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Special Issue

Canadian Public Sector Reform: Towards a Neo-Weberian State?

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Recent turbulence in governing environments has reinvigorated big questions about the efficacy of various public governance approaches. This article examines the applicability of the neo-Weberian state (NWS) approach to the Canadian case. Our analysis reveals that while Canada meets the original NWS criteria (NSW1), it does not currently meet the more recent NWS2 requirements. Canada's decentralized federal system and Indigenous governance dynamics challenge the hierarchy essential to the NWS. As a modest reformer, Canada's public management reform trajectory has not yielded many of the elements stipulated by the NWS. Canada remains characterized by partial and often asymmetrical incrementalism, which we argue points to a hybrid, pragmatic, and negotiated (HPN) approach. Looking at Canada through the lens of NWS2 raises important questions and considerations for the future directions of Canadian public management but also identifies further opportunities to sharpen the NWS approach by considering how key criteria might be operationalized.

Introduction

There has been no shortage of turbulence in the governing environment of the last twenty years: terrorist attacks, the 2008 global financial crisis, the global COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing geopolitical conflicts, rapid technological developments, and widespread instability in democratic political institutions have generated enormous governing challenges. This turbulence has revealed clear limitations of public governance, but in other ways, it has reaffirmed the essential role of public sectors. Scholars have wrestled with important and, at times, provocative questions regarding how best to characterize public governance and make sense of governing responses and reform experiences (Torfing et al., 2020). The succession of significant crises across countries and 'polycrises' (involving rapid and overlapping crises), which can overwhelm public governance, has further fueled this discussion (Ansell et al., 2017; Zeitlin et al., 2019). Comparisons often feature analysis of Traditional Public Administration (TPA), New Public Management reforms (NPM), several collaborative and networked governance approaches (Osborne, 2010; Stoker, 2006), and most recently, the neo-Weberian state (NWS). We now have a dizzying array of governance approaches and hybrids on the table for application and debate (Lindquist, 2022).

This research and debate has productively expanded the menu of theoretical perspectives and analytic options, offered the impetus for different kinds of empirical research, and critically engaged with important normative, theoretical, and practical issues in the study of public sector reform. Canada has not been immune from turbulence and growing pressures on its governments to respond to rapidly emerging internal and external challenges. Exploring Canada as a case, this article engages with the NWS approach and contributes to the debate over the salience of the neo-Weberian model for analyzing the state of public governance in Canada and as a direction for reform.

Canada is an intriguing case with a robust social welfare state and a reform experience diverging from other Anglo-American jurisdictions that more enthusiastically adopted managerialism and NPM reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s (Aucoin, 1995; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Halligan, 2020; Savoie, 1994). In what follows, we start by reviewing our understanding of the new-Weberian state (NSW1) and neo-Weberian state (NSW2) ideal types and juxtapose them with other governance and public sector reform models, adding our perspective of how they model "the state" and propose coming to grips with turbulence and avenues for reform. The second section considers the overall trajectory of Canadian governance and public sector reform, suggesting that Canada has had a distinctive pathway, particularly due to the nature of its federation. The third section focuses on contemporary challenges confronting Canadian governments and using the NSW2 criteria, consider how well Canada is responding. We conclude that section by considering how the NSW2 approach could be further operationalized and, in the final section, suggest that this constitutes an important agenda for research and practice alike.

Our analysis suggests that while Canada displays features of the original NSW1, it fails to meet the criteria essential to NWS2, primarily due to the nature of Canada's federalism and Indigenous governance arrangements, but also reflects Canada's public sector reform trajectory. First, while federalism is ostensibly codified in Canadian constitutional documents, in practice, it is highly decentralized and ambiguous, relying on flexible and negotiated forms of intergovernmental relations (Bakvis & Skogstad, 2020;

Brock & Hale, 2023). Second, Canada's reform experience has been marked by a proclivity for modest reform, characterized by asymmetrical pragmatic incrementalism. Its public sector remains largely closed and rules-based and has a checkered track record with performance management and results-based reforms (Halligan, 2020; Lindquist, 2006). Canadian public management remains predominantly anchored in TPA modalities associated with TPA and NSW1 with pockets of experimentation and hybridity in the public sector. The unenthusiastic view of NPM and the selective adoption of managerialism has been echoed with tepid adoption of digital-era reforms (Clarke, 2019).

What stands out in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century Canadian reform is the persistent and pronounced lack of a coherent or ambitious systemic public sector reform agenda. The Canadian state – which includes federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments – has responded relatively well to major instances of turbulence but remains constrained by fidelity to traditional bureaucratic approaches to public administration and managing highly decentralized federalism. Canada's core public administration hierarchies generally work well, despite occasional errors in judgment and criticism about insufficient transparency, but generally remain professional and responsive to elected governments. As a result, more comprehensive and systematic approaches to reform attract little sustained interest among political or public service leaders, with only episodic and narrow attempts to cut costs or modernize selectively occurring. However, the concerns animating the NSW2 formulation are pressing and worrisome, posing very real challenges to countries like Canada and suggesting that leaders must work more assiduously within and across governments to ensure public service institutions are as prepared and effective as possible.

Locating NWS and Clarifying its Core Features

Several different paradigms and frameworks have been advanced in the field to explain public governance, which often includes implicit or explicit arguments for reform: TPA, NPM, and more recent governance approaches such as Public Value Management, New Public Governance, often also called collaborative governance or network governance), and most recently, the Neo Weberian State. Indeed, NWS in its earlier and more recent forms has been debated and well situated against other competing ideal types, quasi-paradigms, and paradigms (Stoker, 2006; Torfing et al., 2020, p. 2023; Torfing et al., 2018; Bouckaert, 2023; Lindquist, 2022).

