

Interview with Kevin G. Lynch, Clerk of the Privy Council

Linchpin of the *infernal trio*



By
Jean Décaré

When interviewed by a journalist, Donald Savoie, an authority on Canadian public administration research used the expression “infernal trio” to describe the powerful influence the triumvirate composed of the Clerk of the Privy Council, the Deputy Minister of Finance and the Secretary of the Treasury Board has on the government. A former mandarin of Canada’s public finances, recently assigned the top public service job in the country, Kevin G. Lynch appears, given his experience and pivotal role as Clerk of the Privy Council, to be the best man to assist the government in achieving its five-priority agenda.



Photo: Jean Décaré

In February 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the appointment of Kevin G. Lynch as Clerk of the Privy Council in these terms: “Mr. Lynch is known as a highly focussed professional, who will certainly bring a wealth of experience...” Indeed, what is striking when you look at Mr. Lynch’s track record is his “wealth of experience” despite of his “young” age (he is 57). Since he joined the Canadian public service in 1981, the native Nova Scotian has devoted most of his activities to two heavyweight departments: Finance and Industry. At 37, he became an assistant deputy minister. Since then, the career of this young PhD in economics has been a gradual but steady climb to the top of the mandarin class. Clerk of the Privy Council is as high as he can go, unless... “Do you have political ambitions?” – “No, not at all,” he replied seriously.

Kevin G. Lynch has the discretion and reserve of senior government officials used to working in the shadow of politicians. Even the presence of a camera seems to make him ill at ease. He listens carefully to the questions, measures the impact of his answers, looks for the right words and, especially, is very economical in the words he chooses. None of which prevents him from replying in the language of Molière at top speed. For further clarification on the subject, he refers us to a speech he made before such and such a group. He makes himself available to us, but is a very busy man. “I have twenty-five minutes to give you,” he said at the outset. Interestingly, during the interview his affability and good nature shone through; there is still a lot of the Cape Bretoner in the career technocrat, and an economist to boot (!), naysayers would say. His eyes light up when he talks about his home province of Nova Scotia.

Cape Breton naturally led to a question about the relevance of economic development agencies for

the regions. “I think the four agencies are important. Obviously, there is more than one economic development model; approaches and needs differ from one region to the next. This flexibility is important and the objective is basically the same,” he continued, knowing that he was preaching to the converted.

As a good economist, he spontaneously brought up the current economic conditions. “It’s interesting to look at the situation today compared to 10 years ago. The unemployment rate is possibly the lowest it has been for thirty years. In Quebec, we are seeing structural changes in the economy: new technologies, biotechnologies, and others. We must keep abreast of change. The global world is becoming more competitive, we need to stay ahead of the curve.” “Deep down, aren’t you glad you were appointed Clerk of the Privy Council now rather than in 1992?” (Laughter) “I think it’s always an interesting job, regardless of the economic times,” he adroitly replied.

Post-Gomery challenges

The new Head of the Public Service has targeted renewal in the public service as the major challenge ahead. He discussed this issue with enthusiasm, as highlighted by a *Hill Times* journalist: “It’s an exciting time to be a federal public servant in the 21st century.” “Exciting because it’s a major transition period during which we can significantly change our working culture. “There are huge opportunities,” he said.

The new Clerk will focus on two key areas: teamwork and excellence. Addressing a Managers’ National Professional Development Forum in Newfoundland in May, he said:

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“Beyond a culture of team work is how well we do our work...” He elaborated: “If we want to recruit and retain the best and brightest students from all walks of life, we have to offer them a stimulating working environment where excellence prevails.”

In addition to these themes which he has repeatedly spoken of since his appointment, add leadership and the crucial issue of roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. In a morose post-Gomery climate, at the ADM Forum in April 2006, Kevin G. Lynch reflected: “As a result of a number of unfortunate events in recent years, public service writ large has lost some of the public’s trust. This worries Canadians. It concerns every one of us even more.”

The proposed *Federal Accountability Act* and Action Plan tabled by the Harper government will strengthen oversight and management of our institutions and have a direct impact on governance in the public service. To which the new Clerk fully subscribes: “Integrity and respect are at, or near, the top of the list (of our values), as is a commitment to providing the best advice we can, perhaps at times notwithstanding what a minister or government might want to hear.”

The highest official in the land is very proud of the non-partisan nature of the Public Service of Canada. He cites it as an example wherever he goes, frequently contrasting it to the American public administration which often falls victim to the vagaries of politics. “We are the continuity across governments, and as public servants we are called upon to help the new Government govern.... The key for me is how we do it.” As for the fine line between

administration and politics at his level, Mr. Lynch, who is privy to everything that goes on in Cabinet meetings, could not have been more discreet. “Yes, the role of Secretary to the Cabinet falls to the Clerk. But the position is nevertheless non-partisan.”

The Deputy Minister of the Privy Council will be meeting the Agency’s Departmental Management Committee (DMC). He intends to further address some of the themes that are dear to him. Meanwhile, he has asked the « deputy ministers » of the regional development agencies to organize round tables and invite their Ottawa colleagues to them. “It’s important for us? deputy ministers, associate and assistant deputy ministers? to spend more time in the regions. It is important that we have intimate knowledge of the country in order to have a global perspective.” “Time’s up!” he seemed to say to himself as he glanced at his watch.



Photo: Jean Décaré

Accompanied by Jean Décaré for this interview, Christian Codère, of the Government Affairs Branch (GAB), met Kevin G. Lynch in Ottawa. The GAB plays a key role in tracking issues, making representations for and in supporting senior management and the Minister in their relations with other Government of Canada departments and agencies, including the Privy Council Office.

