

Putting Public Services in the Public Eye: Making the Political Case for Citizen-Centred Government

This paper was produced by the Crossing Boundaries National Council Secretariat.

It is based upon discussions held among the members of the Service Champions Network, whose members are:

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Introduction

Imagine a world where, if you lost your wallet, you could get your SIN card, your drivers' license and your health card back from a single office near you. Imagine a world where starting a business would be as simple as going to one website, filling in one or two forms, and hitting Print on the computer to get your permits.

It sounds like a nice world, doesn't it? It is one where dealing with government is less frustrating because it makes your needs as a citizen the focus of how it delivers services. It is a world of technology-enabled, 21st century government.

Inside federal, provincial and municipal governments, public servants who manage these services are working hard to fit them together in ways that work better for citizens. And real progress has been made. But in many areas improvements are coming in smaller and smaller increments. It is becoming clear that some next steps need to be made. Yet public servants cannot make them because they are political in the sense that taking them requires political leadership and decision making.

This paper is about the obstacles that must be overcome to take these steps. It is about making clear why they are a problem and why political leadership is needed to remove them. It is a call for public discussion on how to get and keep that leadership so that officials can get on with the job of improving services for all Canadians.

But the paper is also about a new and hopeful development on the service delivery front. We think that a new agreement between the governments of Canada and Ontario clears the way for some real progress on the issues. Moreover, Canada and Ontario will not be the only governments to sign such agreements. Other jurisdictions will soon follow. Some discussion of the broader implications of the Canada Ontario agreement for these jurisdictions, and government services delivery in general is warranted.

Finally, to ensure that these agreements deliver real results Canadians must be clear on what is at stake and why they are important. We must shine the light of public attention on them. Our group is committed to helping ensure that this happens.

Making Government Work for Citizen

For years, members of the business community have been asking why getting a business license has to be so complicated. A recent study in the Halton Regional Municipality shows why they are frustrated. It maps out the steps that must be taken by someone who wants to start a restaurant. The process is not only bewilderingly complex, including a tangled maze of permits that must be acquired; but there is no clear path with a beginning and endpoint. Many of the rules themselves are even contradictory, so that in one case fish is supposed to be frozen at three different temperatures, thanks to the respective rules set by federal, provincial, and municipal governments.

And while this situation (as we shall see) is really no one's fault, clearly, some serious disentangling needs to happen if government is to support the budding restaurateur in Halton. Until now, the onus has been placed on her to find the contacts and services she needs to wind her way through the system. She is expected to wait in line, go from one office to another, and make the endless phone calls that will get her the licenses and permits she is after. In effect, she has been forced to do the work that government should have done for her—the work of *integrating* the process.

Over the last decade, governments from all levels have responded to stories like this one by seeking to put their citizens on-line, not in line. They have been working hard to co-ordinate across jurisdictional and departmental boundaries to create bundles of services that citizens need when they get married, have children, lose a wallet, or start a business. Web portals now bring together information on services that you might need if you are a businessperson, an Aboriginal person, a senior or an artist. A good deal of progress has been made.

Yet, as the Halton study makes clear, much work remains to be done. Even with new technology and all of the efforts of the last decade, the maze of government is still a maze because governments have yet to find a truly effective way to make integration happen. In May of last year, however, a new agreement was struck that we believe could be the beginning of a new phase and a sign of hope.

The Canada Ontario Service Agreement

In May of 2004 a Memorandum of Agreement was signed between the governments of Canada and Ontario. According to the Agreement, “Canada and Ontario recognize public policy has to be developed to respond to the needs of citizens, and public services delivered in ways that work for them.”

It commits the two governments to work together to improve the quality and co-ordination of services between them, enhancing the availability of information to citizens, co-locating offices where appropriate, and aligning program goals to create innovation in the way services get delivered to Ontarians.

The agreement is fleshed out by a number of guiding principles. They emphasize the importance of accountability, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, the involvement of municipal governments, and the importance of respecting privacy and security in implementing new technology to better serve citizens.

Most importantly, the agreement commits very senior political and public service leadership from each government. It names the heads of both public services, along with the Senior Federal Minister for Ontario and the Parliamentary Assistant to the Premier of Ontario to overseeing the implementation of the MOA.

We think this type of agreement is important and new for a single, but critical reason: ***It creates a mandate for collaboration that will enable elected officials and public servants from both governments to work together across a number of departmental as well as jurisdictional boundaries.***

Furthermore, the agreement sets a pattern that we believe other jurisdictions will emulate. Should more provinces decide they want similar agreements with the federal government, the momentum could lead to major changes in how key services are coordinated and delivered—changes that would be all but unachievable otherwise.