Table 1 situates the most recent formulation of the NWS among other leading alternatives and reveals that, at a macro level, these discussions involve differences in the broad values and norms guiding public governance and the balancing of the public sector, market, and network governing forces and mechanisms. At the meso and micro levels, researchers have debated the impacts of specific applications and operationalizations, as well as public sector reform choices. NWS and other approaches focusing on public policy solutions have also engaged in important analysis of how various public governance approaches deal with turbulence (Bouckaert, 2023; Kusumasari et al., 2024). Table 1 ventures our view on the responses or tendencies of each approach with respect to turbulence, a central challenge of public governance, and key motivation and criteria for contemporary public sector reform efforts. In addition, Table 1 shows the original purpose or critique of governance and public administration that motivated each approach.

The NWS model (what we call NSW1) was initially developed to more accurately capture and classify the continental European reform experience. which had diverged from other jurisdictions that more forcefully adopted NPM-like reforms involving aggressive reform strategies, including deregulation, decentering, a sharp division between formulation and implementation, and a shift to market-based instruments. Many European countries resisted and often rejected NPM principles and methods, retaining strong centralized welfare states, strong administrative law underpinnings, and traditional public administration modalities (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). The NWS1 approach recently evolved into a more normative analytical lens of the neo-Weberian state (NWS2), which reflects the continued centrality and relevance of the public sector and a more potent state-dominated form of public governance, which embraces multiple strategies for designing and delivering public services (hierarchy, markets, collaborative networks) (Bouckaert, 2023). This normative and multi-faceted NSW2 reform strategy is anchored by strong hierarchies, which are seen as essential for addressing the emerging public governance context and challenges of the 2020s and beyond, including climate-change-related crises and adaptation strategies, the rise of authoritarian political movements and governments, an uncertain global security environment, and global economic instability.

NWS2, at its core, involves the "reaffirmation of the role of the state as the main facilitator of solutions to new problems," "reaffirmation of the role of representative democracies and the rule of administrative law," and "preservation of the idea of a public service with a distinctive status, culture and, to some extent, terms and conditions" (Torfing et al., 2020, p. 77). Indeed, underpinning the entire NWS2 approach is the predominant role of hierarchy, which "relies on laws, norms and standards for guidance, control and steering" that reflect the state's legitimate use of democratic authority (Bouckaert, 2023, p. 23). Hierarchy is used extensively in NWS2 as a 'mechanism' or 'trigger' with "authority exercised through a disciplined hierarchy of impartial and professional officials" (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 22). In the NWS2 approach, authority via hierarchy is exercised through the application of the logics of consequences (results) and appropriateness (inclusion, equity, values within the rule of law), and through using strong hierarchy for metagovernance over markets and networks (Bouckaert, 2023, p. 23). These condition how authority is exercised within the public service and across the larger public sector.

The more potent role for the NWS2 ideal-type hierarchy is achieved in the four following ways: (1) a shift from internal orientation to external orientation towards meeting citizens' needs; (2) supplementation of the role of representa-

Table 1. Dominant Governance Models/Approaches and Turbulence

	TPA-PWII	NPM	NPG/PV/CG/NG*	NWS2
Conception of state	State as decision-maker and manager, enabled by strong hierarchies	State as decision-maker, monitoring performance	Multiple state actors from across governments	State-led hierarchy; achieving goals through markets and networks
Original Problem or Challenge to be Addressed	Impartially delivering stable programs for large populations	Unresponsive bureaucracies, poor service, deficits, spending	Gaps and lack of coordination of services; accessing expertise across boundaries	Relevance & effective role of state given rise of markets/networks
Emphasis	Public-service-driven policy creation, designing consistent programs & implementation	Efficiency, service quality, dedicated models for service delivery	Negotiation, collaboration, tailored solutions with and beyond state actors	Performance management, competent public service; attention to citizen needs
Key 'power/ governance' mechanisms?	Elected & public service leaders via command & control, hierarchy	Tapping markets, monitoring results, competition	Engagement, network participation and management, relational contracts & learning	Democratic authority, hierarchy and rule of law
Value base	Public service ethos, neutrality, stability	Efficiency and effectiveness via markets, contracts, and monitoring; responsiveness to elected leaders	Collaboration and responsiveness in design, delivery, and monitoring with communities	Stability and agility in the face of multiple demands and turbulence
Perception/ experience of turbulence	Upsets plans and expectations; disturbs routines	Governments negotiate new terms and/or select new contractors	Contracts likely more relational, open, negotiable; more actor inputs	Early warning signals received; assessing the nature of turbulence
How to deal with turbulence	Coping & crisis management; seeks stability, use of command-and-control tools	Move towards more contingent, flexible contracts	More engagement, increase flow of information, reset relational contracts	State-based hierarchy; centralized control and coordination under crisis
Directions for Reform	Develop new plans and reorganize government	Identify new goals/ objectives, and contractors with correct skills/capacity	Develop new shared vision and strategy, adjust the network to match	Results & performance management, opportunities for direct democracy

Adapted from Osborne (2010); Torfing et al. (2018); Lindquist (2022); Bouckaert (2023). ** TPA= Traditional Public Administration; NPG = New Public Governance; PV = Public Value Management; CG = Collaborative Governance; NG = Network Governance. NPG/PV/CG/NG are grouped together because they each rely on distributed capacities from non-government actors, other governments, and collaborative public sector leadership.*

tive democracy with more diverse ways to consult, engage with, and receive citizens' views; (3) a focus on achieving results using a variety of service-delivery arrangements and then on ex-post control; and (4) a reliance on a highly competent, digitally-enabled professional public service, emphasizing professional managers oriented towards citizens (Bouckaert, 2023; Lynn, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Torfing et al., 2020).

