

From Ideas to Policy

Notes for Remarks by James R. Mitchell
to the
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Introduction

Thank you, P-G, for that kind introduction. I'm honoured to speak at an event so closely associated with one of the great political leaders in our history, someone who was certainly a man of ideas, Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

I'm also delighted to be here because I have the most profound respect for the President of the Trudeau Foundation. P-G Forest is among the most creative and productive thinkers I have ever met. The term 'national asset' is not too strong when applied to him.

My personal connection to Mr. Trudeau is slight, but of great significance to me.

I worked in his Privy Council Office in 1983-4, and though I met him only once, I had, as we all did, a strong sense of working for a Prime Minister who took seriously the ideas and the advice of his officials.

He expected us to be thinking, and thinking clearly, all the time. He was also a man who remembered what we told him!

In those days, before the word processor and the internet and bullet points and text-messaging and twitter, we wrote long memos (something very rare today).

I still recall reading a memorandum on a complicated machinery issue that had come back to us from Mr. Trudeau. There at the top of page six or seven, in his distinctive flowing hand, was the comment "This isn't what you told me on this subject in 1976!"

What a memory! What a mind! Mr. Trudeau was demanding but he was also respectful and appreciative of officials. Perhaps this was because he himself had been, as some of you may know, an officer in the PCO in the early 1950's. It seems incredible, but I have a friend who worked with him there at the same time.

My second connection to Mr. Trudeau is again modest in the eyes of history but also, to me, very meaningful. I was a member of the original team that launched the Trudeau Peace Initiative in 1983. I'll say more about that later.

I'm also happy to observe that I know many of the mentors here this evening, and others who have been privileged to serve as mentors in the past. The idea of pairing experienced thinkers from the public sector with younger academics is a wonderful concept, and I urge the Trudeau scholars to take full advantage of your access to these outstanding Canadians.

My Topic

I want to talk tonight about ideas and how they influence public policy. Specifically, I want to talk about ideas in government – where they come from, how they are advanced and developed, why they sometimes succeed and why they fail. I want to talk about the environment in which idea work is done, and how it is profoundly different today than when I started my career in government.

I chose this topic because, like all of you, I'm in the idea business.

- In university, I studied and taught philosophy – epistemology and metaphysics.
- I'm glad I did because, as it turned out, I ended up spending most of my career working on what you might call the metaphysics of government – the theory and practice of the Westminster system (what we call 'machinery of government').
- And for the past 15 years I have made a living outside the Public Service working with ideas for government – producing them, critiquing them, assembling them and sharing them.

Like you:

- I believe in the power of ideas.
- I believe in evidence as the foundation for *good* ideas.
- I believe in the importance of public policy.
- And I believe government has a positive role to play in our society.

I believe you can get closer to the truth through the exchange of ideas, and by looking at the evidence.

And I believe in federalism – which means, among other things, that I don't believe the federal government has a monopoly either on good ideas or on the public interest.

Bear in mind that my perspective is that of someone who has spent almost his entire career working in, or on behalf of, the federal government. So mine is a very different take on ideas and policy than that of an academic, or someone who works in a think-tank, or an ordinary citizen.

My perspective is coloured by many things:

- By knowledge of how government works (and how it's changing);
- By an appreciation of how hard it is to do things differently in government, even if you badly want to change;
- And by an identification – not at all unconscious – with the interests and perspective of the government of the day, regardless of its political stripe.

Some history

I'm fortunate to have been present (or at least close by) when some very big ideas were being advanced in the government of Canada. I want to say a little about four of them.

