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**Speaking Truth to Power**

It is a privilege indeed to be asked to speak on the Tait Report. Alas, it is a privilege that is as intimidating as it is rare. A perverse law of inverse proportionality seems to come into play: the thoughtfulness, eloquence and inspiring qualities of **A Strong Foundation**, make any words I can muster seem drab, obvious and a little insipid. I was almost tempted to stand before you and just read large passages of the Report back to you: for they are today as compelling and coruscating as they were 1996.

But my task, jointly shared with my co-panellists, with whom I must say I am honoured to share the stage, is to talk a little about the future.

In its concluding chapter, the Tait report posits the following argument: “these four overlapping families of democratic, professional, ethical, and people values appear to us to constitute a set of core values for the entire public service. While they may be reflected in different ways in different places and at different times, they seem to us the values that define the very nature of public service....In fact, in a time of change, these core values, rooted in the democratic mission of government, are the bedrock, the solid foundation on which renewal can take place and on which a stronger public service can be built.... In times of change, however, they may need to be clarified, reaffirmed, or expressed in new ways.” (p.58)

Now, if one wished to be overly fastidious, one might argue that the Tait Report is trying to have it both ways: on the one hand, these four families of values are styled as a bedrock and a solid foundation – implying permanence and enduring consistency; and, on the other, these value are said to be subject to clarification and new forms of expression – implying flexibility and necessary adaptability. Which is it?

Well, if we reflect for a moment on it, I think we would come to the view that the Tait Report expressed it just right: it is both. These four families of values are indeed a strong and permanent foundation on which the public service is built – indeed their instantiation gives very meaning and animation to the public service. But, they can fully serve this role only if each generation of public servants and each institution within the public service – confronted with change and a new reality – undertakes the same “honest dialogue” as that undertaken by the Study Group that John Tait led.

So, what might be a central or defining change or a new reality confronting the future of the public service that might cause us to clarify, reaffirm or express the public service values in new ways?

It won't have been lost on you that I used an indefinite article – "a" defining change – not a definite article – "the" defining change. Some might think that in doing so I am dodging the real debate here and certainly not living up to the value of "courage" (hence violating one of Tait's "people values"!).

So, what is one of the defining changes of our time, which will affect the public service and hence the values within it?

According to research from the University of Ottawa, in 2009 the world witnessed the passing of a notable milestone – over 50 million scientific papers had been published since 1650<sup>1</sup>. According to the World Bank, between 2003 and 2016, the number of scientific and technical articles published annually increased from 1,185,943 to 2,296,271.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, a bibliometric analysis completed by Lutz Bornmann identifies three growth phases in the development of science, which each witnessed the annual growth rates of scientific output tripling in comparison to the previous phase: from less than 1% between 1650 and 1750; to 2-3% from the middle 18<sup>th</sup> century to the period between the two world wars; to between 8 and 9% between 1940 and 2012.<sup>3</sup>

If these rates continue, global scientific output will double every nine years.

Let me now try and ground this explosion of information and knowledge, which will mark the future "operating environment" of the public service, into what is said in the Tait Report about the core values of the public service.

In the chapter on "Ethical Challenges", we find the following, under the heading "Speaking Truth to Power": "In supporting the democratic process, public servants have a dual role to play. One side of this role is to carry out faithfully the program and policies of the government of the day. The other is to provide ministers with a full range of analysis and advice that will help them to take the best possible decisions for the public good." And, the Report goes on to argue "this dual role is played out not just at the top of departments but at all levels in the public service, wherever there are employees and supervisors." (p.47)

To make the obvious point, speaking truth to power assumes, first, that one is able to ascertain the truth.

In the face of overwhelming scientific output – overwhelming and at times conflicting evidence which can be summoned to prove a point or support a position

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Sarah Boon, Canadian Science Publishing, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016

<sup>2</sup> National Science Foundation, Science and Engineering Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, cited in Nature.com May 7, 2014.

– one could simply see this as a “technical challenge”: How does one get a sufficiently broad swathe of available information, suitably tested and selected, to allow one the confidence to offer it as sound advice?

And indeed, as a practical matter, this is probably the first challenge confronting those called on to speak truth to power (in the policy domain, where most such conversations take place).

But often, getting at the “truth” is more than just this technical challenge. There is a very long list of things that were once firmly and insistently held to be true that advances in science have subsequently shown to be untrue.

