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Serving beyond the predictable

The Honourable Jocelyne Bourgon, PC, OC
Public Governance International

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Series foreword

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The Honourable Jocelyne Bourgon is a Distinguished Visiting Professor of Public Administration at the University of Waterloo and the Center for International Governance Innovation as well as President Emeritus of the Canada School of Public Service and Special Advisor to the Privy Council Office. She was appointed to the rank of Deputy Minister in 1989 and served in various departments: Transport, Canadian International Development Agency, Consumer and Corporate Affairs, and Canadian Center for Management Development.

In 1994, she was appointed Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet. She became the 17th Clerk and the first woman to hold this position. From 1994 to 1999, she led the Public Service of Canada through some of its most important reforms since the 1940s. In December 1998, she was summoned to the Queen's Privy Council for Canada in recognition of her contribution to her country. From 2003-2007, she served as Ambassador to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Introduction

Public administrations vary from country to country; they reflect different circumstances, different histories and different philosophies about the role of government in a society. Since the 1980s, however, governments in many countries have undertaken reforms that are strikingly similar.

In their efforts to adapt to modern-day realities, they have:
- focused on improving performance, efficiency and productivity
- implemented citizen-centred approaches to service delivery, and worked to increase user satisfaction
- focused on cross-cutting issues
- experimented with various forms of citizen engagement (Bourgon, 2007).

Many of the drivers of change are the same, be they in Mumbai, Rio, Sydney or Ottawa. They include globalisation, networked societies, population growth, and an increasingly fragile biosphere. These developments have pushed public administrations to rethink their role and functions.

The public sector reforms to date have been helpful, but they represent an incomplete journey. There is not yet a shared sense that public organisations are aligned, in theory or in practice, with the global context or with the complex problems they are expected to address. Reforms still need a unifying framework to achieve their potential.

Making the case for such a framework is not necessarily arguing in favour of a 'one size fits all' model of public administration. On the contrary, a unifying framework is a vehicle whereby our understanding of *what was* and *what is* reaches beyond anecdotes, and helps to forge *what might be*.

A unifying framework would help practitioners understand the diversity of choices open to government, and their ramifications within cultural contexts and circumstances. It would also help practitioners make better sense of the diversity of practices in public administration.

Another reason for pushing ahead on reforms is the unfinished business resulting from the changes and experiments of the past twenty-five years. The re-engineering of the systems, structures, practices and machinery of government that served governments and societies well in the past remains to be done. In particular, if governments accept a broader view of their role, one that embraces serving beyond the predictable, they must transform what was built before, and acquire new capacities to support the new structure. Future public sector reformers will need to work from:
- a broader definition of public results
- an expanded view of the role of government
- a dynamic understanding of the field of public administration.

In their work, reformers will need to take into account the solid foundations inherited from the past, the lessons learned over the last quarter century of reforms, the current realities of practice, and the new insights from knowledge domains not traditionally associated with public administration.

A broader definition of public results

The role of public organisations is to achieve public results. This means achieving *public policy* results and *civic* results of high public value (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
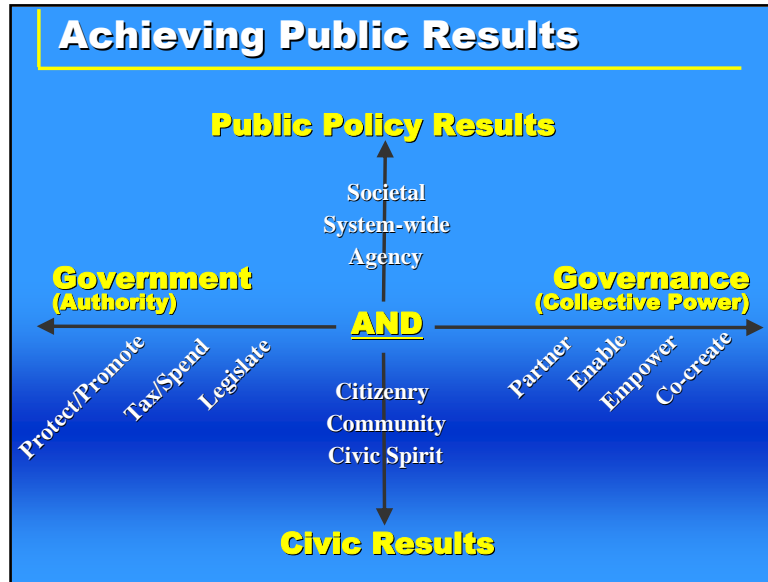
Public policy results

