

“Understanding Government Priorities”

Notes for Remarks by James R. Mitchell

to the

2008 Health Canada Science Management Development
Program Retreat

Mont Tremblant, Québec

June 3, 2008

Introduction

Good afternoon.

Thank you for inviting me to take part what I understand is the 12th year of this innovative and highly successful management development program.

I'm delighted to be here. While I only know a few of you personally, I realized on reading the history of the program that I have known very well many of the people who have been involved as members of your board and sponsors of the participants.

You're taking part in a program whose relevance is obvious, and whose success is now widely recognized. It's just the sort of program the Clerk is thinking of when he talks about Public Service Renewal.

Ellen has asked me to talk today about "understanding government priorities". This is a big topic, and it's not made any easier by the fact that when we look at government today, it's easy to be distracted by the politics of a minority Parliament.

If you only read the headlines in the papers, it's easy to overlook the fact that the current Government has a broad and substantial agenda, and that 250,000 people like you are busy advancing it every day.

So the question I asked myself in thinking about my remarks today was "how can I make this hour most useful to you?" I decided to try to answer four questions:

1. What are the Government priorities that are most relevant to you as science professionals and future senior managers in Health Canada?
2. Why do Government priorities matter to you?
3. How can you translate those priorities into your work?
4. And, how can you influence government priorities from where you sit here in Health Canada?

After I finished talking, there'll be plenty of time for questions and answers.

Government Priorities

Government priorities. You've all been around long enough to understand where to look for them:

- in the Speech from the Throne
- in the Budget
- in speeches by the Prime Minister, and major policy statements such as the S&T Strategy
- in statements by the Minister of Finance

These devices are an essential feature of our Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. They're essential because they give Parliament and Canadians as a whole a regular opportunity to understand what matters to the Government and what it intends to do about it.

A Government with no agenda cannot survive as a government. It's the agenda, ultimately set by the Prime Minister, that gives Parliament something to support or oppose. In a minority situation like we have today, the agenda is all the more important, and the Government knows this.

Let's look at the agenda that was set out in the last Throne Speech – what were the major themes?

- *Sovereignty in the Arctic*, including the development of an integrated Northern strategy (one that is heavily science-based);
- *Reinvesting in federal responsibilities* (remember that those responsibilities include research and a national role in health and health protection);
- *Effective economic leadership*, including:
 - targeted investments in science and technology
 - investments in health research
 - investments in knowledge, including research in support of industry innovation
- *Improving environment and health*, including health threats from the environment and ensuring the safety of basic products such as food
- *Leadership at home and abroad*:
 - *supporting the vulnerable*, including mental health and children with serious medical conditions
 - *protecting health and safety*, including support for Canada's food and consumer safety action plan providing federal letter information on the links between environmental contaminants and illness
 - *strengthening partnerships with Aboriginals* (presumably in areas that include health care and healthy communities), and,
 - *ensuring a cleaner and healthier environment*.

Now, I haven't listed all of the priorities set out in the last Throne Speech – some of them, such as defense and public safety, or international assistance, or the border are at best peripherally related to your concerns.

But it is striking, is it not, that as much as half of the Throne Speech deals with issues and specific objectives that are of direct relevance to your department.

A quick survey – how many of you knew that? How many of you realize that your work is at the center of this government's agenda, whether you're in HECS or HPFB or FNIHB or Policy?

And not to overlook the PMRA, where their work contributes not only a healthy environment and public safety, but also to the competitiveness of Canadian agriculture.

So the first thing we know is that Health Canada is at the centre of the Government's agenda, and that many of the specific priorities set by the Government are of direct relevance to you and your work.

Why do Government priorities matter to you?

Most importantly, they matter because we live in a democracy. The priorities of the Government *are* the priorities of the bureaucracy. This is not just *their* agenda, but *your* agenda too.

And as I said, it's an agenda where you can see yourselves -- where your work can come to fruition. Where your professional objectives can be fulfilled.

