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Insights is written by Ray Pennings to build perspective and provide engaged citizens with resources for faith and public life

HERE'S MY TAKE

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Public Service is both a noun—"the public service" meaning the 350-thousand or so folks who draw their paycheques from the federal government—and a verb. In an ideal world, serving the public is a noble venture of working to serve our neighbours in accordance with shared ideals. Reality is much messier. Ideals are not always shared and the motives and competencies of the 350-thousand are not equally pure. What's more, the entire process of interaction between the citizens who both choose the politicians and receive the services is, in a word, complicated. The politicians are there to set direction and choose priorities, and the public servants, who are there more permanently, are expected to use their skills to implement the outcomes of the political process. The process never works out as cleanly as the textbooks describe it.

The clerk of the Privy Council is one of the most powerful positions in Canada, a position that serves as the head of the public service, as the deputy minister to the prime minister, and as the secretary of the cabinet. The position comes to mind this week after the passing of Ian Shugart, a career public servant who served as the Privy Council's clerk from 2019 to 2022 when he had to resign the position due to health concerns.

Ian embodied both the noun and verb of public service. He started as political staff in the early 1980s and then joined the federal service to lend his skills to federal-provincial negotiations during some of the constitutional challenges in the early 1990s. Ian's resume shows a steady climb through the ranks to become deputy minister of some of the most challenging departments (including Employment and Social Development, and Global Affairs) before being appointed clerk after the SNC-Lavalin affair prompted the resignation of his predecessor.

It is telling that at a time when integrity and confidence in the public service most needed confirmation, the government turned to Ian to fill that challenging position. The compilation of tributes in [Thursday's Politico Ottawa Playbook](#) demonstrate the cross-partisan respect that Ian garnered. Prime Minister Trudeau called him "a pillar of stability." Journalists described him as, "decent and kind," someone who was confident enough to have off-the-record conversations, "without worrying what others might think," so as to help others do their job well, and as a "man of deep faith."

Cardus was privileged to be the beneficiary of Ian's generosity. Just in the past two years he joined us on six occasions for brainstorming sessions and presentations to our board, staff, and stakeholders, including presenting annually to our NextGEN Fellows. He was a reader of this newsletter, not shy about sending an encouraging note from time to time. I appreciated not only the breadth of his knowledge gained from his drive for excellence—which he described as the primary way that Christians gain credibility for their perspectives in settings where they are suspect—but also his very personal passion and interest. We had numerous discussions about how to navigate situations where your personal beliefs were not consistent with government policy directions. He had nuanced but persuasive arguments about loyalty, noting that the essence of public service was when your political masters believed you were giving them your best and honest advice, which meant that silence was not an option. However, knowing how and when to make your point that respects the various roles and responsibilities was key, and his examples were a masterclass.

Ian was a public servant to the end. Just two weeks ago, I had a call with him and a few others regarding a project he was hoping to still see through in the time that God gave him. We left the call with him wanting to think about a few details, promising me an email with next steps "soon since we don't have much time left." A public servant to the end, I learned via a text from his daughter last week that he was being admitted to hospice and hence the email was unlikely to be forthcoming. Ian was known for excellence in even minor details, like being true to your word and following up. He embodied integrity, respect for others, and commitment to the common good. I learned from Ian that public service as a noun only succeeds when you make it a verb, not as a tactic but as an integral commitment about what you believe it means to serve God and love your neighbour. It also was a life of submission to God's plans which often we do not understand. Still, as Ian noted in a [sermon he preached just last month](#), "God calls us to be patient, to trust Him to lift us up, and to submit to Him trusting that He will (fulfill His promises) in due time, not later than we can bear, but not earlier than will be to the glory of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

In God's perfect plan, Ian's time was this week even though by our calculations there seems to be so much unfinished business that would benefit from his continued public service. My colleague Michael Van Pelt and I were discussing this when we learned Ian had entered hospice care. Later that evening, Michael sent me a few reflections he penned after that conversation. The rest of this tribute are Michael's words as we honour a man who by God's grace was a true public servant, respected and appreciated broadly by his accomplishments in the public service as a noun even as he made public service a verb of practice and a fulfilment of his vocation.

Canada's Senator and top bureaucrat was a gospel preacher—a life well-lived

The fact that few knew Ian Shugart was a regular gospel preacher in many Ottawa churches leads to a fitting way to describe the man. Ian rose to be the head of Canada's public service, some 300-thousand people strong. He was a quick mind with steady judgement and an observer of character. He was cautious, wise, and thorough—a model public servant. Mostly though, and especially as he travelled the vocational path to the highest position in the civil service as clerk of the Privy Council, he was a pastor. By that, I mean he always looked for the person behind the professional. In the most straightforward way, he got to the heart of things. He had an eye for things that matter to the heart without losing sight of the job at hand.

