

Trudeau is ready, but the Public Service clearly isn't

Once the envy of the world, Canada's Public Service needs a revamp, writes *Johanna Read*.

Canadians have decided that Justin Trudeau is indeed ready to govern. But the Public Service — essential to delivering the Liberals' agenda — is not ready for Justin.

Canadians elected a new policy agenda and management style. But without a Public Service management agenda made just as important, the realization of Trudeau's policy objectives is at risk.

The Public Service has been cut and gagged and it is demoralized, marginalized and under-utilized. Few, including many public servants themselves, realize just how bad it is and how much concerted effort it will take to recover.

This issue is not just about rebuilding from cuts that were too deep and that had to be made too quickly. It is not just about allowing public servants to once again

do their jobs unmuzzled.

While important, neither is it just about resolving the so-called accountability measures. Many of these rules and processes actually weakened accountability, and most of them were created not by the Harper government but by the public service itself. Not only are the rules ineffective at improving accountability, they create an inordinate amount of unnecessary work. Public servants must rehash issues at multiple committees, write rationales on multiple forms and briefing notes, secure signatures at every level in the chain of command; decision-making has been delegated upward rather than down.

While not simple, these issues can be resolved.

Two issues of greater importance will be more difficult: rebuilding the public service's

capacity to perform its essential role of providing policy advice, and creating a management agenda for culture change so that employees feel engaged, valued and respected — not just by their political masters, but by each other.

The core business of the public service is providing fearless advice and loyally implementing government decisions. This work is driven by a code of public sector values and ethics, rare in bureaucracies. Our professional, non-partisan public service, a core pillar of Canadian democracy, was once the envy of the world.

But public servants haven't had much of a chance to practice their advice skills. They have faced challenges in loyally implementing some recent government decisions. And public service values — particularly how public servants treat each other — are not as high priority as they once were.

The Harper government is not the only one to blame. Not since Jean Chrétien was at 24 Sus-

sex has a prime minister and his cabinet valued "speaking truth to power." There hasn't been much of a market for advice, fearless or otherwise, under the prime ministerships of Paul Martin and Stephen Harper, especially when that advice came from the Public Service.

The Harper government was characterized by power games, cliques, and little interest in listening to anything but what they wanted to hear. The Martin government wasn't dissimilar.

It takes time, but values, attitudes and behaviours from the top eventually trickle down. Power games, cliques, and little interest in listening to anything but what they want to hear is now what characterizes much of the public service too.

What was first tolerated eventually became valued and even rewarded. Power gamers and self-promoters advance to higher levels, and they in turn promote loyal members of their "posse" — those willing to play along and

never speak out of turn. Too many public servants have put their empire building and desire to look good in front of their bosses and peers (caring less how they treat their subordinates) ahead of doing the right things for the right reasons.

This needs to change, or the Public Service is in danger of being unable to serve the current government and governments of the future.

Prime Minister Trudeau needs to give clear and ongoing signals that the management agenda and policy agenda are of equal importance. He and the Privy Council need to hold deputy ministers to account — deputies the same in their chains of command — so that truth can be spoken to and heard at all levels of power, all public servants are engaged and respected, and so that good management is practised and rewarded. New values, attitudes and behaviours need to pour, not trickle, down. *Johanna Read is a former Public Service executive who specialized in policy and leadership issues. When her position was cut, she chose to retire early to pursue her passion for travel and international development.*