

Making Innovation a Way of Life

Claire Morris

**Secretary to cabinet and Clerk of the executive Council
for the Province of New Brunswick in 1996**

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Claire Morris spoke to Association of Professional Executives (APEX) of the Public Service of Canada. She gave a broad overview of the *New Brunswick* experience during an eight-year period of innovation. She outlined a *"recipe" for policy innovation*.

Ms. Morris spoke about

- a new *structure and process of governing*;
- *Agenda for Change*;
- *public consultation mechanisms*
- *Performance Indicators*
- *Case Studies of Innovation*
 - *Literacy New Brunswick*
 - *Service New Brunswick*; and
 - *The Information Highway*: from Call Centres to an advanced telecommunications infrastructure

She mentioned that this push for innovation is not unique to that Canadian province. There was strong and steady political leadership throughout the period with equally strong public support and understanding of the need for change. The benefit of the longer-term planning horizon, the one bestowed by three strong mandates from the voters, cannot be overestimated.

Does successful change happens from the top down or the bottom up? It must happen from everywhere. Bringing about lasting change in the way an organization does business is no small venture. It must engage every facet of organizational life, every player and all stakeholders.

New Brunswick has a well-established innovative tradition in government policy. This tradition started in 1967 with the provincial equal opportunity program, gathering together education, health, social services, public housing and justice under the province's exclusive jurisdiction. Ever since then the emphasis on highly centralized planning has dominated government policies.

The process of reform was launched within weeks of assuming power with the support of every seat in the Provincial legislature.

Structure and Process of Governing

Early in its mandate, NB Government redesigned the structure and process of governing. Central to these changes was the designation of a Policy and Priorities Committee of Cabinet, chaired by the Premier. It assumed responsibility for policy and legislative development and setting the policy framework for the annual budget process. A Budget Committee, chaired by the Finance Minister was assigned the responsibility of bringing fiscal order to the house.

The effect of this restructuring of the decision making process was a strong message about the linkages between social and economic policy, and the equal status of fiscal and policy objectives.

"Agenda for Change"

This Agenda represented a platform document and a commitments to the people of New Brunswick. It became the Policy Framework for the public service, generating a coordinated set of initiatives that were systematically brought forward for Ministerial and Cabinet consideration.

A broad range of *public consultation mechanisms* was initiated in the form of commissions or task forces given broad mandates to review the health and education sectors, housing policy, land use planning and local governance. Each and every one was held to a fixed budget and an ambitious time table. Formal government response to each report and recommendations was prompt and included action plans for implementation.

In the current fiscal year, clearly stated *Performance Indicators* have been publicly tabled in the Estimates process as visible measurement tools of progress.

Major reforms of the health and education sectors, ambitious job creation initiatives, particularly those created in partnership with private sector partners, have led the way. Within the public service, new forms of organizational structures, refined administrative processes, and supportive human resource policies have provided the organizational framework for program redesign and innovation.

Case Studies of Innovation

Literacy New Brunswick

Investing in the Province's human resources has been and continues to be a key priority. The International Year for Literacy in 1990, provided the spark needed to jolt us out of the institutional model of literacy training. At that time, the core of the Government's Literacy program was tutoring, and adult basic education offered through store-front learning centers, night school and correspondence. In 1991, based on the Report of the Premier's Advisory Council on Literacy, community level delivery of literacy training was introduced. The new Community Academic Services Program (CASP), was created and Literacy New Brunswick Inc. formed

The model of the Community Academic Services Program (CASP) presents an innovative approach to literacy training by encouraging the participation of communities, the private sector, volunteer agencies and the government as partners. Each participating financially or materially in the creation and operation of all the CASPs. Literacy New Brunswick Inc., a non-profit organization that comes under the first and only Minister of State for Literacy in Canada, has responsibility for co-ordinating this shared-cost partnership and for organizing effective fund-raising campaigns in the corporate sector.

The CASP initiative has been much more successful than ever imagined. From an early goal of 100 CASPs over a four year period, 650 CASPs have been established. Some 350 private sector sponsors injected almost \$2.7 million into the program. Several National and international awards have recognized its accomplishments. Most importantly, the rate of literacy in the Province is already greater than the 80% target sat.

In cooperation with the Federal Government the CASP model has been extended into the work setting with the initiation of the Learning in the Work Place Program in 1994. Now, in 1996, forty seven programs in thirty one sites have provided learning opportunities in the work place.