In government, no organisational unit, agency or department works alone; no activity, service or program is self-sufficient. In most policy areas, governments achieve results using a *mix of instruments*, such as laws, regulations, tax credits, contributions, and transfers (Salamon, 2002). As a result, their activities are an intermediate step toward achieving broader results. In addition, governments achieve results by working through *vast networks* of organisations—some inside government, many outside—towards common policy outcomes.

Individual program and agency results are important because they link inputs, such as taxpayers' money, to outputs and user satisfaction. However, achieving results of high public value takes place through collective efforts that cut across programs, governments, sectors and society more generally. As a result, the true measure of a public agency's success is its contribution to government-wide priorities, and system-wide and societal results (Bourgon, 2008).

To achieve results of high public value, public organisations must position their contribution in the context of broader results. Public administrators must also be responsible for exploring how to move results up the value-added chain.

Governments around the world are starting to pay greater attention to system-wide results. A few have focused on societal results. These approaches offer more promise than the proliferation of micro-performance measurements characteristic of the past twenty-five years.

Civic results

Public policy results build the *credibility of government*, while civic results increase its *legitimacy*. Together, credibility and legitimacy enhance citizens' trust in government, public institutions and public sector organisations. Therefore, the challenge for government is to achieve public policy and *civic* results. This challenge is not limited to democratic societies. It applies to countries with or without elections, and with or without multiple parties

(Mahbubani, 2009). People the world over are seeking to play an active role in the areas of greatest importance to them.

Civic results include, but are not limited to, active citizenry, strong and resilient communities, *and a civic spirit* that infuses every aspect of life in society.

Optimising public policy results and civic results is a difficult balancing act. It can only be worked out in practice, in the reality of a particular public service, by taking into account mission, context, culture and circumstances. In striking an appropriate balance, public administrators must *mediate* between the drive towards efficiency gains in achieving public policy results, and the need to engage citizens, even at the expense of efficiency in the short term. Doing so contributes to building the collective capacity that will achieve better public results over the long haul.

Many governments have made great strides towards achieving better public results. However, they generally work from an incomplete definition of public results, and with too high a degree of separation between public policy results and civic results.

An expanded role for government

Traditionally, government is seen as the primary agent in serving the collective interest and defining the public good. According to this view, government sets the agenda for change, proposes new laws, and enforces existing ones. Government is the provider of public services, the legislator and the mediator among conflicting interests to advance the collective good. At least three developments already make it clear that this view of the role of government is insufficient to meet the increasing number of challenges in the twenty-first century (Kettl, 2002):

- The role of government as the direct provider of service is steadily declining
- Governments are increasingly reaching out to others (private sector, non-governmental organisations, citizens) to achieve public results that require changes in individual and societal behaviour.
- Citizens and other actors are active agents of change, and creators of public value in an increasing number of public policy areas that exceed the legislative power of the state or the government's capacity to act.

Governments cannot act alone to address an increasing number of complex policy issues, ranging from global warming to global financial crises, from obesity to national security. These issues require the active participation of citizens, and the contribution of multiple stakeholders, without which government initiatives will falter.

Recognising they need to harness the collective power of society, many governments are complementing traditional ways of governing with new ones that enable and empower others (Osborne, 2006). As governments move towards producing results *with* others, they have expanded the options open to them in achieving public results (Lenihan, Milloy, Fox & Barber, 2007) (see Figure 1).

Government can act as:
- a *partner* using the power of the state to support and encourage the contributions of others
- a *responsible contributor* in a system of shared governance within a framework of shared accountability for results
- a *facilitator* that encourages creating and expanding collaborative networks that are able to harness collective intelligence and foster social innovations
- a *leader* acting proactively (even with imperfect knowledge) to improve the likelihood of more favourable outcomes.

In all these cases, government remains the steward of the collective interest with the responsibility to mediate between the public, the private and civil society spheres when the public interest demands it, and to intervene when necessary. The more dispersed the exercise of powers, the more important becomes this stewardship role, which entails the responsibility to monitor, to anticipate, and to course-correct when the collective interest demands it.