Without such a mandate, officials usually lack the authority to make decisions that reach beyond their own departments and services. As a result, aligning a group of services from different departments or governments becomes a painfully slow process. Each change must be negotiated a step at a time. The real world consequence of this institutional fact is that disentangling the net of services for the restaurateur in Halton ends up being very difficult.

Moreover, it is the nature of negotiations that they involve teams who are usually set up in opposition to one another. This does little to encourage a spirit of collaboration. On the contrary, the pressure to “negotiate well” all too easily leads team members to become preoccupied with protecting their departmental or jurisdictional interests rather than concentrating on what needs to be done to improve the service for the citizen, especially when costs come up for discussion. Such negotiations often do as much to reinforce the jurisdictional and departmental boundaries—the “silos”—as to break them down.

Our hope is that, by providing a mandate to work collaboratively across jurisdictional boundaries, the agreement will create an environment and a culture in which there is less need for conventional negotiations and more room to work together in ways that encourage governments to view better service to the citizen as a win for everyone.

If it is to succeed, this kind of collaboration will need the right kind of decision-making and governance structures. They must allow officials from different jurisdictions to create effective working relationships that produce results. To help ensure that this happens, agreements such as the Canada Ontario Service Agreement must be kept in the public eye. It is in this regard that our group thinks it can help.

Who We Are

We are a group of senior public servants and elected officials from across Canada, and from all three levels of government. Some of us are managers who are directly responsible for improving the quality of service citizens get from government. Most of us are members of the Crossing Boundaries National Council, a group of politicians and senior public servants dedicated to helping governments prepare for the 21st century (see www.crossingboundaries.ca). Others are closely associated with the Council and supportive of its aims.

We have come together to fulfill a need. Canadian governments are world leaders in improving the delivery of public services. But we recognize that they can go further. Information and communication technology could allow them to collaborate in ways that would dramatically change how citizens relate to their governments, affecting everything from how they get a drivers’ license or file their taxes to how they exercise their democratic franchise. Yet there is no unified and influential voice in the public sphere willing to champion the opportunities and address the challenges created by the technology.

We want to be that voice.

Over the coming months, this groups aims to become a recognized national champion for improving public services in Canada. We will work to achieve this by publishing discussion papers such as this one, reaching out to national and local media, and providing a platform for other voices—particularly political voices— by sponsoring speeches and events that will put the issues before the public.

So as governments like Ontario and Canada try to move their agenda forward, what are they up against? What should they be concerned about?

From the Shallow to the Deep End of the Pool

We know from our day jobs that one of the biggest challenges governments face in improving services for citizens has to do with *integration*—that is, aligning related programs and services from different government departments and jurisdictions so that they serve the same goal or meet the needs of a particular group of citizens. But real integration can be an extraordinarily complex and sometimes politically sensitive task. Why?

Depending on the kind of integration project governments undertake, and depending on how much integration between different programs needs to happen, the kinds of challenges governments face in getting programs and services together will change. As such, integration lies along a kind of continuum.

At one end of the integration continuum—call it the shallow end—a number of like services are put together to be accessed from the same place. An example might be a project to allow citizens to get their passports, health cards and driver's license from the same office. In essence, there are still two or three services being delivered, but they are now being delivered under one roof. Not much needs to change about these programs other than organizing a shared countertop.

If governments were to try to reduce the number of permits and licenses to provide businesses with a single permit, however, this would require a deeper level of integration. Municipal, provincial and federal governments each have their own regulatory frameworks—different health and safety standards, building codes etc. Providing a single permit would mean harmonizing regulatory frameworks by choosing the most appropriate standard to protect citizens, while lowering the transaction costs and increasing convenience for businesses. Meanwhile, the needs of individual governments would have to be respected. For instance, permits and licenses are a major source of the revenue for municipalities. A critical success factor for this kind of integration will be to find a way to deal with this revenue issue.

If governments were to integrate, say, child care services with education services and health services, a much more deep level of integration would be required. While legislative and logistical concerns will still exist, there may be major differences between governments about who should be receiving these services and what they are supposed to achieve. These are policy and, ultimately, political differences, and coordinating them is probably the most significant challenge for those overseeing integration projects, especially between different jurisdictions. The recent healthcare negotiations between the provinces and federal government are proof of the difficulty in achieving this kind of consensus.

