Leaders Arrive Hopeful

Advice for Civil Servants Meeting New Ministers

I was struck by the good sense in this advice for Canadian officials. Its author, Peter Miles, has kindly allowed me to republish it over here.

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Transition from one government to another is a time of great uncertainty for many public and political staff. However, this period also brings moments of opportunity to help shape the path of the new administration.

I've been fortunate to be part of four government transitions over the last decade in my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador - the first in 2015 from the PC government of Paul Davis to the Liberal Government of Dwight Ball, in 2019 a re-elected Dwight Ball government reduced from majority to minority, the August 2020 Covid transition from Dwight Ball's Liberals to Andrew Furey's Liberals, and the 2021 transition of a re-elected Furey government - this time from minority to majority. Each of these transitions presented a unique set of circumstances - changing parties, changing status, or changing leaders. With opportunities and risks, here's what you need to know…

Leaders Arrive Hopeful - and with a Strange Combination of Energy and Exhaustion

The leader and their close staff will be coming in excited, full of optimism, relief, but also a little road weary. They've just won an election - it's gruelling both mentally and physically. They've spent a month on the road or in a war room together, contemplating major domestic and international public policy issues, while balancing concerns of local constituents such as potholes, traffic, and snow clearing. As the saying goes, all politics is local, so their minds will be more focused on how their policies affect people in their hometowns.

The public service should be prepared to answer these questions, point to local examples, and give guidance on execution.

I recall walking off the campaign bus and into transition briefings the day after an election. Public servants with arms filled with briefing books - it was intimidating and overwhelming at times. I felt impressed by their level of professionalism and preparedness, but frustrated by their approach:

"We know you proposed this, but it can't be done that way."

"We've tried that before and it didn't work."

"Why don't you focus on this instead?"

"The fiscal situation doesn't allow us to do that at this time…"

Although these may be accurate and well intentioned, my best advice is: go easy on the "that hasn't worked before" message. The finances may have changed, public views may have changed, and importantly - the players have likely changed. An open mind as to new ways to accomplish these goals will be helpful. Your expertise is helpful to avoid pitfalls or files getting "stuck", so relaying these experiences will be important as policy develops.

Be Prepared

The new political team will appreciate your knowledge of their campaign promises.

From their written platform to debate commitments, their priorities should not come as a surprise, and you should be prepared to discuss them on day one. The new leader and staff are looking for guidance on execution, not resistance. They may not fully understand every aspect of how the government works - but they do understand that their job now is to deliver. Offer advice, suggestions, paths forward, lessons learned.

Don't assume they fully understand government processes - but don't act like it's an elusive mystery they'll never figure out either.

We've all heard the saying that bureaucrats must provide "fearless advice and loyal implementation." Even if all parties have experience with this dynamic, it is worth discussing it head on, and how practically that will work between you. Leaders may differ in the form, frequency, and stage that hard truths are best received, and importantly – in front of whom.

What Advice are New Leaders Given Heading into Transition?

Planning for a new government transition is one of the most awkward situations a new leader will face. They need to be prepared, but can't openly plan or get "too far ahead of themselves." My advice to leaders has been: "The more you talk openly about transition, the less likely it is to ever happen." The very nature of preparing to form of new government means that cards have to be held close.

Another piece of advice every new leader should be given is this: "Manage your time. It's your most valuable asset - and the one everyone will want." Senior public officials need to recognize this and work with senior political staff to decide which matters will reach the leader's desk - and in what format. Establishing protocol on day one sets the tone for everything that follows.

The Human Side of Transitions

There's an emotional layer here that can't be ignored. Leaders are stepping into a role that they campaigned for, but may now find overwhelming. There is pressure to move quickly, to show results, to make their mark - but also to avoid missteps. Many will feel imposter syndrome in those early days. The public service has a real opportunity to offer both structure and stability, but also reassurance and calm. That matters more than you might think.

Personality Plays a Role

Every leader will bring in their own plans, opinions, and personality. One may have planned for this moment their entire life, while another may have seized an unexpected opportunity

for the role. Some leaders may have detailed plans for transition and operations, while others may have resisted taking anything for granted, and be more open to suggestions.

Paying attention to the individual nature of the leader and responding accordingly will be important. They got elected being themselves, and expect that personality to carry forward into governance.

Get to know the political staff closest to the leader. They have likely all formed close relationships during the campaign, and they are in "the meeting after the meeting". Keeping them engaged and informed through the transition period and beyond will ensure a smoother ride through the delivery of the agenda.

Do New Leaders Always Want to "Clean House"?

In short, no.

During the period leading up to swearing in - and in the weeks that follow - the new leader and political staff will receive much unsolicited advice about the attributes of Deputy and Assistant Deputy Ministers. Don't be distracted by it. Having served through four transitions, I can say this kind of advice is always taken with a grain of salt. It rarely derails a sound and productive working relationship with the public service.

When you hear such chatter, the best advice is: don't overreact. Be professional, be prepared, be helpful, and be respectful. The new leader's most pressing item is Cabinet selection - not who's in which ADM role. Political staffing and public service staffing are items that will come later.

What Not to Do - For Both Sides

- **Public Service:**

• Don't dismiss new ideas just because they weren't tried your way.

• Don't talk down or imply "you don't get how government works."

• Don't take the attitude of "we've been here before you, we'll be here after you."

• Don't criticize the outgoing administration in front of the new one. It reflects poorly

on you, and breeds trust issues that you'll breach their confidence someday.

- **Political Staff:**

• Don't assume the public service is trying to block you - they're trying to help.

• Don't treat policy execution as a given - everything takes work and compromise.

• Don't get frustrated by government process - realize these processes are likely in place to protect your team and the public.

• Don’t waste time trying to find “your own people” before understanding the talent already in place.

Why the Political Lens Matters

A successful transition isn’t just about briefing notes and logistics. It’s about understanding the psychology of power change. New leaders arrive with a vision and a political narrative they’ve promised to voters. They need help executing, yes - but they also need validation that their ideas can be implemented.

The public service cannot become political - but it does need to understand politics. Knowing the pressures, motivations, and challenges facing a new leader allows public servants to better support them in turning campaign promises into effective governance.

The bottom line? Be informed. Be understanding. Be respectful. Be helpful.

A successful government transition will then follow.

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