NWS2 recognizes that the contexts and pressures of the digital era, along with the advent of 'co' modes of production and public governance, have recast how modern public governance works. However, it sees the state as *the* facilitating and driving force of public governance (Byrkjeflot et al., 2018; Torfing et al., 2020). NWS2 also calls for governance-like principles and practices that generate a more externally facing mode of governing: increasingly open and featuring considerable citizen participation through consultations and direct opportunities for citizens to voice preferences into policy and administrative processes (Bouckaert, 2023). Simultaneously, NWS2 departs from TPA-PWII with the integration of more managerialist principles and techniques emphasized by the NPM movement with its focus on performance management, a results orientation, and an emphasis on managerial public service. However, these managerialist principles are executed through improved public service institutions and offerings rather than through market-based instruments like NPM (Bouckaert, 2023, p. 50).

Canada and Public Management Reform: Background and Context

Canada presents an interesting case for considering reform and the potential for moving in the direction of NWS2. Canada adopted limited NPM and managerialist initiatives in the 1980s but retained a strong social welfare state (Aucoin, 1995; Halligan, 2020). It was never an NPM exemplar nor grouped as an NWS jurisdiction (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). It is usually grouped as one of the so-called "Anglo-American" countries because the dominant language is English and, like the UK, US, and Australia, has a federal government (Halligan, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2009). It shares a set of 'Westminster' style Anglo-administrative traditions with Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, which feature, most notably, responsible governance and strong cabinet governance based on a fusion of the executive and legislative branches; individual and collective ministerial responsibility; the rule of law; and a permanent, nonpartisan, and professional public service (Craft & Halligan, 2017; Halligan, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2009). The anglophone administrative tradition is among the most flexible, which also makes it more amenable to public management reforms (Aucoin, 1995; Halligan, 2020; Marciano & Craft, 2023). However, in practice, reform in Canada has been attenuated because of the nature of its federation and the relative disinterest among political leadership in launching administrative reforms.

Canada's Distinctive Federal Context[1]

Canada's federation is exceptional among the Anglo-American countries for two reasons. The first concerns the members of its federation, consisting of the majority-French-speaking province of Quebec with its unique legal system and culture and a federal arrangement that, while codified in a written constitution, includes unwritten constitutional conventions and continues to rely heavily on intergovernmental relations to navigate ambiguities and formal authorities (Bakvis & Skogstad, 2020; Brock & Hale, 2023). Canadian federalism has always been characterized by a high degree of decentralization, given the country's expansive geography and complex fiscal, political, and administrative governing arrangements between national and subnational governments. This decentralization and asymmetry continue to evolve, reflecting increased urbanization and evolving municipal governance needs, the distinct needs of rural and remote communities across the country, and, recently, a fuller recognition of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples (Bakvis & Skogstad, 2020; Russell, 2021; Satsan et al., 2022).

The second reason Canada's federation is exceptional is that some of these complex governing arrangements predate Canada itself, further complicating the concepts and practices of its federal governance arrangements. They also challenge notions of state-based hierarchy central to NWS1 and NWS2 given the varied and, at times, non-hierarchical principles and practices of Indigenous governance (Alcantara & Spicer, 2016; Bakvis & Skogstad, 2020). Before Canadian Confederation in 1867, settlers had a history of reneging on treaty undertakings, taking away traditional lands and confining Indians to small reserves, forcing new governance structures on Indigenous communities that would later be subject to the *Indian Act*, and announcing policies to eliminate Indigenous culture through residential schools, outlaw traditional practices, and encourage the adoption of Indigenous children (Milloy, 2008). After numerous court challenges and recognition of inherent rights predating Confederation (Satsan, Abele, and McNeil, 2020), the federal government formally apologized and began working concertedly to increase and devolve funding and authorities to Indigenous communities through treaties, decentralization, and self-governing agreements – often unique to each nation or tribal group of nations.

In short, asymmetrical federalism involving provinces, territories, and Indigenous nations is an important feature of Canadian governance (Alcantara & Spicer, 2016; Russell, 2021). Canada has a divided administrative state with fourteen federal, provincial, and territorial governments, along with over 600 Indigenous nations, 12 Métis settlements and several nations, and 53 Inuit communities in four regions, as well as over 3500 municipalities located across the country. Finally, from its founding to the present day, Canada has been enormously influenced by ideas, culture, trade, and other pulls of the United States, its neighbor to the south, whose population is an order of magnitude higher. Despite its distinctly different political system, the United States affects political discourse in Canada, creates north-south trade pulls, and puts cost and trade pressure on its economy. All of these factors condition how Canada has approached reforming governance and public administration (Halligan, 2004; Pierre et al., 2024).

A pragmatic reform tradition

Canada has never been viewed as a significant reforming nation, with the exception of the 1960s and 1970s when, in the post-World War II context, a succession of governments introduced a panoply of significant programs and new cabinet, public-service management, and budget systems to guide the rapidly expanding size and scope of government. Since that era, and with the wave of significant

1 One reviewer noted that "the ideal NWS does not necessarily only apply to unitary states," but, conversely, we note that neither NWS1 or NWS2 explicitly model or suggest ways to treat or embrace federalism. They anticipated different components of the state from a horizontal perspective but has less to say about vertical nature of the state. A next step for NSW analysis is to consider "federalism" more explicitly as a variable, since federations are comprised of differing numbers of subnational units, degrees of decentralization, and dispositions and/or requirements towards cooperation. Perhaps this will be the NSW3 approach.