Public administration is not a structure or a set of rules; it is a dynamic and open system where the authority of the state is used in different ways to achieve different public results and to serve the collective interest. Public administration takes shape in an expansive space of possibilities where acquired knowledge and past practices are refashioned and transformed, and where new ways of working are grounded in the accumulated experience of the tested and the true.

Public organisations cannot meet the challenges of serving twenty-first century citizens with nineteenth century systems and practices. Embracing an expanded view of public administration as a domain of practice would transform the way public servants understand their role and the functioning of public administration systems.

The capacity to serve—a solid foundation

Compliance

Public administration and most public organisations have evolved from the nineteenth century, leaving a solid foundation that includes developments of enduring value that serve as the touchstones of good government:
- respect for the rule of law and public institutions
- an expectation that public servants , in serving the public trust, will exhibit integrity, probity and impartiality
- due process including fairness, transparency and accountability for the exercise of powers and the use of public funds.

Taken together, these factors contribute to building the institutional capacity of the state apparatus. Controls and audits, for example, ensure compliance with the law and with public sector values. Most public administrators recognise them as part of the 'classic administration' model that is best suited to repetitive tasks performed in a relatively stable environment. Classic administration used to capture the quasi-totality of government activities; today, it represents a declining portion of the role of government.

Performance

A well performing society, able to achieve a high standard of living and high quality of life, requires a well performing private sector, a well performing public sector, and a lot of strength in between—a sphere known as civil society.

As a result, it is important to retain the sharp focus governments have placed over the past twenty-five years on *performance*. This focus has given rise to some important changes that are worth preserving:
- a commitment to making government more productive, efficient and effective
- a special attention to improving service delivery and the need for continual improvement
- a focus on sound governance that incorporates the contribution of other sectors and actors
- the use of the power of modern information and communication technologies.

These measures contribute to building the organisational and inter-organisational capacity of the public sector. These capacities are necessary to work across boundaries with multiple actors inside and outside government to achieve government-wide and societal results.

As the concept of public administration has expanded from a commitment to *compliance* to embrace a focus on *performance*, the need to rethink existing public sector management systems and to build new systems has emerged. It is one thing to modernise concepts, but quite another to modernise practices. Some of the systems, structures and practices in government have not kept pace with the reform agenda of the past twenty-five years.

Transforming existing systems—disentangling control systems from performance management systems

Disentangling control systems aimed at ensuring compliance from *performance management systems*, is one area that helps to illustrate the need for adjusting existing systems. Arguably, this would help to improve public results.

Well performing public organisations require strong control systems and effective performance management systems.

An effective control function ensures the respect of public sector values and adherence to the rule of the law. It is necessary to prevent corruption, and it plays a key role in ensuring the accountability of government to the legislative assembly. A control function sets limits to the exercise of discretion by public administrators. Its role is to reduce the risk of mismanagement.

A performance management system is needed to improve decision making at all levels to achieve better public results (Browne & Wildavsky, 1984). It is necessary for the early detection of problems and to identify areas for improvement. It is part of the learning cycle of well performing organisations. It helps to identify and remove obstacles to achieving better results, and to shed light on the reasons for failures (Behn, 1988). A performance management system contributes to achieving better public results. Its role is to encourage innovation and ensure better management.

While both systems are essential, they are meant to serve different purposes and respond to different needs (Aucoin, 2001).

Over the last twenty-five years, some countries have expanded the state audit function from 'auditing for compliance' to 'value-for-money'. These countries have progressively integrated audit with other activities, including program evaluation, performance measurement, performance management, information management and some aspects of public policy research. In effect, they have entangled their compliance and performance regimes.