I met Ian in 2011 as part of the Advisory Council for Social Innovation. He sat two chairs away from me. He seemed quite at ease to be invisible until he spoke. When I listened to him speak my internal voice exclaimed, "I know that language." I know the careful wording about human dignity, I know the language of respect, and I know the language of history and wisdom. Simply, I knew right then he was a man of faith. I left the meeting, quickly jumped on to Google, and to my great surprise the first entry on Ian Shugart was a faith-filled speech he presented at the very think tank I worked for, Cardus.

Not long after that meeting, I was waiting in a government boardroom as part of the long cadre of people deputy ministers meet in a day. Ian walked into the boardroom and said, "You know I am a founder of your organisation." With discernable disbelief in my eyes, I listened as he shared that he was part of the early group of Parliament Hill staffers that founded the Centre for Cultural Renewal (which was absorbed into Cardus in 2010).

Since that day we have met many times for more than a decade. Our deal was this: first, let's not do day-to-day politics, but let's talk about ideas that matter—and we did that. The second was: don't ask me to share what you know I can't—and I didn't. Only one time did I catch a glimpse behind the scenes. It was a very public scandal that clearly landed on his plate to fix. I was teasing him about his easy life and his eyes went wide and frustration lines reshaped his face, for maybe a second. He never wavered from his commitment to respecting confidentiality.

In the last few years as clerk and then as a senator, Ian paid special attention to the emerging leaders in the Cardus community. As he weakened, his words had a growing intimacy and urgency to them. He spoke less of strategy and more of character and faithfulness. I watched these future leaders—young men and women—allow the voice of Ian Shugart to burn into their hearts and set their trajectory of public service.

I know from Ian's own words and worldview that he was deeply concerned about the cultural and spiritual direction of the country he served. Despite his deep concern, he stubbornly remained a public servant in its purest form. Ian would often remind me, "Michael, worry more about the cultural and spiritual state of yourself, your neighbour, and your community. Politicians will follow the culture and the public servant must serve the government. And that is as it ought to be!" Many times I imagined what power a deputy minister could exert by bending an issue in my direction. But here, Ian Shugart was in the tradition of Saint Thomas More, known as the virtuous statesman who never used the means of power to advance a matter of personal interest.

I'll miss Ian Shugart. Just as the prime minister gave him space to truly voice the wisdom of a Godly and wise man, cancer was breaking his earthly form. I had dared to imagine tackling legislative files with mutual mission.

My colleague, long-time friend, and Cardus co-founder Ray Pennings is another one of those "gospel preachers" and a highly respected political analyst. He and Ian would geek out on the biblical texts they were preparing to preach on or what Greek or Latin text helped today's interpretation of the Christian Scripture. But both of them were taken by the great public servant and prophet, Daniel. (Yes, the Daniel of the lions' den.) Ian has unfinished business. For many years he had studied deeply the model of Daniel as a faithful leader and public servant. I challenge my colleague Ray and Ian's other friends in this conversation to share the lessons of this great biblical prophet Daniel. It is business worth finishing.

Ian faced the brokenness of the world, including cancer, while holding onto a hopeful future. I have no doubt that the words he hears today are, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share your Master's happiness."

All of us at Cardus extend our deepest appreciation to the Shugart family for sharing their husband and father with us and we express our condolences to them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ray", with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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WHAT I'M READING



Attracting Grade-A Politicos

Professor Donald Savoie just authored his 28th book regarding governance issues in Canada, making him a familiar voice for policy nerds and mostly unknown to the broader populace. His latest, [Canada: Beyond Grudges, Grievances, and Disunity](#), argues that social media and the expectation that leaders respond to every issue within very tight news cycles mean no prime minister can achieve (cabinet government) unless the merits and challenges of government in the new era of social media are redefined. In a [Hill Times interview published this week](#), Savoie argues that our expectations of politicians have become so unrealistic that “we run the real risk of having second-, third- or fourth-grade people running for office, and that will not serve Canada well.”



Living the Jewish Reality

Josh Gilman, an Ottawa communications expert and former political staffer, is in my broader network of acquaintances. So, I suppose that familiarity makes me find his latest [blog post](#) especially poignant. In it, he writes about being Jewish and realising “that there is a large population in the world that wants to kill you.” This, he argues, casts the reality of the local protests regarding the Hamas-Israel conflict into a different light.

