



A Message from CAPE President Claude Poirier

Wear a “grey square” during National Public Service Week

This year, once again, Treasury Board will be urging us to celebrate our work and achievements during National Public Service Week. The theme for this year is: “Celebrating our Commitment!” Under normal circumstances, this would have been a very appropriate sentiment; but current events lead me to suggest a different theme for the week: will the public service recover from all these attacks?

One cannot turn a blind eye to the upheaval facing the thousands of public service employees who have already received or will soon be receiving a letter informing them that their positions may be affected by the government’s cutbacks and that there is a very real possibility that they will be losing their jobs. The effect on our working environments has been devastating, straining relations among public service employees. So how can we celebrate?

In his most recent report to the Prime Minister, the Clerk of the Privy Council, Wayne Wouters, stated: “These are remarkable times in which to be a public servant.” Several CAPE members have complained to me about the insensitivity of this remark. Indeed, Mr. Wouters could have been more tactful in his choice of words, given the temper of the times. As it is, he seems to have written an annual report that is entirely oblivious of the difficult situation facing the public service. The Captain of the *Titanic* also ignored every indication that there was a disaster in the making, until the iceberg made him sit up and take notice.

No, these are not remarkable times to be a public servant. The day-to-day working lives of federal public servants have been rendered topsy-turvy, and it has also become clear that the fundamental non-partisan nature of their roles is being undermined. The present government’s cult of secrecy is bridling the work of our analysts and researchers by preventing them from releasing study results without a go-ahead from the Prime Minister’s Office, assuming they manage to obtain it. The recently announced budget cuts will reduce the public service’s ability to provide the in-depth analyses elected officials need in order to make informed decisions. Several programs and services offered to Canadians will be gutted or abolished: in many cases, people will not realize what they have lost until they come up against a closed door.

According to our members, however, one new trend is clearly on the rise: instead of being asked to produce analyses to support the selection of the best possible options or the most adapted programs, they are simply being asked to validate choices that have already been made by the government. This is exactly the opposite of what an impartial and independent public service should be doing, and no

amount of fancy oratory claiming that the Canadian public service is among the best in the world can change that fact.

The Clerk of the Privy Council's comment that we must "explore new ways of working" to offset the reduction in resources has a hollow ring to it. For years now, we have been asked to do a lot more with less and less. Everyone who works in the public service knows this to be true. And yet Mr. Wouters and other senior policy officials have never defended the public service from repeated attacks that have grown even worse since the budget was tabled.

Instead of remaining silent, as they do now, politicians and public service executives should be trumpeting the importance to Canadian society of having a strong, independent public service with sufficient resources to perform the work entrusted to it.

So I am sure you will understand that I don't feel much like celebrating as National Public Service Week approaches. I know that public servants deserve recognition for all of the fine work that they do, but not like this – and not just for one week.

During this difficult time, as a gesture of solidarity with their colleagues who will be losing their jobs, it was suggested to us that we ask all public service employees to wear a "grey square." Inspired by the "red square" campaign mounted by the student movement in Quebec, this badge of solidarity will allow people to respectfully demonstrate that the current situation affects everyone. The "grey square" would be a way for us to express our thanks to all of our colleagues who will be leaving their jobs in the wake of the government's cost-cutting measures.¹

Lastly, as a Canadian citizen who appreciates your contributions to Canadian society, I want to thank you for the exceptional work you are all doing despite a hostile environment and dwindling resources.

Claude Poirier
President
Canadian Association of Professional Employees

¹ Contact CAPE if you wish to obtain fabric with which to make grey squares. You may also use whatever fabric you already have at your disposal, or purchase or make your own fabric.