reforms captured under the banner of managerialism and the NPM, Canada has been viewed as a modest reformer by Canadian scholars and a partial or incremental and selective adopter by many international scholars (Aucoin, 1995; Halligan, 2004, 2020; Lindquist, 2006; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Savoie, 1994, p. 1999). During the late 1980s and 1990s, the Canadian government introduced special operating agencies, service standards, and performance reporting policies and undertook the June 1993 restructuring of the government and its public service, followed by the internationally celebrated Program Review to engage in alternative service delivery and bring its deficit under control (Bourgon, 2009; Lindquist & Shepherd, 2024). However, it was not seen as embracing significant structural reforms like the Next Steps agencies and privatization in the United Kingdom, adopting new language and performance systems and contracts chief executives in New Zealand, nor concerted adoption of many NPM approaches in Australia, including reliance on new service delivery models, performance management and reporting, outsourcing of many administrative functions, reliance on public-private partnerships, and annual expenditure reviews, as well as trading jurisdiction with state governments. In short, Canada has not developed a national reputation for sustained comprehensive reform.

Indeed, looking at Canada, many observers see too many announced reform initiatives but little concrete or persuasive reporting on progress, which peter out and are often superseded by other initiatives with similar results (Halligan, 2020). Many see this repeated with innovation labs and digital government initiatives – there is innovation that can be pointed to but not viewed as leading to a transformation of how the Canadian government works (Clarke, 2019; Evans & Cheng, 2021; Wellstead et al., 2023). That said, Canada responded reasonably well to the Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (Boin et al., 2020; Brock & Hale, 2023; Lindquist, 2022). The Canadian government has evolved and become more digital and inclusive, but many change agents who entered government – especially in the digital space – have left because of frustration with the slow take-up of new ideas and approaches. It would be seen by international standards as beginning to make significant progress on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and furthering self-government, notwithstanding generations of ill-treatment. None of this points to a country that is incapable of reform and ongoing improvement. Yet there remains a sense that Canada is not a persistent, active, and aggressive reforming nation, but rather, a more incremental, pragmatic reforming one. What might explain this apparent paradox?

Explaining Canada's paradox of reform: leadership, strong centers, federalism

First, unless confronting a crisis, Canada's national political leaders have only been episodically seized with public service reform – generally leaving the reform of the Canadian public service and how it works to public service leaders to imagine, call for, and seek government support for. In this sense, Canada's political leaders, however critical of the performance of the public service, have typically deferred to its leadership but often lack a coherent perspective or strategy for reform. Episodes of politically led reform have often centered on increasing political control in policymaking (Trudeau in the 1970s or Harper in the 2000s) or sought to implement new budgetary or expenditure management processes to reduce spending or restructure the machinery of government (Mulroney in the 1980s Chretien in the 1990s) (Savoie, 2003; Shepherd & Stoney, 2018). Public service-led reform initiatives have also come and gone, but with checkered results. Some have been more systematic and significant (e.g., La Releve), while others have involved trendy rebranding exercises, often launched from the center of government without adequate support, implementation planning, or performance monitoring (Clark & Swain, 2005; Shepherd & Stoney, 2018). The activist Trudeau-led governments (2015-) have seen sizable public service staffing increases driven by policy priorities or service issues but seemingly unconnected to a reform or modernization agenda (Craft & Henderson, 2023a, 2023b). Rather, Indigenous reconciliation and public service diversity and inclusion reforms have driven the political reform agenda, while the public service leadership has sought to advance a renewed emphasis on values and ethics with departments and units advancing their own reforms in ad hoc fashions.

Second, if there has been a constant in Canadian public management, it has been a hallmark of an assertive political management, which includes a strong center of government. This was initially the product of reforms launched in the late 1960s, followed by successive governments of different political persuasions tarred with the brush of 'centralizers' and ongoing concerns over the concentration of power around key central agencies and the prime minister's office (Craft, 2016; Savoie, 1999). While these concerns endure, they have seemingly plateaued, with all governments adopting similar centralized management approaches regardless of policy agendas or the party in power. This fact raises important questions for the NWS2 formulation, given its call for a strong and capable state expressed through hierarchy(ies), which may amplify already problematic centralization tendencies as governments look to govern through hierarchical command and control or with and through markets and networks.

Finally, but paradoxically, Canada is one of the most decentralized federations in the world, meaning that much of the delivery of public services (e.g., health, education, social services, municipal government, etc.) falls under the responsibilities of provinces and territories – and increasingly cities and local governments – with the federal government using its considerable taxing power to transfer funds to the provinces and territories, leading to diverging approaches across the country (Lecours et al., 2023). Third, provinces of varying sizes, economies, resources, populations, and diversity also demand autonomy and the ability to tailor how they deliver services, even when induced by shared-cost programs announced by the federal government (e.g., childcare, dental care, mental health services). These two points combine in a non-obvious way to outside

observers who do not see the extent to which provinces and territories constrain the maneuvering room for the federal government when it comes to reform: any significant federal initiative outside of its exclusive jurisdiction typically must be negotiated with the provinces and territories, and to secure support, must be done in a flexible manner, which does not lend itself to branding. Moreover, Canada has ten provincial and three territorial governments, which have launched quite different policy and institutional reform initiatives. Third, even in a domain where a great deal of reform is proceeding – that of devolving responsibilities and authorities to Indigenous nations – the very presence of over 600 nations with tremendously varying circumstances and varying existing governance arrangements with the federal and provincial crowns means that developing clear snapshots of reform progress is difficult. Finally, with a few exceptions, Canada's federal governments have never branded public sector reform in the way that, say, the UK government has. Indeed, the idea of Canada as a "reforming nation" has never supplanted the more mundane characterization as a jurisdiction with "peace, order and good government" (Library of Parliament, 2017).