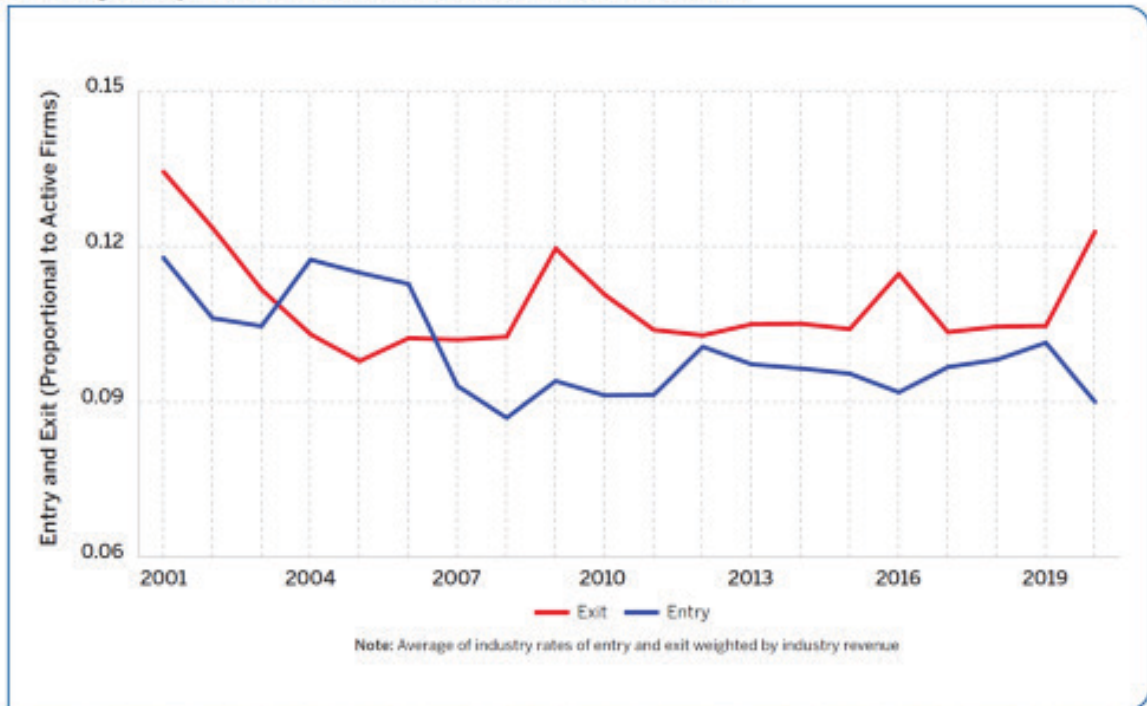


Uncharitable Policies

[This Globe and Mail opinion piece](#) highlights the impact of largely unreported measures that were included in the federal 2023 budget. It details how the alternative minimum tax for high-income earners will reduce giving to charities. While being sold as “ensuring the rich pay their fair share of taxes,” there are estimates that the policy will affect up to 30% of the \$11.4 billion given to charities by disincentivizing wealthier Canadians from supporting charities to lessen their tax burden.

MEANINGFUL METRICS

Figure 3: Average entry and exit rates from 2001 to 2020 for all industries



Competition Requires Start-Ups

The [report issued by the Competition Bureau of Canada](#) last week exposed some of the underlying challenges facing the Canadian economy. The analysis looks at concentration and market share by sector, the number of new start-ups, and the profits/mark-ups per sector. It argues that these three factors in combination should provide some sort of measure of innovation. Recognizing that there are no perfect measures, this seems like a reasonable indicator. It was telling that on none of the individual metrics, much less on the three in combination, were very many sectors of the Canadian economy showing “innovative” characteristics. As the chart above highlights, save for a brief period between 2004 and 2007, companies exiting the economy outpaced new entrants. In recent years, the graph shows these trends starkly widening the gap.

TAKE IT TO GO



Snow Kidding

Various parts of Canada had their first snowfall of the season this week, including Winterpeg where I found myself for a few days. Weather is the go-to small-talk subject. So, my corny “You’ve got this city pegged when you know the weather always wins” got an obligatory chuckle from my Uber driver. However, his comeback that “at least the potholes will soon be filled with snow and the ride will be better for the next six months” was one that caused me a deeper chuckle. Actually, Winnipeg is lovely if you manage to avoid the seasons of mosquitoes, snow, and construction. Its residents are skilled at starting with a self-deprecating approach to conversation that soon becomes a blizzard of a sales pitch, providing evidence that the locals have lots of experience in shovelling affordability, weather, culture, and history into a pitch that actually makes Winnipeg seem picturesque, quaint, and desirable. I learned that the familiar adage, “when handed lemons make lemonade” has a Winnipeg version: “When confronted with snow, make snowmen.” They even added the carrot, and while my heart stopped short of being melted by the pitch, I will admit they made a good case for themselves, snow notwithstanding.

Until next week.



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