Service New Brunswick

Government initiatives in New Brunswick have often borrowed freely from the private sector and other jurisdictions. The best known of these initiatives is Service New Brunswick, a one-stop shop providing a variety of government services in strategic locations in the Province. A 1991 inventory had identified 890 government service delivery points in 195 communities across the province, confirming the wisdom of such an initiative as a long-term solution to more effective service delivery.

In Service New Brunswick Centers, customers can apply for birth, marriage or death certificates; purchase hunting and fishing licenses; and register for educational courses. They can pay their bills : from telephone and other utilities to pay various taxes, driver license and other permit renewals; and register motor vehicles. Maps, pamphlets, application forms and other information are also available at SNB centers.

There are currently four Service New Brunswick centres which offer 90 government services from 16 departments under one roof. Additional Service New Brunswick centres are scheduled to be opened during the next two years.

The Information Highway

New Brunswick is quickly becoming a Center of Excellence for communication technologies, as well as the prime location for Call Center operations in North America.

Building on NB's strengths in telecommunications infrastructure, a bilingual and well prepared workforce, the province has attracted a number of well known companies to the Province including Xerox, Royal Bank, Canada Trust, UPS, Purolator just to name a few. The most recent announcements of 650 Air Canada Jobs in Saint John (a major port city) and a 300 job expansion to the existing Royal Bank call Center in Moncton (the capital of the province) speak to the momentum in this area. The additional spin-off benefit is that new fields of specialization are cropping up in geomatics, environmental engineering, infomatics, software development and multi-media technologies.

From that same base of a very advanced telecommunications infrastructure, and in strong partnership with the telephone company, the province has moved aggressively to ensure that schools are linked to the Internet and ready to take full advantage of the opportunities on the information highway. New Brunswick served as the pilot site for the development of community access centers, in partnership with Industry Canada, and will see this project expand to include over 200 community access centers in the province by the end of 1998. With schools as potentially prime sites for community access centers, citizens across the province will have access to these new technologies.

The "recipe" for policy innovation:

It is important to pause and to ask: what are the necessary ingredients for maintaining an innovative culture within a public service and, in fact, within the broader context of its community of interests.

- Clear and constant communication from the top that innovation and creativity are valued. Political leadership can quickly set the tone in this area.
- Decision making structures and processes that are nimble, responsive, and supportive of that same innovation.
- A corporate culture that fosters a broad view in all of its senior managers. This too requires constant reinforcement from the top and on-going development programs to foster that perspective.
- Clear identification of goals and recognition of strengths. A steady compass and a solid base are essential.
- A willingness and readiness to beg, borrow and steal good ideas from wherever they emerge.
- A recognition that private sector partners can offer a great deal in the development of creative solutions. It requires a setting aside of the traditional ways and a willingness to commit to the inherent complications of any partnership. The results are worth it.

Future Challenges

Innovation as a way of life in New Brunswick can be characterized by public acceptance and participation, partnerships between the public and private sectors, the innovative use of new technologies, the impact on costs and the assessment of results. To meet the challenges of the future, greater emphasis on accountability and on corporate projects will be placed, which will change the way governments do things.

In the New Brunswick experience, a number of key ingredients stand out. The articulation of a vision, supported by an action plan, and held accountable through measurable targets, are central to getting it right. The constant reinforcement of key priorities, the discipline to manage the agenda and the willingness to be measured against commitments are essential elements.

The new style of governance entails new partnerships between the political leadership and the public service, the private sector, and the broader community. These partnerships transcend political affiliation, and constitute meaningful alliances to move the public policy agenda forward.

Leadership is required in all sectors: leadership that can demonstrate the discipline and integrity demanded by the taxpayer, leadership that is prepared to walk the talk, and leadership that is prepared to admit and learn from mistakes.

This poses a challenge to public service managers. It demands striving constantly to excel. It demands innovation more than ever before. And it demands accountability.

New Brunswick has a small population: 761,000.

It is widely dispersed. The population is more rural than most other provinces in Canada, characterized by a number of small communities, many of which depend on single industries. NB's economy has traditionally been heavily resource based, although now rapidly diversifying into other sectors.

The province boasts a strong network of personal relationships and easy access to decision-makers in both the public and private sectors. Building partnerships in such an environment has had marked advantages.

New Brunswick, Canada's only officially bilingual province, has adopted a government policy that draws its inspiration from the exceptional relations maintained by its two linguistic communities.

NB has never experienced the luxury of "too much" but rather has a strong tradition of "making do" - often in creative and ingenious ways.

About the Author:

Claire Morris is the Secretary to cabinet and Clerk of the executive Council for the Province of New Brunswick