

## **Jim Mitchell: Opening Comments**

I am more than pleased – I am honoured – to chair this opening panel of today's colloquium.

I'm honoured because I knew John Tait, the man whose work and whose personal example are the focus of today's event. All the good things that will be said about John today are true. He was a remarkable public servant and an inspiration to everyone who knew him.

The second reason why I'm delighted to chair this panel is because I am a long-time friend and admirer of our two panellists – Ralph Heintzman and Judith Moses.

Judith and I were colleagues in the Machinery Secretariat in PCO in the mid-1980s, and we've been friends ever since. She is a truly remarkable public servant, someone who has served in senior positions at both the federal and provincial levels, in policy and program roles and in central agencies. And what's most important about Judith is that she has always been a thinker. She is someone who cares deeply about issues and values, and about what lies beneath the surface.

I've known Ralph for almost the same length of time. You have his bio note, but what it does not say is that before his retirement, he was recognized as one of the preeminent public service thinkers *about* the Public Service. And he continued that vocation at the University after his retirement.

Our panel today is an opportunity for you to hear from Judith and Ralph.

Let me say a few words about the setting for the Tait Report, as I see it in the context of some of the changes that were happening in the Public Service at the time.

Think back, as most of us can, to 1995, when this Task Force and Report were commissioned. Just two years before that, in June 1993, there was a massive reorganization of the public service, one in which I played a major role. It affected more than half of all employees and many of the larger departments and agencies.

People's lives and careers were thrown suddenly up in the air; there was a general sense that the old order had changed but no shared understanding of what the new world looked like. A year later came Program Review: a cost-cutting and deficit reduction exercise that resulted in the departure of some 55,000 public servants.

In this environment, people were asking – legitimately – what was the Public Service anyway? What did it stand for? What did it mean to be a public servant? Those were the questions that the Tait Task Force took up in its

work. The fruits of their consultations and their reflections are found in the Tait Report, a document that has served ever since as a foundation for understanding the values of the Public Service and what defines the vocation of the public servant.

I'll say only a few things about the report, because we have its Vice-Chair (Ralph) and a member (Judith) on the panel today and I'd rather leave it to them to explain it. But allow me just a couple of observations from the vantage point of 20 years-plus.

1. First, the Tait report is not just about values and ethics in government – it's really a work of philosophy. It's a book on what you might call the 'metaphysics' of Westminster government in Canada and the duties of the public servant within our system of Westminster government. It is one of the most important pieces of idea work in the last 50 years.
2. When I read it again, I am struck by the subtlety of its discussion of concepts like *responsibility*, *accountability*, and *anonymity*. The report reminds us how the values we perhaps take for granted are founded on principles and essential features of government operations that don't receive as much attention as they deserve.
3. Second, it's striking that a report written barely more than 20 years ago makes virtually no reference to the digital universe in which we live today. Yet the report starts on the assumption that the world is changing and it seems to foresee more changes in the structure and operations of government than in fact have occurred.
4. For example, there has been *no explosion of new organizational forms* to replace the traditional departmental and Crown corporation model; nor, despite some stresses in recent years, has there been *any fundamental shift in our understanding of the respective roles of ministers and officials*, including the responsibility of officials, within our system of Westminster government, to provide loyal, professional advice to ministers on both administration and policy.
5. The bigger changes affecting government – the ones that have actually occurred – are in the *environment* in which Canadian governments operate today – the globalized information universe in which we all live; the ways in which governments can reach directly to citizens and vice versa; the globalization of commerce; the attitudes of a digital generation of younger public servants who have a very different sense of their career and their duty than we may have had 30 or 40 years ago.
6. So *the Tait report is not a crystal ball*. Rather, I read it as almost a biblical text for the Public Service – a repository of more or less permanent truths

about the duty of the public servant and the values that should guide him or her in doing their duty today and in the future.

With this as background, I'm going to turn first to Ralph and then to Judith to talk about how they see the meaning and impact of the Tait Report and the issues it raises.