



Verbatim/Michael Sabia

## Thinking Differently

The job of government was defined in terms of its “efficiency.” And the emphasis placed on the minimal “must do” instead of the aspirational “can be”.

Of course governments have to demonstrate good stewardship of public resources. But if all they do is *count* change, it limits their ability to *effect* change.

The fact is when big problems arise — whether it’s a financial crisis like 2008 or a tragedy like Lac Megantic — people’s first instinct is to look to government for a solution.

Yet opinion researchers tell us that people are increasingly disappointed with our collective response to the issues that matter most—income inequality, health care for the aged, climate change. They’re withdrawing from public affairs and wondering if we still have the ability to tackle big challenges. To do big things.

And that’s important.

Because big, pan-societal issues like climate change are not going to yield to individual effort. There are no apps for those. We still need institutions that can bring together ideas and organize responses big enough—and comprehensive enough—to make a difference.

**S**o what to do?

Well the answer is not to turn the clock back to a time when government thought it could solve a problem unilaterally. It’s not about bigger government versus smaller government. It’s about *different* government.

One that moves away from a manager’s obsession with doing things better to a leader’s focus on doing *better* things. Like fostering innovation. Being open to new ideas. Encouraging experimentation. Rewarding risk-taking. And, frankly, accepting failure as a condition precedent to success.

The good news? There’s lots of creative thinking coming from leaders—especially at the local level. Case in point: Medellín, Colombia. In 1992, one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Today? One of the world’s most innovative—in its architecture, its transportation systems, schools and libraries.

Or here in Canada. The Winnipeg Boldness Project. A neighbourhood-based, early childhood development initiative. Government, non-profit foundations and aboriginal leaders coming together to address a complex social issue. One child at a time.

There are other examples. The creativity driving Boston’s Office of New Urban Mechanics. The mission of New York’s Innovation Delivery Fellows to execute new ideas.

Yes, all small steps. But, they’re a start.

In today’s world, progress comes incrementally. Step by step, sometimes one step back. Until you make a breakthrough. And then another. No silver bullets. No more once-and-for-all solutions.

Fortunately, young leaders are really good at this. They’re used to working collaboratively. Interactively. Iteratively. Across networks. Tackling problems through an open source world.

Governments need to catch up. We need them to operate differently. To put a priority on imagination, invention, and innovation.

And it starts by thinking differently. **P**

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**W**hat sets people apart as leaders, in government and the private sector?

They all think differently about what they do. They question. They innovate.

Why does it matter? Because of the world in which we live, and the nature of the challenges we face: A world in which innovation and creative destruction are the norms—and motors—of our times. A world where technology and the sheer volume of data are setting a pace of change unlike anything we’ve seen before.

Innovations that destroy businesses as fast as they create new ones. Think of 3-D printing. Truly revolutionary—affecting everything from the manufacture of airplane engines to the future of regenerative medicine.

In *this* world, the only way to harness change—the only way to lead—is to think differently.

That applies as much in government as it does in business or anywhere else. But here’s the paradox. At a time when creativity is relentlessly driving change in so much of our world, many would limit government to managing their way through rather than working with others to solve problems.

**I**t started in the 1980’s and 1990’s, when we decided governments needed to become “more like businesses”, adopting the metrics—and vocabulary—of corporations. Citizens became “clients”. Compliance replaced creativity.