



Branding the Public Service of Canada: A Model Worthy of Emulation or Unfulfilled Promise?

Contemporary Issues Facing the Canadian Public Services

Tim A. Mau, University of Guelph

In 1998, Robert Behn (1998: 209) famously wrote, “Leadership is no just a right of public managers. It is an obligation.” Administrative or bureaucratic leadership was no longer a misnomer; rather, enhanced leadership capacity was something that public services around the world strived to achieve. In their annual reports to the prime minister on the status of the public service, for example, successive clerks of the Privy Council identified the critical importance of recruiting and retaining as well as identifying and developing public service employees, particularly those who would comprise the leadership cadre of the future. In effect, various clerks have been attempting to brand the public service as a career of choice in the minds of capable young Canadians as part of the global war for talent (Glenn, 2012) in order to remain a vital national institution. The shift from rhetoric to action was palpable in 2007 when the Canada Public Service Agency formally spearheaded an initiative to brand the public service (Canada, 2007), which has been characterized as “the most interesting example from a branding perspective” of the many countries that have been “engaged in transformational processes to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and image of their public service” (Temporal, 2015: 249). The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of branding as it applies to the public sector and, more specifically, to provide a critical evaluation the Canadian federal government’s public sector branding exercise. Has Canada been the vanguard in this respect or has the branding exercise largely been a failed experiment? This paper argues that despite good intentions and the clear benefits to be derived from branding the public service, the initiative, like many government reform efforts, has been one of unfulfilled promise. The government has yet to deliver a compelling public sector brand that has coalesced the views of current and prospective public servants and citizens alike around the name, values and identity of the Canadian public service.