Governments operate in traditional but negotiated public administration modes

All the above complicates and creates a more ambiguous picture and uneven practice of the state of Canadian governance and reform. Canada continues to have competent public service systems, but many governments must be considered – to only look at the Government of Canada with respect to reform is to miss the nature of progress and service delivery being made at three other levels of government. Conversely, the Canadian state, as a whole, is fragmented and proceeds with an enormous amount of decentralization and uneven practice, idiosyncratic development of policy and programs for even ostensibly national initiatives, and an ongoing mix of collaboration, posturing, and contestation. To develop a good sense of the state of practice and whether sufficient progress on policies and institutional reform in Canada requires not simply looking at what the federal government is doing but delving into what all governments have done in a succession of policy sectors, much like the work of Atkinson & Coleman (1989), who examined the policy networks of all state (federal and provincial governments) and non-state actors, and then explored whether these arrangements and capabilities were conducive for tackling the policy and administrative challenges on the horizon in each sector.

If we were to undertake a similar analysis today, what we believe we would find is a management approach that is still largely operating in TPA modes, relying heavily on hierarchies within the public service and command and control modes of management. However, the public sector is nested within an increasingly networked policy landscape, and Canada's federalism remains ambiguous and contingent. The national government increasingly relies on partnerships and fiscal transfers to other orders of government or individuals and often must work through negotiated intergovernmental agreements to deliver programs and services. This negotiated and contingent reality shines through in Canadian public management, given the highly discretionary and flexible nature of the Westminster-style administrative tradition. Political and public service leaders interpret and operationalize different stylistic and working-level preferences to match the needs and contexts of a turbulent and digital era, raising significant questions regarding how core public management functions and aims are articulated and secured.

Public services moving from policy advisors to implementation overseers?

One persistent issue of concern has been the fundamental role of the Canadian public service as a fearless adviser and loyal implementer (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Savoie, 1999). Its relevance and capacity have been questioned given a broader array of actors, often outside of government, engaged in advisory work and policymaking and with many signaling the decline, or unevenness, in public service policy capacity (Craft & Henderson, 2023b; Howlett et al., 2017). Indeed, growing attention has been paid to the influence of private sector consultants and partisan political staff in Canada, with the latter far outnumbering those in Westminster-style comparator countries (Pickering et al., 2024). Seeking to foster change with consultants and partisan-political ministerial staff is not the same as embedding a reform posture deep into public service hierarchies or bureaucracies.

These trends have been characterized by a greater 'on demand' approach where political executives and the public service draw increasingly from consultants and specialized experts in addition to more robust partisan-political staffs in ministers' offices on an as-needed basis (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Vanden berg et al. 2019). This dynamic has arguably positioned Canada's public service into a more implementation- or 'delivery' heavy role – a departure from its more traditional role in policy development (Savoie, 2003). Capacity challenges are not new, of course, but have become more high profile, particularly for major projects and system-wide modernizations of essential, and often legacy, public service systems and infrastructure. These have called into question the public service's ability to assume a stewardship function over key public service assets and essential operating equipment and have been showcased through high-profile failures and constraints in public service payment systems and public service implementation and delivery capacity in the rollout of COVID-19 responses on public health and economic supports (Boin et al., 2020; Clarke, 2019).

The dampening effect of proliferating rules, oversight, and trade agreements

The recent period of Canadian public management can be marked by the introduction of the 2006 *Federal Accountability Act* under the Harper government, which aimed to strengthen controls and formalize new accountability relationships, including identifying an Accounting Officer for each department, successive reform plans that reflect on-

going attempts to strengthen and modernize public service capabilities, and changes, at least in commitments to a results-based accountability framework as examined below. Moreover, the number of agents of Parliament has grown to include the Commissioner of Official Languages, Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, Parliamentary Budget Officer, Access to Information Commissioner, Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, Privacy Commissioner, and Commissioner of Lobbying, which have joined the Auditor General of Canada and Chief Electoral Officer, and counterparts in provincial legislatures (Bergman & Macfarlane, 2018; MacMillan, 2006; Prince, 2018; Public Policy Forum, 2018; Shepherd & Stoney, 2018; Stillborn, 2010; Thomas, 2003; Zussman, 2015).

The work of these agents is complemented by audits and reports undertaken by the Public Service Commission of Canada, which monitors trends in hiring and staffing and progress on employment equity hiring and retention (e.g., based on gender, Indigeneity, disability, minority status, veteran status, and regional location). Agents and commissions send and institutionalize important signals to departments, agencies, and governments about reform and key values, but this also increases the volume of reporting by these organizations, which lowers the impact of each and makes them somewhat easier to ignore for deputy ministers and agency heads working in over-determined contexts and managing to mandate letters from the Prime Minister (Clark & Swain, 2005; Public Policy Forum, 2018; Zussman, 2015; Craft & Henderson 2023). This reality reflects not a hierarchy but rather a complex web of rules and actors whose authorities can overlap and often intersect, dampening the interest and bandwidth of public servants and political leaders alike to innovate and reform.

Likewise, many observers – including Bouckaert (2023) – note the challenges to and weakening of state power inherent in globalization, governance, the pace of change, and integration across governments due to a combination of trade agreements, supply chains, and alliances, as well as reliance on the expertise found in external networks. For Canada, this includes the North American Free Trade Agreement and Canada–European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, but, interestingly, and reflecting the decentralized federation, the Canadian government has been unable to move internal trade barriers across provinces, often making it easier for businesses and citizens to trade across international borders than provincial borders.