1. *Free Trade*

- This was an old idea, advanced with vigour, imagination and determination by Derek Burney and Michael Hart in the early 1980s in what was then called the Department of External Affairs. Today, after distinguished careers in government, both of these gentlemen are at the Centre for Trade Policy and Law in Ottawa, but then they were just people down the hall.
- Derek was a man who used his enormous energy and intelligence, and the force of his personality, to push for things he believed in – things he thought were good for Canada.
- He pushed his ideas under the then-Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau and later under the Tory government of Brian Mulroney.
- Michael Hart was a colleague in the Economic Policy Bureau who used to wander by our policy planning shop on the seventh floor of the Pearson Building to present his own ideas on trade liberalization, and to urge us to push those ideas up to the Undersecretary and the Minister and the PCO.
- Like Derek, he was determined. (If you've ever met him, you'll know he was *very* determined.) But he had done the analysis; he understood the global trading environment and Canada's place in it. And he passionately believed that Canada's interest was best served by securing our access to the world's largest market and opening our doors to American competition. History has shown that he was right.
- Michael and Derek were advancing their ideas well before Donald MacDonald's 1984 Royal Commission report. And in the end, they succeeded.
- Of course, they couldn't have succeeded as officials unless the Prime Minister – and a whole lot of other people in the Department of Finance and the PCO and the governing party – had been convinced of what they were saying. But they *were* convinced. Even Mr. Mulroney, who had campaigned in 1984 against free trade, saw the wisdom of what was being proposed.
- So good ideas, brought forth in the right environment, championed by officials with determination and courage, and backed by a Prime Minister with vision and political courage, won the day.
- The moral of the story? This is the way it's supposed to work in government.

2. Trudeau's 1983 Peace Initiative

- I wonder how many of you remember this one? History has not been very kind to Mr. Trudeau's Peace Initiative. Even John English, a historian of profound balance and sensitivity, described it as "marginal".
- I'm biased, of course, because I was part of the original team (I think there were seven of us) tasked by the PCO to come up with a comprehensive initiative to change the tenor of the dialogue between the West and the Soviet Bloc.
- Working under great pressure, we produced a whole lot of ideas (26, as I recall). We put a smaller number up to the Prime Minister for consideration. He adopted five and then spent a good deal of time during his final months in office travelling the world to promote them. That was the Peace Initiative.
- What Mr. Trudeau wanted from his officials was some good ideas to get the world off the track it was on, and that's what we gave him. Public reaction at the time ranged from sceptical to highly critical, even dismissive. But he took the whole thing seriously and so did we.
- And do you know what? The Peace Initiative didn't 'succeed', but the environment did change – not necessarily *because* of what Mr. Trudeau was trying to do, but certainly coincident with it. President Reagan's apocalyptic rhetoric toned down, and by 1985 Gorbachev was in power
- The least we can say nearly thirty years later is that Mr. Trudeau's well-publicized, if somewhat vainglorious, Peace Initiative did draw public attention to precisely the problems he was concerned about. In one sense it was a failure, but it did what was intended.
- Ask yourself – which is better: to do nothing, or to *try* to do something even if people don't think you can succeed? Mr. Trudeau tried, and he did it with ideas.

3. Tackling the deficit (1985-95)

- This was a related issue. I remember arriving at the PCO in the mid-80s, and having the senior economist explain to me the vicious circle in which Canada was then locked – structural deficits, mounting debt, ever-increasing interest payments, and ever-less money for the programs Canadians expect from the federal government.
- I also recall my colleague showing me what a *virtuous* circle would look like – a cycle in which the government took steps to eliminate the structural deficit, increase revenue and start paying off the debt. The result? Prosperity, lower taxes and more money for programming. And that's exactly what happened between 1995 and 2005.
- As we look back, we can see that Michael Wilson and Brian Mulroney prepared the ground for the subsequent successes of Paul Martin and Jean Chretien. They made a big issue out of the debt and the deficit; they got Canadians to appreciate the dangerous path on which the country had been for over a decade

(what turned out to be two decades). And the next Government had the wisdom and the courage to act, and of course – the timing was right. We were entering the longest period of sustained prosperity in Canada's history.

4. Funding Research

- Perhaps the best recent example of 'ideas + evidence = good policy' was the major investment in federal funding of scientific research and related infrastructure that began in 1997. This initiative, which has now endured through three administrations, represented a synergy of efforts and imagination from the university world, the bureaucracy, political staff and Ministers.
- It shows what can be done when a real need is met with good policy and lots and lots of money.

What's common to all of these cases?

- You had a Public Service that knew it was in the idea business, and Ministers who expected ideas from their officials.
- You had ideas that were supported by evidence and analysis.
- You had Ministers who were prepared to be convinced, and then to act, even when that meant doing something other than what they had previously committed themselves to.

In my view, that's what the theory of Westminster government is all about.

But Westminster government has been under some stress in recent years – not just here, but in the UK under Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown; and in Australia under the administrations of John Howard and now Kevin Rudd.

The problem is that Westminster government is not working the way it should – and part of the reason, in the eyes of many experts, has to do with ideas. Ministers are not looking to their officials for ideas in the way they could and should (witness the Alistair Campbell phenomenon), and officials are not generating ideas that Ministers can use.