Some adverse effects stem from this integration of compliance and performance management. These are as follows:
- Performance management used as an instrument of control reduces the usefulness of performance measurement as a learning instrument. It increases fear and reduces responsible risk-taking, experimentation and innovation. It also frequently leads to "gaming' (Pollitt, 2000). That is, actors choose performance indicators that can be easily met, report in ways that accentuate positive performance, or take performance information out of its context, and provide interpretations of it to suit other purposes (Davies, 1999).
- Integrating control and performance measurement has led to a proliferation of performance indicators (Gregory, 2007) to meet the needs of parliamentarians, ministers, public service leaders, citizens and auditors, among others. No system can be all things to all people (Thomas, 2004). Today, most government services are subject to ex ante controls, process controls, output controls and various forms of

performance measurements. The end result can be a disproportionate cost of control and reporting requirements compared to the overall benefits (Barzelay & Armajani, 1997; Halachmi, 2005).

- Performance measurements collected at great cost are put to limited use. It is not clear that parliamentarians and policy makers use performance measurement information to shape new public policies, or that managers use the information to achieve better results.

In short, the current approach is becoming a barrier to learning and continual improvement to achieve better public results.

Committing to both compliance and performance provides the opportunity to rethink the current approach. The choice is to find ways to eliminate the adverse effects of an integrated regime or to disentangle the compliance and performance management functions while ensuring their synergy.

Building new systems—machinery of government

The roles, relationships and organisational structures of line departments and the centre of government must be reconfigured to achieve better, higher order results. This highlights the need for building new structures.

Focusing on system-wide results requires line departments to complement their conventional approach of working as vertical hierarchies. They must also serve as hubs of vast networks of public, private and civil society organisations working to achieve common public results. In this context, the role of departments is to convene, to facilitate and to ensure a coordinated effort to improving the performance of the whole network of actors. It is a role akin to the one played by central agencies today. This approach is particularly relevant in areas that involve large numbers of organisations, such as health, education and transportation.

Departments can only play this new role if their relevant authorities empower them to do so. They must have the necessary authority to act on behalf of the network, and to advise ministers on behalf of the collective. They must reconcile vertical delegated authority and shared accountability for results, and devise a regime of shared accountability for results when multiple actors are involved.

A focus on system-wide and government-wide results opens up the possibility of modernising the role of the centre of government. One of its most important roles is to ensure coherence in the interdepartmental and intergovernmental space of modern governance in support of government-wide priorities. Government-wide coordination is difficult at the best of times. To improve the likelihood of success, a number of conditions need to be met, including:

- Departments and agencies must achieve clarity of purpose and establish clear priorities.
- The centre needs to designate a champion and an organisation to lead on behalf of the collective effort
- Contributing departments, agencies and the level of resources that this contribution entails must be identified.

Today, most departments dedicate a significant amount of resources to supporting horizontal initiatives and government-wide priorities. Yet government accounting systems generally have trouble accounting for this contribution. The centre of government has a special responsibility to ensure that the general accounting and reporting systems are modernised to reflect today's reality so that they encourage interdepartmental collaboration and provide reliable information about system-wide results and expenditures.

Horizontal management needs to be supported by modern systems that are commensurate with the difficulty of the task. These should feature:

- easy access to decision-makers
- regular monitoring and reporting to the centre of government or prime minister
- the alignment of incentives, rewards and performance pay in support of the collective effort. Indeed, a case could be made that performance pay should be used primarily to encourage achieving results beyond the individual's own organisation.

In summary, the infrastructure to support a commitment to system-wide and societal results is not yet in place; systems and the machinery to support government-wide priorities are lacking, and incentives are not aligned to encourage working across boundaries. Many systems and practices need to be transformed, and new ones developed to increase the institutional and organisational capacity of government to serve in the twenty-first century. This is unfinished business of the reforms initiated over the last twenty-five years.

If left unfinished, it will slow the next phase of public administration reforms, which is about preparing government *to serve beyond the predictable*. In this next phase, other transformations and innovations are needed to help governments tackle complex issues in an increasingly uncertain environment.

Serving beyond the predictable

The work of government extends beyond predictable tasks and stable environments, and entails dealing with complex issues. Some of these issues have the features of 'wicked problems' in a volatile environment—local problems can quickly become global, and global problems can have a wide and unpredictable range of local impacts.

Emergence

The term 'emergence' describes this space of government concern and operations. It reflects the fact that new patterns arise out of a vast array of interactions and seemingly out of nowhere, pointing out the limitations of 'grand designs' no matter how well conceived such plans may be (Bovaird, 2008; Holland, 1998; Westley, Zimmerman & Patton, 2006).

