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Before you clamour for results-based management in the civil service, remember Chuck Guité could be its poster boy

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Action, not indecision. Results, not red tape. Service to clients, not nitpicking about rules. That's what we want from government, right?

In fact, our ideal public servant might be like this one: "[He] was a man of action. . . . He can attack a number of projects at the same time. . . . He was a man of decisions. He was never afraid, nor did it take him 50 years to come to a decision. [The program that he ran] was administered very quickly. . . . [I]n terms of client services, there were few who could beat him."

This federal government executive, now retired, had a reputation for being "oriented to obtaining results by cutting through red tape." You might think this fellow could be a poster boy for "results-based management (RBM)," the philosophy promoted in the public service by the Treasury Board Secretariat, the department that oversees the implementation of federal programs.

Think again. Joseph Charles (Chuck) Guité was no poster boy. Mr. Guité - the descriptions above are from Gomery inquiry testimony and from Mr. Justice John Gomery's report - was the bureaucratic linchpin of the sponsorship scandal. The Auditor-General accused Mr. Guité, the former executive-director of the Communications Co-ordination Services Branch, of breaking "every rule in the book" when awarding contracts to promote Canada in Quebec.

In our reaction to the sponsorship debacle, we've lost sight of a fundamental point of public-sector management - a topic less sexy than the scandal, but more important.

Our first clue to the deeper issue is the irony in Judge Gomery's remark about Mr. Guité's reputation for "obtaining results by cutting through red tape." I mean, that's a good thing, isn't it? Who likes red tape? Who's not in favour of "results," especially when the

strength of Confederation is at stake? As former prime minister Jean Chrétien observed, "Perhaps there was a few million dollars that might have been stolen. But how many millions have we saved to the country because we have re-established the stability of Canada?"

The irony gets richer. In 1997, while Mr. Guité was awarding contracts, Treasury Board published "Getting Government Right," its first major statement about how results-based management would improve public administration. Public service managers needed "greater flexibility" to serve Canadians. This required "relaxation of bureaucratic rules and regulations countered by an increased accountability for results." The board itself promised to focus "on results, not on process."

Thanks to public sector bashing popularized by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, public administrations around the world got makeovers. There were diets - then-finance minister Paul Martin masterminded major budget cuts from 1994 to 1996 - and management facelifts by RBM doctors.

The focus on "results" was supposed to counter the (mostly inaccurate) image of public servants consumed by paperwork, at the expense of real "outcomes" that mattered to Canadians.

Remember the good old days before Nortel and Hollinger, when the private sector was the paragon of management savvy? Results-based management was part of a drive to make the public service more "businesslike." Public servants were to focus on getting things done for Canadians - "clients," according to the New Public Management movement - instead of pushing paper. They were to be accountable "on the basis of results rather than process," the Treasury Board said.

This is where the argument starts to falter. To be sure, Treasury Board should insist that public servants focus on results over process. (Every public servant I've met wants to do just that.) And there are things that government can learn from business.

But the government cannot and should not be a clone of the private sector. I am not a "client." I am a citizen. A client's relationship with a private company is narrow, simple, fleeting and superficial. He buys a good or service, wants a fair price and expects follow-up if things go wrong. The relationship ends with the transaction.

A citizen's bond with government is broad, complicated, constant, and deep. It exists even when I'm not doing business with the government. Government is more than a machine spitting out goods and services, because there's a piece of me and every other Canadian in all that it does. I want the government to define and protect the public interest - a task that's not the business of any private company. I want it to embody certain values, and make Canada a country of which I'm proud.

Yes, government owes us a businesslike focus on results." But what the sponsorship mess illustrates so well is that results in the business sense are not always the most important thing in the public sector. Mr. Chrétien was wrong. We do care that money was stolen.

In business, process and administration get cut to the bone. They reduce profit, and that's bad. But government isn't a for-profit operation. It serves the public interest. There's no question that process and administration can impede good government, and must not be overdone. But while process is a necessary evil in the private sector, it has its own special value in the public sector because it helps ensure that government lives up to our ideals.

Most public servants care very much about results, but they want to generate them the right way. Think about that - and Mr. Guité - the next time you're tempted to moan about "red tape."

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