Conclusion: Canada's divided state with competent NSW1 public service bureaucracies

In short, although Canada is a federal state with divided powers, it nevertheless reflects many NSW1 attributes. Public administration at all levels of government adhere to the principles of merit-driven, professional bureaucracies serving duly elected governments, both of which are accountable to legislators and the public. Canada's democratic institutions at all levels of government remain robust, notwithstanding social media and populism, in that elections are not contested, governments are held to account, and the judicial system is not under attack, although some provinces have been selectively invoking or threatening to invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 (a lawful way for governments to not adhere to Supreme Court decisions). Canada's public service institutions have not traditionally been viewed as formally independent from the government of the day, but this is being challenged by evolving practice and conventions that some claim have given rise to a public service with a constitutuional 'personality' of its own (Savoie, 2006). However, to date, the arrival of newly elected governments have has not led to the politicization of the public service institutions. First ministers do have scope the authority to appoint top executives and reorganize the machinery of government so that larger public service institutions can loyally serve governments in a nonpartisan manner.

Moreover, Canadian public administrators devote a great deal of attention to achieving efficiency, reporting on results, and responding to oversight entities. When pushed, the Canadian public sector can adequately respond to crisis and turbulence but often does so through crude and forceful instrumentation, relying on partners and other orders of government, as shown during the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. The public expected Canadian governments to lead and collaborate, and they did (Brock & Hale, 2023). In this sense, then, the Canadian case is congruent with the NWS1 model.

However, the decentralization of the Canadian state means that it does not fully fit the NSW1 model or notion of coherent public-sector reform, especially in non-crisis contexts. When Canada's federal government wants to introduce new programs (e.g., affordable childcare, dental services) or reform policy regimes (e.g., employment insurance, health funding) but does not want to spend significant amounts of resources, it usually sacrifices policy and program coherence in the face of provincial and territorial government demands and in response to strong interest groups. It leads to idiosyncratic, heavily negotiated, and often divergent policies and programs across policy domains for reform. Shared jurisdiction and vertical imbalances in the taxing power of governments, along with divided responsibilities across governments and trade agreements, make it difficult to progress with substantial reform, although those very initiatives and assorted accommodations are undoubtedly reshaping the very bureaucracies that have negotiated and implemented them. The progress achieved can be variously described as reflecting the New Public Governance, Collaborative Governance, or Network Governance approaches, but it would not be possible to characterize this as the result of a strongly coordinated central government, but rather, multiple centralized governments mutually adjusting, negotiating, and working with non-government entities, enabled by competent professional bureaucracies. This dynamic of mutual adjustment, along with the disinterest of Canadian governments in wholesale public-service reform, is a key reason why Canada has not been viewed as a radical reformer, especially during the NPM and digital eras.

Looking forward, however, given the many challenges confronting Canada, larger questions need to be asked about adaptability and the longer-term stewardship of the public service, such as how state-based hierarchies can be reformed to work more effectively in more distributed and negotiated domestic and global contexts, and whether state capacity within and across levels of government is appropriately configured to deal with new challenges.

Current Challenges and Looking Ahead: Appraising Canada as a Neo-Weberian State

Bouckaert (2023) makes an important statement about the need for democratic systems and strong and capable public sectors to adapt governance and public service systems to meet a host of stark contemporary challenges and "system quakes" that arise from rapidly evolving ecological and geopolitical contexts. He articulates a high-level ideal-type NWS model (what we call NSW2) for better navigating these challenges. In what follows, we seek to appraise the Canadian system, recognizing its complexity, against the four key criteria found in Bouckaert (2023) for a more highly enabled state: external orientation towards citizen needs; supplementing representative democracy; shift from ex-ante to ex-post controls; and professionalization of public sector managers towards citizens. However, some crucial elements are missing in the NWS2 formulation, leading us to add critical but hitherto implicit considerations: embracing digital platforms and tools and, in the case of Canada and perhaps other jurisdictions, dramatically improving collaboration and coordination across orders of government are necessary for enabling progress outlined under the other four criteria.

External orientation towards meeting citizens' needs

In the 1990s, the Government of Canada, led by the Treasury Board of Canada,[2] started to focus on improving service quality, encouraging introducing service standards, undertaking research on different dimensions and priorities for improving citizen services, and developing a common measurement tool (CMT). It built a community of practice within the Canadian public service with the leaders of programs engaged in delivering services directly to citizens with single-window solutions, better use of electronic technology, and service standard announcements to users. During the 1990s, the government also created several special operating agencies, such as the Passport Office, specifically to focus on improving service delivery and to provide their leaders and staff with more scope for operating in more customer-oriented and innovative ways. This approach and the CMT caught the interest of service-delivery leaders in other governments, shaping a community of practice across Canada involving federal, provincial, and municipal organizations known as the Citizens First Initiative. It was eventually funded, staffed, and housed in a non-government entity, the Institute for Citizen Centered Service (ICCS). These developments were part of the NPM wave of reform, but it was a selective initiative, not a wholesale reorganization of government.

As interesting and creative as the Citizens First initiative has been, it had two drawbacks. First, despite the considerable interest in single-window and digital service delivery for citizens, governments have been significantly limited in developing solutions across levels of government due to privacy requirements and different digital platforms, thereby limiting the long-envisioned prospect of seamless delivery (Clarke, 2019; Roy et al., 2019). Second, despite the obvious overarching goal of Citizens First, it was nevertheless public-service centered – in the sense of staff using tools and measuring how prompt and effective services were based on data and feedback from clients – and not directly collaborative with citizens in the sense of co-creating new service models. More recently, though, several different kinds of innovation, service, and digital labs have been established by federal, provincial, and municipal governments in central agencies and departments, which use a richer menu of qualitative methods to explore citizen circumstances and needs, and collaborative workshops to engage citizens and key stakeholders to generate new service models (Brock, 2021; Lindquist & Buttazzoni, 2021; Wellstead et al., 2024). However, the take-up of their ideas and recommendations at the policy level has been uneven, especially when involving action by other departments or levels of government, so the extent to which they can be viewed as successful and creating public value is an open question.