The ABC of the Clerk of the Privy Council

"It would be difficult to conceive of a title less informing and more misleading than 'Clerk of the Privy Council,'" was the assessment so accurately provided by Gordon Robertson¹, former Clerk of the Privy Council (1963-1975) and renowned senior official spanning the years from Mackenzie King to Pierre Trudeau. In fact, while the title is now entrenched in both custom and the law, the term remains somewhat obscure for most people, familiar with clerks in less exalted positions.

Before World War II, there was no secretariat for the supreme organ of executive power, the Cabinet. William Lyon Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada for 22 years (1921-1930 and 1935-1948), was all for that state of affairs, which left him total control over how meetings were run.

Canada's entry into the war in 1939 upset the established administrative apple-cart. Overrun by questions of stewardship, Mackenzie King, like the British during the Great War, set up a Cabinet War Committee headed by a duly-appointed secretary. At the close of hostilities, the secretary's role was extended to Cabinet overall. In the interest of efficiency, and to avoid using the war as an excuse to create a new position at the highest levels, the duties were grafted onto the existing position of Clerk of the Privy Council, whose ambit since Confederation had been limited to clerical tasks. Some 60 years later, the position of Clerk of the Privy Council has now become as strategic as it is prestigious, as indispensable as it is impenetrable, since top government officials most often work far from the spotlight.

The Clerk's three hats

The Clerk is responsible for three tasks, each important in itself. First, that of administrative advisor to the Prime Minister. As his Deputy Minister, the Clerk is part of the Prime Minister's closest circle. The two of them meet on a regular basis. The Prime Minister can consult his Deputy Minister on a broad range of topics, from the appointment of top government officials, to the composition of government, Cabinet decision-making procedures and management of very specific issues. The role of Secretary to the Cabinet is also his responsibility. Nothing is tabled in Cabinet without first passing through the Clerk's hands. He attends all the meetings and is involved in drawing up the agenda—no mere minor detail. Finally, as Clerk of the Privy Council, he is also the head of Canada's Public Service and represents the vital link between the political and administrative spheres. He has to ensure that the Public Service supports the Prime Minister and his government in their priorities. To do so, the Clerk relies on the administrative machinery of the Privy Council Office (PCO), which actually constitutes the Prime Minister's department and the Cabinet secretariat. (JD)

¹ See Gordon Robertson, *Memoirs of a Very Civil Servant*, University of Toronto Press, 2000, p. 302. This box is partly based on Robertson's profile of the role of the Clerk of the Privy Council, written material highlighting the 125th anniversary of the PCO and information gleaned from the Privy Council Office Web site: www.pco-bcp.gc.ca.

News from the business offices

The Estrie: so much more than just a "weekend getaway"



By Lyne Montpellier

The Estrie is full of breathtaking landscapes and magnificent spots that welcome with open arms city dwellers wanting to get away from it all.

This image, however, belies the fact that the region is now home to more than 280,000 people or that Sherbrooke is the sixth largest city in Quebec and is considered, according to a recent study by accounting firm KPMG, as one of the most attractive cities in Canada for foreign investors.

The Estrie, often called the Eastern Townships, has everything to please. It is a major export region with a diversified industrial base featuring such big names as Bombardier Recreational Products, Cascades and Domtar. The region boasts two major universities, no less than 55 research centres, a university hospital (CHUS) and a growing pool of innovative enterprises.

But despite all these gems and the unquestionable drive of its regional stakeholders, the Estrie, like many other regions, has been hard hit by the performance of the Asian market and the stronger Canadian dollar. Result: 7,400 manufacturing jobs have been lost in the past two years, R&D investments have fallen off and some companies are having trouble keeping up, let alone increasing their competitiveness.

Staying ahead of the global curve, or lagging behind

The problem of industrial adaptation is critical. As we have shown, the Estrie has the resources necessary to seize the opportunities offered by the new global economy to reach its full potential. To help the region accomplish this, the Estrie Business Office team has two "obsessions": innovation (let's say it again: innovation!) and increasing enterprises' competitiveness.

For the past two years, the team's strategy has been to work beforehand in various ways. In a previous issue, we talked about the diagnoses and proactive action plans being developed in each MRC. So it should come as no surprise that the Business Office is working with the community more than ever, is involved in many major, structuring projects and is considered a key player. If we put aside humility, we could even say, without blushing, the number one development player in Region 05!

The team's priorities are constant: helping Estrie's industrial and manufacturing enterprises meet the challenge of boosting their competitiveness and assisting Sherbrooke in creating, developing and consolidating its centre of excellence.

According to Regional Director Marie-Andrée Katia Bertrand, the region can count on an experienced, committed, dynamic and results-oriented team. What's more, the Business Office recently welcomed two new recruits who bring their considerable experience to the team: Suzanne Beaudry, who worked for several years as an industry commissioner at the *Centre local de développement de Memphémagog*, and Claude Boulanger, from the *Conférence régionale des élus de l'Estrie* which he headed as executive director for 15 years.

By way of conclusion, Marie-Andrée would tell you, rightly, that the Agency's new vision and the Government of Canada's recent requirements concerning results-based management do not represent a *revolution* for the Estrie Business Office, but rather a *natural evolution*.



The two new employees of the Estrie Business Office: Claude Boulanger and Suzanne Beaudry.



From left to right: Marie-Andrée K. Bertrand, Diane Gauthier, Nathalie Morier, Gilles Provost, Andrée Audet, Daniel Blouin, Julie O'Shea, Ginette Léger, Sylvain Bélair and Michel Petit. Absent: Ronald Poirier.