The main difficulty for government in dealing with complex issues is that conventional approaches were not conceived or designed to deal with complexity and uncertainties. The conventional approach has been to break down difficult undertakings into simpler tasks, which are then pursued sequentially or through parallel courses of action (Wagenaar, 2007). This linear approach can leave government in a reactive position, unable to *detect* emerging trends and unable to *intervene* ahead of time.

A different approach is needed to confront complex issues. It starts by recognising that complexity is part of the normal state of affairs (Haynes, 2003). It accepts that complex problems cannot be solved by breaking them apart; they can only be addressed by looking at the whole system (Senge, 1990). More knowledge does not necessarily help to resolve complex issues, since problem definitions and the solutions are often contested, and positions are entrenched (Haveri, 2006; Kahane, 2004).

They require a participative approach to create a shared view of the issue, thus opening up the possibility of concerted action (Senge, 2004). Complex problems cannot be solved by replicating what was done before, because they form in new terrain (Kahane, 2004). New, emergent solutions must be grown to address them. These solutions take shape in the interaction and interdependencies between the actors and the context.

A commitment to serving beyond the predictable provides the impetus for transforming existing government functions and systems, and inventing new ones to support this expanded mission.

Transforming existing functions—the policy research function

The policy research approach in government helps to illustrate the need for transforming existing functions in order to achieve better public policy outcomes in the face of complexity and uncertainty.

Most governments have developed internal policy research functions to understand the impact of existing public programs, and to provide elected officials with policy advice that takes lessons learned into account.

In most cases, policy units are responsible for data collection, policy research, policy advice and evaluation. They are mission-specific and department-focused. They encourage and value linear thinking and technical, cause-effect rationality. This approach has contributed to great achievements in several domains of public policy. However, it is not well suited for tackling complex issues in unpredictable contexts. New policy capacity and skills are needed to complement current ones.

Governments should prioritise building their anticipative capacity. Countries with strong capabilities in detecting emerging trends and anticipating significant changes will have the important advantage of allowing proactive interventions to pre-empt or prevent undesirable events or to transform the course of such events toward more favorable outcomes. Some countries, such as Singapore, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, have taken ambitious steps in this regard, and the field of public administration has much to learn from their experience (Habegger, 2009).

A government-wide approach to policy research is required. Government can take steps to reduce the time and cost of data collection, and allocate time for more important aspects of the policy function—in particular, focusing on extracting meaning, discerning patterns and deriving probabilities from the data.

Diversity is needed in the policy function. Dialogue between multiple actors who bring a diversity of perspectives to the information will enrich the exploration and meaning-deriving process. Policy units need a diversity of skills, approaches and academic disciplines where linear thinking and system thinking co-exist with emergent approaches.

Building new ones—collective intelligence and networking

In spite of the best efforts to improve government's anticipatory capacity, the best knowledge and the most useful intelligence on emergent phenomena does not necessarily rest with government. It is:

- dispersed across society and at the scale of our global, networked society
- in the minds of people going about their daily activities
- in the possession of a leading expert who may live next door or thousands of miles away
- found in the self-organised networks and in the multiple relationships of people in their local communities or in their chosen communities of interest.

The body of literature on collective intelligence from a variety of angles is growing (e.g. Surowiecki, 2004; Tovey, 2008). Little is known, however, about how governments can best tap the collective intelligence of society to extract knowledge and meaning on emerging

patterns and events, or how to channel the efforts of many minds towards tackling complex public issues.

Also, not enough is known about how to harness the power of people's networks to generate new solutions or create favourable conditions for more desirable public outcomes, although people are working hard to provide insights and guidance (e.g. Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004).

The good news is that these topics are currently the subject of intense research in several countries. The challenge will be to internalise the findings into the intellectual framework of public administration and the practices of public administrators.