Supplementing representative democracy: Consultation and directly representing citizens' views

Although engagement of citizens, groups, and experts was once an important feature of how the Canadian governments developed and reviewed policy – usually through royal commissions, parliamentary hearings, conferences, and consultation processes animated by so-called "green" and "white" papers – those repertoires have become highly attenuated (Inwood & Johns, 2016; Lindquist, 2005; Longo, 2017). Governments continue to initiate commissions of inquiry, usually under considerable pressure after a policy failure or serious issue has arisen (Truth and Reconciliation Commission; Commission on Missing and Murdered Women and Children, etc.). However, in recent years, governments have been highly reluctant to announce royal commissions to appraise certain policy domains, commission research, hold hearings, weigh evidence, and make

2 The Treasury Board of Canada is a committee of cabinet supported by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, a central agency responsible for expenditure management and policies spanning human resource, financial, and information management, and other areas.

recommendations (Inwood & Johns, 2014). These commissions are viewed as too expensive, difficult to control, typically have long lead times, and the final recommendations are often outstripped by the passage of time and events. The last significant rounds of consultation at the national level in Canada involved debates over constitutional reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s and how to rationalize federal and provincial deficits (Lindquist, 1994, 2005; Longo, 2017). Over the last twenty years, governments have opted to selectively engage with and learn from interest groups, peak associations, experts, and citizens through time-limited task forces, advisory councils, social media monitoring, and inviting comments on web portals (Clarke, 2019; Lindquist, 2018).

Provincial and local governments have experimented most with citizens' assemblies (British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004) and other forms of direct democracy and deliberative civic engagement (e.g., Beauvais, 2018; Mao & Adria, 2013; Massie, 2023),[3] but whether this constitutes a "deliberative wave" (OECD, 2020) is an open question. Consultations with citizens and communities are often formalized in selected policy and regulatory processes, such as environmental reviews and budget priorities for limited budget envelopes (Lindquist et al. 2018; Mao & Adria, 2013), but these appear to be more the exception than the rule. Most such consultation and engagement activities are narrow in scope and constrained. All governments now assiduously monitor social media and continue to commission polls on citizen preferences. Some jurisdictions have dedicated web portals that announce and provide updates on progress with engagement initiatives across all departments and agencies (e.g., Canada here, British Columbia here); however, this should not be confused with a record of deep citizen engagement or deliberative initiatives (Lindquist et al. 2018). Alberta governments have used referenda over the years as part of strategies. The *Alberta Sovereignty Act* and the referendum asking Albertans if the province should opt out of the Canada Pension Plan are the latest examples (Moran, 2022). These can be viewed as performative because they can bind neither the federal government nor other governments in any way.

In short, Canadian public service organizations remain largely closed and internally oriented (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Halligan, 2020; Lindquist & Shepherd, 2023; Savoie, 2022). While consultation is a well-established feature of policy and regulatory activity in Canada, it remains dominated by key stakeholders and is heavily managed by government officials and political actors (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Prince, 2018).

Shift from ex-ante to ex-post controls and greater orientation to results?

Federal and provincial governments in Canada have long had program budgeting and performance systems in place and have since layered on a host of other reporting and results frameworks on departments and agencies for specific purposes. Public auditors, reporting to public accounts committees in their respective legislatures, undertake and report publicly on financial and performance audits. Departments and agencies are required to publish department or ministry plans and results frameworks, later followed by performance reports. However, without access to more detailed information, holding any department or ministry accountable based on such reports is often difficult.

The Canadian government has long had an evaluation regime and community, more recently animated by a results policy and the establishment of department audit committees (which include outside experts) that rely on internal audits, evaluations, and results reporting to provide advice to executive teams that is not for public consumption. Departmental plans, evaluations, and results reports are published as part of the expenditure management system but are not systematically reviewed by legislative committees (see Shepherd, 2022 and, for a similar provincial perspective, McDavid & Huse, 2012), but are reviewed at the federal level by mandated department audit committees (Shepherd, 2011). The Treasury Board of Canada requires departments and agencies to submit annual Management Accountability Framework reports, which essentially constitute backward-looking system checks[4] and reporting on how well organizations are performing with respect to seven areas of management: financial management, people management, service and digital management, results management, innovation management, security management, and management of acquired assets and services. Management Accountability Framework reports are reviewed by the Treasury Board staff and feed into broader performance reviews of deputy ministers (Lindquist, 2009, 2017).

During its first mandate, the Trudeau government tracked progress on its 2015 election commitments with a Mandate Letter Tracker (Government of Canada, 2021), but this was discontinued during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the government continues to make public the mandate letters issued by the Prime Minister to ministers on their appointment, which vary in detail and can provide a high level of accountability (Canada, 2021b). Finally, Canada does not undertake annual spending and strategic reviews and share the results with the public, like the Netherlands and Denmark. Rather, the Canadian government's reviews over the last two decades have been

3 MASS LBP, a Canadian consulting firm, notes that it alone has organized more than forty-five Reference Panels and Citizens' Assemblies in Canada in recent years. See https://www.masslbp.com/.

4 This stands in contrast to New Zealand's more forward-looking Performance Improvement Framework (Allen et al., 2021).

episodic, and the advice and final decisions of these reviews have been tightly held (Lindquist & Shepherd, 2023).

Aside from the typically highly intermittent use of performance and results reports by opposition leaders, journalists, and other observers for the purposes of holding governments to account, what should matter more is their use by executive teams for tracking progress, learning, and course correction. Although many programs and organizations provide examples of such usage, instances of poor performance at the federal level over the last few years, which eventually led to public embarrassment, are too numerous to ignore. This suggests that the assiduous use of performance and results reporting is not highly valued by ministers or that it proceeds at such a high level that ministers or their executive teams cannot remedy issues promptly.