Indeed when Peter Hennessy coined the phrase “speaking truth to power”, at least as used in the Westminster tradition, he was in some quarters challenged for being arrogant in his assumption of public servants being in possession of privileged insights in regards to the matters of their brief.

For my part, I approach this more as an “epistemological challenge”, tackled by the very logic found in the Tait Report itself, that is: we need to recognize and embrace the dynamic tension between competing sets of facts, and to rely on the fruitful synthesis implicit in the dialect logic of an “honest dialogue”.

In short, truth must be seen as a relational concept, which is part of an evolving and dynamic narrative. This is emphatically not to say that there are no truths, or that all truth is relative. It is to say that what Ralph Heintzman earlier today called “truth telling” must be understood as a dynamic dialectic of what was received wisdom in the past and what has been discovered now that challenges it.

In sum, setting aside a parallel concern around what has been termed a “post-truth world”, characterized by “alternative versions of the truth” and the labelling of unfavourable reporting as “fake news”, public servants loyally and earnestly trying to adhere to their values and fulfil their appropriate roles can be forgiven for asking: “How can I possibly provide ministers or my superiors with the “full range of analysis and advice” in a world faced with an exponential growth of scientific and technical information?”

Well, let’s briefly work through each of the four families of values and see how this defining change might come to bear and how our public service values might need to be clarified, reaffirmed or re-expressed.

The Tait Report persuasively argues that the core of our democratic values (which, it is worth noting, are held out as the most important of all four families of values and the foundation to the other three families) is the concept of loyalty to the public interest, as represented and interpreted by the democratically elected government and expressed in law and the Constitution. This is described as one of the normative foundations for the public service and a key distinguishing feature, separating us from those in the private sector. (p.54)

Confronted with an ever growing universe of information and knowledge, loyalty to the public interest entails a dedication to learning all one can about one's authorities and accountabilities but equally to a continuous effort at learning all that is being uncovered about the world around us that bears on those responsibilities. It entails not just continuous learning but continuous curiosity. Equally, it imposes an obligation upon the Government and the leadership of the public service to free up the resources needed for public servants to access all the information they can and increase their knowledge and capabilities in the process.

Core to the second family of values – professional values – is the concept of service to the public, importantly, where the public is seen as made up of citizens who are bearers of rights and duties in a framework of community. (p.55) Properly understood, the value of service to the public is also linked to the public interest, for it also connotes serving Canadian values, public purpose and national goals.

It seems to me that the principal ramification of the explosion of information and knowledge to the value of service to the public is bold reaffirmation of the value of innovation, notably arrived at through experimentation. Public servants must be committed to trying new things and taking informed risks in the process, in a system that is more tolerant of failures (which are quickly declared and learned from).

Central to the third family of values – ethical values – is the lofty and inspiring value of integrity, again distinguished in the public service by its link to holding public trust and to putting the public interest before any private interest or advantage. (p.56) Of note, the Tait report argues that the value of integrity is what imposes on public servants the obligation to speak truth to power.

The exponential growth in scientific output requires that the ethical value of integrity is manifest in the diligence, comprehensiveness and (for lack of a better word) humility with which we public servants go about the task of marshalling the evidence and the facts in support of our advice. Well-developed options and different scenarios should likely always accompany recommendations. It makes it incumbent on us to provide caveats and qualifications and above all of being transparent about our sources of information and the degree of confidence they can justifiably support.

The final family of values was termed "People Values" in ***A Strong Foundation***. The Report didn't single out a value in this family, as it did in the other three, but I argue that those people values which we show or offer to others, such as respect, are central to this family. (p.56)

In the face of ever-expanding scientific and technical information, the values that we show to others must demonstrate the acknowledgement of the essentially contestable nature of much of what we hold to be the case. This means that we need to re-affirm and re-fresh people values such as receptivity and openness as we move ahead.

***A Strong Foundation***, quite appropriately I feel, ends on a call for leadership: “nothing is more important to the nourishment of public service values than the quality of leadership in the public service.” (p.57) Faced with an exponential growth of scientific output, leaders of the public service in the future must be called on to model and reaffirm the values I have highlighted above – the diligence in becoming informed, the embrace of innovative approaches, the rigorous marshalling of evidence and its measured presentation, and an expression of receptivity and openness in dealing with others.