These priorities matter because they are the immediate drivers through which you can obtain the resources you need to fund your program, or to support your regulatory agenda or your program of research.

Ask your colleagues in Policy Branch, and they'll tell you. If you want to get new money, show a link between what you *need* to do and what the Government has declared it *wants* to do.

Show that your program, or your ideas for an amended or expanded version of your program, helps the Government fulfill the objectives it has set for Parliament and for Canadians. Do that, and you'll be much more likely to get the money and the people you need to succeed.

This is something that many people working on regulatory science, or research or science related programs, often fail to appreciate, because they are so conscious of the inherent value of what they're doing.

The truth is, if you want Ministers to understand the merits of your program, you have to show how it supports the agenda they have declared.

Moreover, you have to show how what you want to do will actually produce *results* – results that they can show to Canadians.

It's not enough to say that your interest is coincident with theirs. Rather, you have to show that by allocating scarce resources to your initiative, they can achieve the public policy goals they have set.

I appreciate that this is never an easy task. And the temptation is often to seek ministerial support simply for the continuation or expansion of the excellent work you have already been doing. That won't work. What *will* work is a focused effort to link measurable results to declared government priorities.

Translating Government Priorities into your Work

Leaving aside the question of getting new resources, every manager has a responsibility to translate Government priorities into their regular work. That's why it's important actually to read the Throne Speech, and the Prime Minister's speech in reply the next day, and of course the Budget,

This is part of your duty as a science professional and as a manager. As I said, it's what we call democracy – the elected government sets the direction for the bureaucracy, and they follow.

This can sometimes be difficult, especially if it means changing direction, even only modestly. As we know, there is a natural tendency in both individuals and institutions to want to keep going in the same direction. You might call this the social equivalent of the physical concept of inertia.

Your job as a manager and a leader in the Public Service is to understand when it's time to change course, and then to lead your staff along the new path.

How can you influence government priorities?

Even our colleagues in Policy Branch may not appreciate how important, and how potentially influential, is the role of mid-level managers like yourselves in affecting the policy agenda of the Government.

Think again about the list of Health Canada-related priorities set out in the last Throne Speech.

You don't think the people in PMO thought all those up by themselves, do you? They didn't. At best there were perhaps a dozen items or issues where it was clear to them what the government should be trying to achieve.

But politicians and political staff know, as does PCO, that a great deal of the Throne Speech must deal with lower profile but no less important priorities brought forward by professionals like yourselves.

Issues such as food safety, the connection between environmental contaminants and illness, science in the North, environmental influences on the health of northern peoples, mental health – the list goes on.

Those items are there because Health Canada brought those issues to the attention of your Minister and the Clerk and ultimately the Prime Minister.

That's why the jobs of DGs are so important – they own the program responsibilities, and the policy issues, and the regulatory problems, that eventually emerge as matters of priority concern for the government.

It's their advice, carried forward by ADMs, that ultimately shapes major policy documents like the Throne Speech and the Budget.

But as you know, the DGs don't think of those matters themselves. They rely on you – the science professionals and mid-level managers who deal with directly with those issues.

If you're not on top of your files, thinking ahead not just about how to continue doing what you're doing already, but about what needs to be done in future for the benefit of Canadians, then no one is.

Your Program

That's why this management development program is so important. Because it's intended to grow people in Health Canada who have a solid foundation in science, a broader experience of the department, and the skills to manage both people and issues.

I wouldn't be surprised if the people who started your program 12 years ago are now pointing to the substantial health-related content of the Throne Speech as evidence of the kind of strength in this department that they were trying to develop.

With great respect to Karen and her staff, it's not simply because of the good work of Policy Branch that those priorities are present in the Throne Speech. It's also because of good work in HECS and HPFB and FNIHB and PMRA.

It's because people in this department understand science and because they have the capacity to bring science to bear on the fulfillment of this department's mission “to help the people of Canada maintain and improve their health”.

That mission has found no better expression than in the priorities of the Government of Canada today. Your job is to take those priorities and translate them into effective programs that will bring results for Canadians.

Thank you.