It's a double-barrelled problem. And let me be clear – it's not just the fault of Ministers. The bureaucracy today is too often not generating the kinds of ideas that Ministers can take on board.

Too often, officials are recycling ideas from the previous administration, or ideas with which they are personally invested, or ideas that reflect a particular ideology or perspective that is not consonant with the position of the government.

Don't forget – the idea business in government is not like the idea business in universities. Officials are there to think, but they are also there to serve – to think independently but to act with professional loyalty in advancing the declared objectives of the government of the day.

Of course, sometimes this duty of professional loyalty can mean helping the government to define or redefine its objectives, or, as in the case of free trade, to change course entirely. But officials have a democratic duty of professional loyalty to the agenda of the government – not to their own ideas.

What do we know by now?

It's 2010. What do we know today about ideas and public policy? What is still true, and what has changed in the world and in government since the four cases I described?

Here are ten propositions to think about. One could give a whole speech on any one of them.

1) We know that ideas still matter.

- Indeed, in my view politics today is still more a matter of ideas than personalities. Every party is struggling to define the issues and ideas that will win public support. What's interesting is that so far, I don't think any have succeeded (we can debate this later).

2) But, as in the past, ideas are not the only thing.

- Other forces and factors can carry equal weight. In America, the Bush administration played skilfully on American fears of threats from abroad after 9/11, with the result that it enjoyed two full terms in office notwithstanding the war in Iraq and its disastrous handling of the economy.
- So 'gut feel' – an emotional identification with a party or leader or a place on the political spectrum, or an antipathy to people or policies – often matters as much to public policy as ideas do.
- We see that in the health care debate in the United States. And we've seen it in Canadian politics as well – where the Bloc has played on the fears and resentments of Quebeckers, and the Reform Party on the feelings of Western Canadians.

3) The Public Service has no monopoly on ideas.

- Perhaps the most significant factor in public policymaking today is the increasing importance of ideas from outside government. This is not an entirely new development, but it's much more important today than 20 or 30 years ago.
- Perhaps because of our small size, Canada has tended more than other countries to rely on the Public Service as a source of high quality ideas and expert advice to government. Indeed, this has always been one of the great attractions of a public service career in Canada – the opportunity to do work on big policy issues affecting the entire country.
- But in the United States, as you know, the situation is quite the reverse – America's vast wealth and its long history of political engagement by individuals and corporations has produced well-funded universities, dozens of high quality

think tanks, and a vast range of other bodies supported by private funds that contribute significantly to the public policy debate. If you want to influence government, go to Brookings or the Hoover Institute, and then join the Administration.

- We have only begun to see this pattern in Canada, and it will never match, even proportionately, what they have in the United States. But look today at who is writing in the op-ed pages; look at the new institutes and think tanks in Alberta, British Columbia, Québec and Atlantic Canada. More importantly, look at how political parties – across the spectrum – look to external sources for ideas. (What's interesting is that universities and university scholars are much less influential here than in the U.S. We should talk about that.)

4) *The internet has changed everything for government (but we are only beginning to appreciate how).*

- I was reflecting recently on President Obama's significant fall in popularity, notwithstanding his success in dealing with the financial crisis, his balanced approach to engagement in Afghanistan, and his extraordinary skills as a communicator.
- Leaving aside Fox News and the tea-baggers, President Obama has suffered because he is really the first prominent figure to be subject to the full-blown high-intensity spotlight of ubiquitous broadband, the 24-hour news cycle, instant information, social networking and a generalized capacity in our wireless information society to look for instant judgments on everything at the drop of a hat.
- In effect, by trying to serve as a President for all the people, Obama has set the bar for success so high that he cannot possibly achieve it. The new media universe that got him elected is what makes him so vulnerable 12 months later.
- What's the solution? We're seeing it now in the Bank strategy. Go on the attack. Don't build; instead, define something you're against and attack that. That's the way to build support, and remember – it worked for his predecessor.
- Is this good government? I don't know, but it appears to be good politics.