Practitioners will need a pragmatic understanding of collective intelligence and self-organising networks to enable collaboration and to prepare government to serve beyond the predictable. This is one of the reasons why Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, Singapore and the United Kingdom are working together to define a 'new synthesis' in public administration over the coming years. They share a commitment to providing practitioners with guiding principles and tools better aligned to today's reality (see http://www.ns6newsynthesis.com).
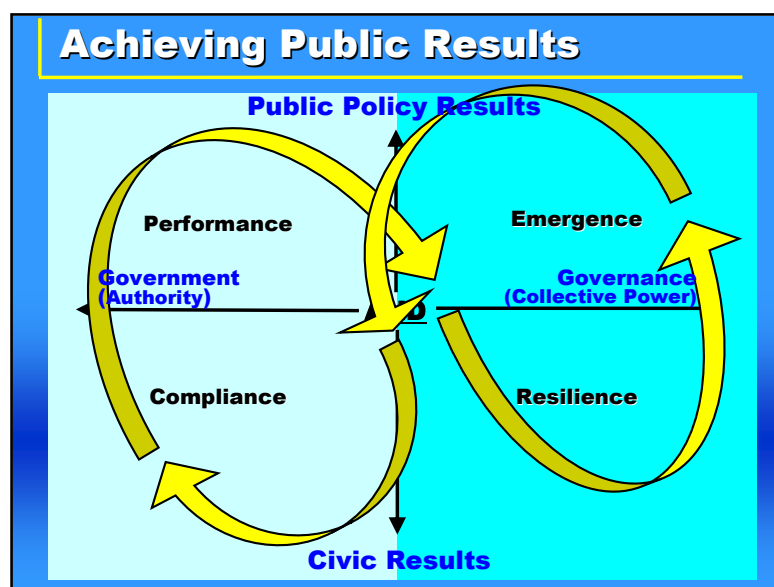
Resilience

This overview is still incomplete. Unforeseen events and shocks will still occur. Government will always be the insurer of last resort when the collective interest is at stake. Passive or laissez-faire approaches can impose significant damage and high costs on society.

Some shocks or classes of negative events can be reasonably foreseen, or at least have a non-negligible probability of occurrence. In these cases, the role of government is to anticipate, initiate pre-emptive action and mitigate key vulnerabilities (Berkes, 2007; McManus, Seville, Brundon & Vargo, 2007).

Some shocks cannot be foreseen or prevented. In these cases, the role of government extends to promoting the resilience of society (see Figure 2) by ensuring a more equitable distribution of risks, and mitigating the negative impact of change for the most vulnerable. Government can also focus on building the adaptive capacity of society to learn and prosper in the face of adversity (Berkes & Folke, 2002).

Figure 2

Resilience cannot be achieved by individuals, organisations or government working alone (McManus, Seville, Brundon & Vargo, 2007). It requires an active citizenry with the skills and confidence to take action. It relies on strong communities with the capacity to mobilise resources and coordinate action in support of common solutions (Dale & Onyx, 2005). It needs an affirmative State with the capacity for intelligent interventions ahead of time even when working with imperfect knowledge.

As the field of public administration embraces a more complex, dynamic and adaptive view of itself and welcomes a concept of good government and good governance that extends to compliance, performance, emergence and resilience, it will transform and find new ways to fulfil its mission.

Old concepts revisited—efficiency and redundancy

An aggressive drive towards efficiency gains may erode the adaptive capacity of public sector organisations. A level of redundancy is needed to build resilient organisations and improve their adaptive capacity.

Redundancy does not mean unproductive resources. It means that some resources may be used for purposes that do not easily lend themselves to accountability for results, except in the most vague of terms. They can be deployed easily to explore emergent solutions, initiate experiments to enhance collective learning, or simply to interact with others in a process of discovery.

An organisation where all human, financial and material resources are fully used to achieve the immediate results expected of it is, in fact, an inefficient organisation; it is locked into a mode of production with no residual capacity to anticipate or to renew itself. Public administrators can improve the adaptive capacity of their organisations by maintaining and managing strategically a certain level of redundancy. They can create safe spaces or hospitable environments for exploration, experimentation and innovation.

A similar concept is building contingent capacity in areas of greatest vulnerability. Contingent capacity allows resources to be rapidly deployed to address certain classes of vulnerabilities on a nation-wide basis. Defence reservists have traditionally operated in this fashion, as have emergency-readiness units. In addition, contingent capacity building is relevant to economic crises, environmental disasters, communication system failures, pandemic diseases, national security and other global vulnerabilities.

