Social Development I noted that all public university graduates were fortunate. I would like to elaborate on this theme by noting three reasons why graduates from the School of Public Administration are particularly fortunate. The first is that there is a growing demand for public administration graduates. The second is that you have received your degree from one of Canada's best schools, and have been exposed to some of the best public administration scholars in the country. The third is that you are now well placed to enter an extremely rewarding profession.

The demand for public administration and public policy graduates

Canada's public service leaders have identified the renewal of the human capital as a top priority for the next decade. This is driven by demographics (the need to replace the wave of baby boomers about to retire) and changing job requirements (the need to make public services more outward-looking, technologically adept, network-oriented, and innovative). And the demand for policy analysis is not restricted to governments. More and more participants in the public sphere recognize the need to make their cases in the policy marketplace.

Indeed, the labour market for policy and public administration graduates is reminiscent of what it was when I was recruited in the early 1970s at the beginning of what some scholars have called the "policy analysis movement."

In those days the focus of analysis was on how governments could apply economic principles to address issues of "market failure." Over time, policy analysis evolved to apply a broader range of principles to address issues related as well to "government failure."

U Vic professors have been intimately involved in this evolution. When U Vic professor emeritus, Rod Dobell, was recruited from his job as director of the Institute for Policy Analysis in Toronto to the newly created Planning Branch of the Treasury Board Secretariat, we were at the apogee of what some have

called “high modernism.” Those of us who went into government in the 1970s suffered from a touch of technocratic hubris along with our hopes of making a better world.

Today many scholars think that policy studies is best thought of as a “persuasive vocation” where analysts must be practise their art in a world of decision makers impatient to act in the face of urgency and of entrenched interests resistant to change.

Rod Dobell and other U Vic professors both participated in this evolution and helped think it through.

U Vic’s head start

U Vic has been ahead of most universities in Canada in adapting the best of public administration and public policy teaching in other universities, and in learning from experience what actually works in government.

In 1969, Harvard University joined Princeton and Berkeley in creating a school of public policy by engaging leading practitioners as well as scholars from a variety of disciplines within government and the university. I was an early beneficiary of that investment at Harvard. Your Director, Evert Lindquist, was a graduate of the Berkeley public policy program, as was Professor David Good.

U Vic was one of the few Canadian universities to build on the work in great American universities to develop a practical “policy analysis toolkit” and to adapt it to the Canadian context. I often wish that more of the public servants in the federal and provincial governments over the last 30 years had had the kind of training that you have received.

How many millions of taxpayers’ dollars could have been saved? How many flawed program designs, failed reorganizations, and surreal management requirements could have been avoided over the last three decades if more of the bright young people hired since the early 1970s and destined to rise to positions of authority in federal, provincial, and municipal government had learned in university the things you have learned? How much better would public administration have been today if all these officials had possessed a solid grasp of micro-economics, a good understanding of the nature of public goods and logic of collective action, enough understanding of the theory of institutional behaviour and political process to be able to anticipate the completely predictable reactions of real people and real organizations, and a solid foundation in the legal and constitutional underpinnings of Westminster government and Canadian federalism as taught by Professor Herman Bakvis?

Trust and happiness in the public service

I would like to say a few words about how the themes of trust and service that I spoke about at Convocation this morning apply to our profession. I spoke about how recent research is demonstrating that when we act in ways that advancing trust and service, we not only contribute to the social good but to our individual happiness as well.

The trust-service-happiness nexus applies with particular force to those who chose public service as a profession. The wonderful thing about working in the public sector is that the service element is built right into the job. The happiness dividend is there each hour of the day, at least in theory.

But the trust element has a more challenging edge in the public sector. We are dealing, after all, with public trust. Government necessarily needs more extensive rules than the private sector to demonstrate that things are being done properly. Unfortunately when things go wrong, there is a tendency to over-react and create too many regulations and too much oversight. This undermines the public sector's efficiency and creativity and can often undermine effective accountability as well.

Professor David Good helped popularize the phrase that captures this phenomenon: the web of rules. I am happy to say that tackling the web of rules has recently become a priority in the federal government.

The issue of trust is also crucial in the relationship between the public service and the elected representatives. Many of us in this room have worked in circumstances where there was a high degree of trust between the public service and the elected members of the government. In such an environment one could have frank internal debates where the creative clash of ideas probe and test every viewpoint. This is the most effective way to arrive at the best policies and administrative practices.

Obviously people make mistakes. But if mistakes can be acknowledged with candour and seen for what they are – honest errors made in good faith – then they will not require a panoply of rules and regulations to prevent them in the future. And in those rare cases where a public servant has broken the public trust, we should all expect that that person will be vigorously prosecuted for breach of trust.

Let me close with an ethical challenge that I have been raising with public service leaders in Ottawa. In order for work in the public sector to become more efficient and innovative, I suggest it has to draw more on the emotional factors found all successful groups – values and emotions that make people want to work together, to become friends, have fun. Psychologists have identified a number of binding values that encourage people to work productively in a group, such as ingroup, loyalty, authority and sanctity. We have seen how gifted leaders can use these to raise the work experience from “a job,” or even “a career,” to “a calling.”

But harnessing these powerful emotions is tricky in the public sector. Creativity and commitment are all very well but emotions like ingroup and sanctity, or even friendship and fun, do not sit comfortably with rules aimed at preventing favouritism and promoting inclusiveness. If the public service wants to harness emotions in the way that innovative and effective organizations outside government routinely do, then we will need people like U Vic's Professor John Langford to help advise on the best way to reconcile the competing values at play.

And U Vic Public Administration graduates can always get advice from the many distinguished former public servants who are now affiliated with the School, people like Gordon Smith, Barry Carin and Harry Swain.

When trust and service are well aligned, there can be no more rewarding careers than the ones that many of you are about to embark on.

Congratulations and good luck.