5) *Yelling louder works.*

- Another feature of our new wireless world is that we are losing our faith in dialogue. It's all broadcasting now. And increasingly, it's just yelling. Dialogue is about exchanging ideas, ideally in a common search for truth. Today, instead of sharing our ideas, we are too often just shouting at one another.
- The lesson of Fox News, and the corresponding approach to politics exemplified by the Bush administration, is that shouting works. It works because it circumvents ideas; it works because it pushes the opponent off the stage rather than admitting that he or she has a right to be there. And whoever gets the word out first and loudest usually wins.

6) *It's all entertainment.*

- I don't see anyone at CBC, or in the political parties, apologizing for it. What I see instead in Canada's print and broadcast media is the theatrics of fierce competition to attract what some people call viewers and others voters – but the process is the same – no presentation of facts or sober analysis of ideas; just a pitch for winners and a corresponding search for losers.
- Canadians deserve better. And so do their governments.

7) *We're all curmudgeons now.*

- Well, not all. You're not, and I hope I'm not. But too many of our fellow citizens are.
- I define a curmudgeon as someone who knows where he or she stands, regardless of the facts. I'd like to think that all the people in this audience are prepared to change their minds in light of new evidence, or a compelling argument. I would like to think that what we have in common as citizens is more important than what divides us. I would hope that whatever allegiances we have today are not so cast in concrete that we cannot endorse other views or new leaders in future – because I would hope that what we value is more important than who is trying to convince us.
- Sadly, that is less and less true in Canada today.

8) *Communities matter more than ever, but they have changed profoundly*

- With relatively few exceptions (such as Quebec and Newfoundland), people today identify much less with place and much more with ideas and culture.
- Ideas and culture spread via the Internet – it's as simple as that. So it is on the Internet that communities are born and grow; that's what happens in FaceBook and MySpace and even Wikipedia.
- Politics today is really about two things – using the new information and communications technologies to create communities around ideas and using technology to tap into people's emotions. Both techniques work.

9) *Even very good ideas may have a rough ride, and may take a long time to be accepted.*

- I suppose this is obvious; it's certainly true inside government. Take the merger between External Affairs and ITC – it's been nearly thirty years and people have still not really accepted it.

10) *Leadership on ideas is a critical challenge for all political leaders, and it takes courage and determination.*

- Look at Prime Minister Mulroney standing up to Mrs. Thatcher on South Africa.
- Look at Prime Minister Chretien deciding not to join the invasion of Iraq.
- Look at Mr. Chretien and the *Clarity Act*.

- Look at Prime Minister Harper on the Residential Schools apology and the recognition of Quebecers as a nation.

These are all cases (and I can give you a dozen more) where good idea work by officials and political staff was made meaningful by the willingness of political leaders to act on those ideas. In every case, action took courage. And in every case it was right.

What does all this mean for idea work in government?

Let's start from the obvious – it's clear that we who work on ideas in (or near) government are not in the same business as you. We're not working on a green field called "the public interest". Our field of intellectual activity is constrained by our duty of service, and we need to remember that.

Second, we in government have to get much better at listening to ideas from outside our institutions and from outside our borders. And we have to get a whole lot better at listening to the public, because the public has more ideas and stronger views than ever, and they expect the government to respond to those views instantly.

Third, we have to realize that Ministers and their staffs are more tuned into the new world of the 24-hour news cycle and social networking and Web 2.0 than we are. The Obama campaign proved that, and our own political parties have learned a lot from American experience. If the bureaucracy doesn't catch up – and fast – how do we expect Ministers and their staffs to respect us, or take our insights and ideas seriously?

Fourth, we have to be able to walk and chew gum. Policy people in government must be able to deal with the urgent issues of the day and think about the issues of tomorrow. It's in thinking about emerging issues that the Public Service is least constrained by the agenda or the ideology of the Government of the day. We do have a duty to think broadly and independently about what's important and what to do about it.

Finally, we need to value idea people inside government – not just those with bright ideas but people who have thought deeply about things; who know more than a little, and who can turn their insight and knowledge into ideas relevant to the problems of the country and the perspectives of the Government of the day. It's these people, the Pierre Trudeau's of tomorrow, who are among the most precious assets of the Public Service.

Conclusion

The honour that has been given to you as Trudeau Scholars carries with it above all an obligation to recognize that ideas matter – not just scholarship, but *ideas* – ideas in the form of well-developed propositions, theses and concepts, clearly articulated in universities and in the public domain, that have public resonance and positive consequences for the public good.

Surely the knowledge that ideas can make a difference is one of the greatest legacies of our former Prime Minister.

Thank you.