

## *Executive Summary*

Governments today are confronted with a complex array of interconnected problems, increased citizen expectations, and fiscal constraints. Technological, geopolitical, economic, social, and environmental changes mean that the operating context for the public sector is one of increasing flux rather than stability. Governments cannot assume that existing policies and programmes remain the most suitable options for today, let alone that they will suffice for tomorrow. Governments therefore require a systemic approach to public sector innovation to develop and deliver novel solutions that meet the existing and emergent needs of citizens.

What does a systemic approach to public sector innovation at the level of national government look like? This report looks at the experience and context of the Public Service of Canada, where significant emphasis has been placed on innovation. The Canadian civil service has been on an ongoing journey of discovery and learning about public sector innovation, and this report outlines some of the notable points from the past 30 years. It reveals that, despite ongoing effort, more is needed if the Canadian Public Service is to achieve its own stated ambitions. The report provides some suggestions as to how this gap might be overcome, as well as proposing a new public sector innovation system model to assist other countries. There are no easy answers, however, and there is a need for ongoing stewardship of the innovation system.

The most appropriate actions will depend on the level of ambition and intent for the innovation system. Accordingly, three different scenarios (continuing as is; additional effort and investment; a radical shift to truly emphasise and embed innovation at the heart of the state) are explored to consider different possibilities. These scenarios highlight the different trade-offs that may be encountered as the system develops over time.

### **Key Findings**

- The Government of Canada starts with a strong base, having a long demonstrated history of innovation. The civil service also has a longstanding awareness and appreciation of the need for innovation.
- However, there has been an ongoing recognition that the Public Service of Canada needs to continue to adapt and be responsive. Respective Clerks (the Heads of the Public Service) have repeatedly identified the need to go further.
- Much of the ‘low-hanging’ fruit (i.e. activities to support public sector innovation such as awards, efforts to remove hurdles, introduction of new tools) has already been picked, but this is unlikely to lead to long term sustainability.
- The innovation system is still relatively fragmented, in that most actors are experiencing the same system in different ways. New approaches are needed.

- This need for new approaches is linked to the significant change occurring in the public sector operating environment. When everything else is changing, existing measures and interventions cannot be relied on to be the most appropriate.
- In such a context, innovation needs to shift from something that is often a sporadic and *ad hoc* activity to something that can be drawn on consistently and reliably.
- The current lived experience of innovation within the Public Service of Canada reveals a range of insights about the nature and dynamics of public sector innovation systems. This includes the need to pay attention to four particular areas:
  - Clarity – is there a clear signal being sent to system actors about innovation and how it fits with other priorities?
  - Parity – does innovation have equal standing with other considerations when it comes to proposed courses of action?
  - Suitability – are the capabilities, systems and infrastructure appropriate and sufficient for the available options?
  - Normality – is innovation seen as integral, rather than as an occasionally accepted deviation from the norm?
- Where the system elements are not sufficiently developed, then innovation activity will be relegated to the organisational or individual level. When this occurs, it will leave innovation practice vulnerable to chance or circumstance, and is thus unlikely to be a sustainable or reliable activity.

### Key Messages

- Public sector innovation is fundamentally difficult and much is still being learnt about how to support and embed it as a practice within governments.
- The Canadian Public Service has made some significant steps, including the introduction of a structural driver for innovation in the form of the Experimentation Directive, towards a more systemic approach to public sector innovation. However, it is likely that without continuous efforts and direction the innovation system will not be able to consistently and reliably contribute to the delivery of the best outcomes for citizens.
- An innovation system is made up of many parts and contributed to by many actors. While the Impact and Innovation Unit within the Privy Council Office plays a central role, the effectiveness of the innovation system – i.e. its ability to consistently and reliably develop and deliver innovative solutions that contribute to achieving the goals and priorities of the government – will depend on collective effort, involving action from different actors at the individual, organisational, and system levels.

While a range of options are put forward, the aim of this review, and the guidance included within it, is to help provide a reflection of the system so that all actors can see themselves within it. This can provide a contribution to the ongoing discussion and deliberation about what the collective aim for innovation is within the Public Service of Canada, and how everyone can play a part, and be supported in that. This will help the Government of Canada to achieve the best outcomes that it can for Canadian citizens.



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