The overall lesson here should be that taking on the challenge of integrating services is not and will not be easy. Furthermore, integrating services shouldn't be done just for the sake of integration. Governments should have compelling and practical reasons to bring together services to make them more valuable to the citizens they serve. Sometimes citizens will only want a single service from government, not a whole array of them.

Making the right choices and overcoming the challenges will require strong leadership from governments, and especially elected officials. In our view, the Canada Ontario Service Agreement could provide a platform for that leadership. It brings together the most senior public servant in each jurisdiction with senior political leadership from each jurisdiction, making it extraordinarily well positioned to drive change. But what sort of leadership will be needed to make the MOA succeed? And why show it in the first place?

Making the Most of the MOA

The kind of leadership demanded by an agreement like the Canada Ontario Service Agreement will stem from commitment in both jurisdictions to work towards success and manage failure, should it come. It will require collaboration and innovation from the public service, and rock steady support from elected officials.

As we have pointed out, it is a reality of government that public servants must work within the boundaries set by their political masters. If we want to cross those boundaries in new ways, political leadership will be needed. It is the elected officials who can create the situation that frees public servants from the negotiating table and helps them set to work on achieving common goals. For these reasons, it is the political element of the Canada Ontario MOA that impresses us most. The challenge will be to ensure that it gets the leadership it needs to deliver real results.

We believe there are good reasons for sticking with the MOA. First, over the long term, much needed tax money might be saved if the Agreement or others like it lead to the elimination of service duplication and overlaps between the jurisdictions. Second, higher quality, more effective services can provide the reach governments need to achieve their goals and make the lives of citizens—whether they interact with government only once a year or on a daily basis—far easier. Third, governments will continue to have to do more with less, and using agreements like the MOA in concert with information technology could create significant gains in productivity for governments.

Of course, leaders will encounter difficulties, and their mettle will be tested. Turf wars, cultural differences and legislative problems will likely come into play as governments try to work together. Privacy, especially, is an issue that will require attention from politicians as more information is shared between governments to deliver services in integrated ways.

Further, questions about how credit or blame for the success or failure of a service will be handed out must be answered. For example—whose logo goes on a potential Canada-Ontario service website? Whose office will take responsibility for the angry phone calls from citizens should the service be below par? How and by whom will the service be funded?

Despite these challenges, we reassert that the MOA holds great potential as a next step forward in improving government services. Perhaps most promising is the idea that it could become a catalyst for other Canadian governments to come forward with similar agreements. And while we are supportive of such initiatives, we want to mention a few critical factors that leaders in all governments should consider:

1. ***As agreements are developed between individual provinces and the federal government, efforts should be made to harmonize their guiding principles and develop an overarching vision for service delivery for the country.***

It would be a tremendous irony if the agreements designed to break down barriers actually erected new ones. In future, the most effective way to improve services may not always be bilateral arrangements between a provincial government and the federal government. Down the road, other agreements might be appropriate, perhaps involving more than one provincial government, municipalities or Aboriginal governments in tandem (or not) with the federal government. Work done now should be sure to allow for or even encourage other kinds of service **agreements in future.**

2. ***Can Governments identify a set of priorities for service improvement across Canada?***

While our group recognizes that each jurisdiction will have its own specific needs as far as service improvement is concerned, some overarching priorities will encourage the development of a coherent, coordinated service delivery infrastructure for Canadians. What would it take for these priorities to be developed and set? Is this a question for First Ministers? Or are there alternative approaches?

3. ***Let's not reinvent the wheel.*** Some governments will be ahead of others in establishing and implementing agreements like the Canada Ontario Service MOA. Sharing learning and experiences about how to establish and sustain these inter-jurisdictional agreements can help everyone succeed.

4. ***Municipal and Aboriginal governments must be part of the picture.***

Agreements like the Canada Ontario Service Agreement should endeavour to articulate the role that municipal and Aboriginal governments can play in delivering services. In many towns and reserves, the first place citizens go to find the services they want is not their provincial or federal government, but their city hall or tribal council office. To be citizen-centred, we must be sure to acknowledge and incorporate the strength they bring to improving services.

5. ***Identify the business case for integration.***

Getting clear on how integration projects can and do save money for taxpayers will be a crucial to making improvements happen. Establishing the business case for improving service delivery should thus be a goal for governments taking on this challenge.

We know that answers to our questions and responses to our challenges are coming. Governments across Canada recognize the momentum being built behind making government services truly citizen-centred. A culture of collaboration is on its way, and we are confident these (and our) governments can and will succeed.



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