Creating new concepts—working across scales

A participative approach to addressing public policy issues reinforces resilience, particularly when it allows for decision making and facilitates action at the community level (Lebel, Anderies, Campbell, Folke, Hatfield-Dodds, Hughes & Wilson, 2006). Furthermore, it has the merit of preventing problems from escalating up and across the social system and becoming crises of great magnitude.

Complex issues are context specific. They present a high degree of variability and can manifest themselves at various scales in governance and social systems (Cash, Adger, Berkes, Garden, Lebel, Olsson, Pritchard & Young, 2006; Holling, 2001). An issue can be confined to the local scale long before taking a more dangerous form with globalising potential (e.g. security, pandemic diseases). Some issues evolve incrementally until they reach a tipping point (Gladwell, 2000) and take on new and more devastating forms (e.g. environmental issues). Some have cascading potential (Kinzig, Ryan, Etienne, Allison, Elmqvist & Walker, 2006); a small failure in one part of the world can have an immediate, global ripple effect (e.g. electronic communication system failures, banking crises, power failures).

Government generally works at a single scale (municipal, sub-national or national) in line with the constitutional arrangements and mandates of the electorate. Because complex issues cut across scales, government must develop the ability to modulate its interventions at the level most conducive to achieving desired outcomes (Holling, 2001; Berkes & Folke, 2002).

Combined with the anticipative capacity mentioned earlier, government capacity to work across scales holds the promise of reducing the risks of undesirable shocks and improving the likelihood of more favourable outcomes (Cumming, Cumming & Redman, 2006).

Concluding thoughts

As a professional and scholarly endeavour, public administration has a unique internal coherence. It was borne out of constitutional law and political science. Over time, it embraced ideas and practices from economics and business management. It integrated knowledge from the organisational sciences, and became enriched by ideas from the social sciences.

Public administration must once again explore new frontiers as it begins to integrate ideas from many knowledge domains—from complexity to adaptive systems theories, from collective intelligence to network theories, and from evolutionary biology and ecology to epidemiology. This will provide important insights for the future of public administration, and drive the process through which the anticipative and adaptive capacities of public organisations can be further developed. Practitioners, academics and scholars can effectively explore this matter by working together. Research and practice are two inseparable parts of a common enterprise.

Embracing a dynamic view of public administration and an expanded concept of good government and good governance extends to:

- institutional capacity of the state apparatus to support the foundations of good governance
- inter-organisational capacity to achieve shared public results
- a stronger anticipative capacity in government to support proactive interventions and course corrections
- the collective innovative capacity to achieve results beyond the capacity of any one actor acting alone
- the adaptive capacity and resilience of society to deal with unforeseen circumstances (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
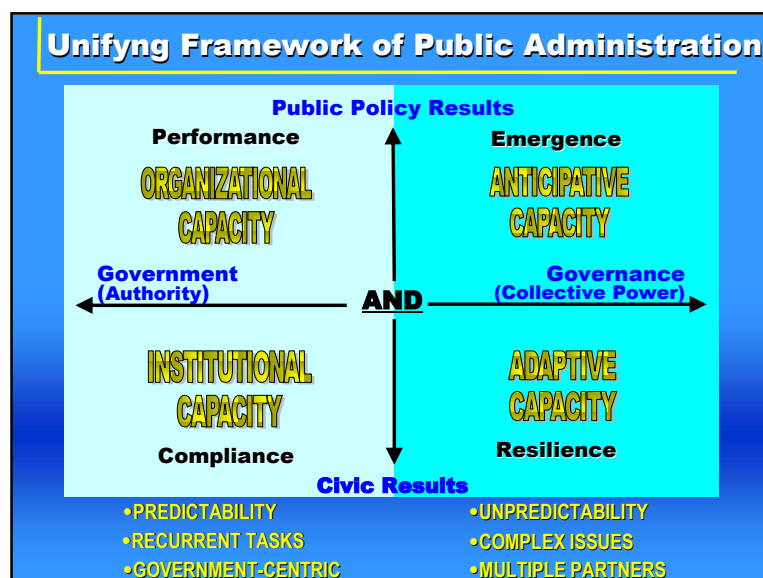
This vision transforms what governments have built, and requires new ways to fulfil their mission. Taken together, these transformations amount to a new synthesis of public

administration—a unifying framework able to guide practitioners to serve beyond the predictable.

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