



From one generation to the next, the public service has been the pillar of Canadian public policy, particularly at the Privy Council. *iStock photo*

A Birthday Card to Canada from its Public Service

Richard Dicerni

Canada stands with France and the UK among G7 nations in which a career in the public service has long been considered not just an honourable but a noble calling and respectable use of one's talents. For our Canada 150 piece on the country's public service, we turned to Richard Dicerni, the retired senior public servant whose contribution to Canadian public policy over four decades of service was widely recognized to be disproportionate to his administrative titles. He submitted this unabashedly patriotic Letter to Canada.

Dear Canada,

It has been quite a journey we have travelled together over these past 150 years. Overall, I think we have helped you grow and evolve into the great country that you are today.

In anticipation of your anniversary, I have gone to Library and Archives Canada to find some of the family albums that we have put together over the years.

Do you remember when it all started on July 1, 1867? There were 2,660 of us ready to serve your first government. Most of us worked outside of Ottawa in the four provinces; our major departments were Customs, Agriculture, Public Works and, of course, Finance.

Over the years, as the population grew and the economy diversified, the need for additional civil servants was recognized. The need to hire on the basis of merit was also recognized. So, in 1908, Parliament passed an act establishing the Civil Service Commission. However, old patronage habits did not disappear quickly. It took another decade before the Civil Service Act was passed and the merit principle was enshrined in law.

Enough of those early years, let's look at family albums. The first one I want to look at is about the 1930's. As you will recall, this was a difficult period economically—domestically and internationally. It was also a time when ministers, especially prime ministers, worked closely with their officials in order to deal as best as possible with the challenges that you faced. You faced these challenges with the help of three remarkable public servants: Clifford Clark, O.D. Skelton and Arnold Heeney.

In 1932, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett recruited Clifford Clark to be deputy minister of Finance; Clark would go on to serve in that capacity for the next 20 years and support seven ministers of Finance. On his watch, key pieces of legislation such as the Bank of Canada Act (1935), the National Housing Act (1938), the Financial Administration Act (1950) would be passed by Parliament. Clark was at the table when the Rowell-Sirois Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations was established and when it reported. Under his stewardship, five wartime budgets, which reconciled domestic needs with military exigencies, were prepared.

As a leader, he recruited outstanding individuals such as Bob Bryce, A.F.W. Plumptre, Walter Gordon and

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Mitchell Sharp. He also ensured that the Treasury Board functioned as it should as the comptroller of government expenditures. His overall contribution is best summed up by Walter Gordon, who said “Clark was the dominating genius of the department and, in fact, of wartime Ottawa”.



O.D. Skelton. As undersecretary of state from 1925 until his death in 1941, he played a leading role in building Canada's Department of External Affairs. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

The 1930s was also the decade that you, Canada, came of age, where you appeared on the international stage not as a colony but as a country. It was a time when you had official representations in places such as London, Tokyo, Washington and Paris. It was the period when the nascent Department of External Affairs came to be.

The guiding hand that made all of the above happen was O.D. Skelton. He also had a sharp eye for talent and recruited individuals such as Hume Wrong, Norman Robertson and Lester B. “Mike” Pearson, who would all go on to have exceptional careers. Providing foreign policy advice in a fast-changing world landscape was challenging, especially given the many competing interests and values. Throughout his tenure as undersecretary of state at External, a post he held from 1926 until his death in 1940, Skelton ensured that government had the best advice possible to navigate these complex international shoals.

On July 13, 1938, Mackenzie King wrote to Arnold Heeney, a young bilingual lawyer from Montreal, to ask him to come to Ottawa to assist him in running his office and liaise with ministers. In 1940, Heeney became the seventh Clerk of the Privy Council and the first Secretary to Cabinet. He held that job until 1949. When he had initially approached Heeney, the prime minister had noted in his letter that “a sort of Secretary to the Cabinet” position existed in England and he saw “no reason why such a post might not be developed in Canada.” He then added, “where work is really important it is the man who makes the position, not the position which makes the man”. Heeney rose to that challenge.

Heeney worked with the PM to undertake governance innovations, such as setting and circulating agendas for cabinet meetings, ensuring that supporting documents were prepared, and that minutes of meetings were taken and records of decisions were noted and followed up.

Gordon Robertson, who held the Clerk's job from 1963 to 1975, wrote in 1972 that "Heeney had designed the machine that coordinates all of the vital decisions of government... the basic design is unchanged because he designed it so well".

These three individuals shared some characteristics: they earned the trust of prime ministers and ministers with fearless advice and problem solving, they were superb at talent management, they had a solid understanding of the public interest and they knew how to manage.

Since Heeney's appointment in 1940, 16 Canadians have followed in his footsteps and have been Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to Cabinet. One Canadian stands out in the family albums for his contribution to your well-being and continued prosperity: Gordon R. Robertson who had the position between 1963 and 1975.

I am sure you will remember 1967. It was a spectacular year, your 100th anniversary. This special year had many celebrations, including the remarkable Expo 67, which showcased to the world all that you were and could be.

But the years that preceded it and the years that followed were not easy. New social programs such as the Canada Pension Plan/Quebec Pension Plan and Medicare were launched after many difficult, intense negotiations with provincial governments; new economic development departments, including the first Science and Technology ministry, were established; constitutional discussions were undertaken leading to the Victoria Charter which eventually was not approved; the Treasury Board was established as a government department with its own minister. Canada also suffered its first terrorist attack in October 1970 when the FLQ kidnapped British diplomat James Cross and Quebec Cabinet minister Pierre Laporte, who was subsequently assassinated.

Throughout his 12 years as clerk,

Robertson was a steadying hand: in providing advice to your ministers; in helping shape policies; in implementing many new programs; and in navigating difficult crises.

However, I want to particularly draw your attention to one additional album which I know is dear to your heart: Official Languages in the federal public service.

Ottawa, as you know, in the mid-1960s was an anglophone community and its public service worked in English. As the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism noted, unilingualism was not an oversight, "it has been strongly influenced by a particular interpretation of the concept of efficiency". Robertson personally assumed responsibility for seeing that the new official languages policy in the public service was fair, defensible and effective. He oversaw with focus, determination and sensitivity the implementation of the Official Languages Act. He also walked the talk by taking French language training.

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The implementation of the OLA was challenging but, under Robertson's watch as clerk, a corner was irrevocably turned.

There are many other albums about individuals and institutions in the public service that have had an impact on how you have grown up.

I am thinking of people like Jules Leger, who served as deputy minister, ambassador and Governor General; David Golden, who was deputy minister of Industry and president of Telesat Canada; Jean Edmonds who was one of the first women senior executives in the mid-1960s; Huguette Labelle, who over 20 years held five deputy minister positions; and Paul Tellier who held the clerk's job during the FTA, NAFTA and Meech Lake negotiations.

However, what stands out the most in these historical albums is the partnership that existed between elected officials and non-elected officials. It was a partnership based on trust, mutual respect and a common desire to enhance the Canadian public interest. Of course, there were times when all was not great between politicians and senior bureaucrats. But for every one of those incidents or moments, there were hundreds of positive, cooperative efforts that exemplified how a professional non-partisan public service can support a government and deliver programs to Canadians.

Having said that, there are activities about which I am not proud. For example, there was a time when married women were prohibited from having jobs in the public service. The fact that this prohibition lasted over 30 years and was only lifted in the mid-1950s may partially explain why in 1988, women only represented 12 per cent of the management category. You will be pleased to know that significant progress has been made in the past 30 years. Women now occupy close to 50 per cent of the management positions in the federal public service. Another example of underperformance is the lack of First Nations in our ranks and especially in our executive levels. We need to do better in ensuring our numbers reflect the diversity of Canada. Fortunately, the current clerk, Michael Wernick, is very focused on enhancing the diversity of the federal public service.

Going forward, we will face a number of challenges. There is across the democratic world a loss of faith in institutions, especially in governments. There are issues of relevance, of responsiveness, of trust. The advent of social media, which can connect thousands of people instantly, compounds the challenge. In that context, there is a need for a continuing and constant focus on improving services to Canadians across the country.

But as I look to the next few decades, I am very confident in the capacity of the public service to be an organization that helps and not hinders your *épanouissement*.

I say that because I firmly believe that we can continue attracting the best and the brightest. Just last year, 7,700 were hired to partially offset the 9,000 who retired. Fifty per cent of the new public servants were under 35.

At the sides of the leaders whom I have described and those who have

followed in their places, stand thousands of dedicated, hard-working faceless public servants. They, dear Canada, have truly been the “unsung heroes” of your government over your first 150 years.

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Being a federal public servant is still a cool job, where you get to make a difference, where you get the oppor-

tunity to serve the public interest, where you can have a challenging and diverse career ranging from writing competition law to being a fisheries officer, from providing policy advice to administering employment insurance programs.

In 2017, we are over 250,000 Canadians who provide core public services to our fellow Canadians. I can assure you, we will continue to do so on a non-partisan and professional basis.

As always, we aim to serve.

All the best,

Yours truly,

Your federal public service. **P**

Richard Dicerni joined the federal government in 1969. He held a number of executive positions including most recently Deputy Minister of Industry. He also served as Deputy Minister of the Alberta Executive Council and deputy minister of various portfolios in the Ontario government.
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