Professionalization of public service emphasizing managers oriented towards citizens

Canada's public service and broader public sector reflect significant developments towards more professional organizations. Formal human resource staffing practices, including categorizations and more informal professional communities of regulators, evaluators, and policy staff, have emerged (Shepherd & Stoney, 2018). Likewise, the government has sought to professionalize its recruitment practices with a range of policy and other functional areas to bolster capacity gaps and deficiencies and to modernize public service competencies. Targeted and general recruitment programs have been implemented to fill gaps, respond to changing needs, and often include specialized skills and feature rotations around government central agencies and line departments (Craft & Daku, 2017). The government of Canada and several provinces have increasingly recognized a clear gap in public service digital-era competencies (Clarke, 2019; Roy et al., 2019) and have been attempting to shore up in-house talent to avoid dependencies on external contracts.

Given the interest in improving service quality and service standards in the late 1990s, stimulated by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and eventually leading to the creation of the Citizen-Centered Service Delivery Network, comprised of entities across the federal public service and provincial and territorial governments, and eventually, to the establishment of the Institute of Citizen-Centered Service as a non-profit outside government, funded by a variety of national, provincial and territorial governments. It has supported a cross-jurisdictional Public Sector Service Delivery Council and a Public Sector Chief Information Officer Council, sponsors research on service delivery, offers training and development, and is best known for its surveys of citizens and businesses regarding their service experiences and measuring and benchmarking tools (details here). Likewise, since the 1990s, led by a small office, the Privy Council Office has supported the utilitarian Consulting Canadians website (now called Consulting With Canadians, see here), which sought to promote International Association for Public Participation engagement principles and monitor and showcase all consultations proceeding across the public service. Under the banner of "Open Dialogue," the Canadian government has a web page with links for citizens to comment on regulatory changes and engage in consultations, principles, and guidelines for engagement (including those relating to the duty to consult with Indigenous Peoples), where departments and agencies can procure public engagement and consultation services, links to different open government services, and, through the GCcollab capability, access the federal public service's Public Engagement Community of Practice. A similar capability was developed by the BC government approximately ten years ago (Lindquist et al., 2020).

More generally, research on the function and roles of management-level staff are surprisingly thin and dated, but accounts point to the number of managers in policy and mid-to-senior ranks as having grown. However, most of this work emphasizes their process management functions and the directionality of their accountability, with its orientation being towards senior officials rather than citizens (Howlett et al., 2017; Lahey & Goldenberg, 2014). The size and composition of the Canadian public service has swelled, including management and executive cadres, but without any strategic sense, or clear linkages with policy or administrative objectives, nor why or where staff are being allocated (Craft & Henderson, 2023) and whether, for example, middle managers focus on citizen engagement initiatives or if such responsibilities are left to specialists in corporate services or procured.

Stepping Back: Looking Across NWS Criteria and Operationalization

Table 2 below summarizes our analysis. The bottom line is that Canada fails to meet the four essential "neo" criteria of the NWS2 ideal type outlined in Bouckaert (2023). Canada's orientation remains largely internal and rules-based, and public sector management reform has been tempered by major governing constraints flowing from federalism and Canada's cautious approach. NWS2 does not effectively characterize the current Canadian governance system and its reform efforts. Rather, Canada's governance system reflects a hybrid, pragmatic, and negotiated (HPN) approach. Hierarchy may be a predominant feature of Canadian governance, but it is distributed across governments and conditioned by the practices of intergovernmental relations and resulting negotiated asymmetrical arrangements, increasing recognition of Indigenous authority, complex networks, and globalized policy and administrative contexts. The system remains largely elite-driven and closed, and reform has lacked a systematic basis, often unfolding episodically and asymmetrically.

Recent reform priorities have emphasized accountability, inclusiveness, and diversity and have sought, but often fallen short of, opening up and making government more agile. This shortcoming is unsurprising given the persistent emphasis on accountability, which has evolved through incremental reforms, producing mixed results with important and lasting internal management and results frameworks. Pressures to adopt digital-era reforms have had limited impact, butting up against slow and complicated rules-based

Table 2. Canada as a Neo-Weberian State?

NWS2 Criteria	Canadian Experience
External orientation towards meeting citizens' needs	Internal orientation; results and process/rules-based accountability; limited and uneven movement towards integrating citizen satisfaction; weak citizen-centered design principles.
Supplement representative democracy with a range of devices for consultation and the direct representation of citizens' views	Continued reliance on representative democracy; stakeholder-based consultation in tightly managed regulatory and policy processes.
Shift from ex-ante to ex-post controls and greater orientation to results	Ex-ante controls with ex-post reporting and considerable oversight by agents; uneven track record of results focus.
Professionalization of public service emphasizing managers oriented towards citizens	Professionalization of functional professional communities and management; managers remain focused on stakeholders and responsiveness to senior levels.

Source: authors

Table 3. Extending the NWS Framework

Candidates for Additional NWS Criteria	Canadian Experience
Hierarchy through strong state capabilities, especially to intervene and take up digital tools and platforms to enable NWS	Canada has struggled with its stewardship over key public service infrastructure and equipment. It has struggled to sustain system-wide capacity and to transition to a strong foundation of digital infrastructure, platforms, and cultural tools to work fully within and across government in the digital era.
Effective approaches to multiple hierarchies and network management and participation (e.g., in federal systems, with Indigenous peoples, and international institutions and networks)	Multiple intersecting hierarchies, dominated by ever-shifting and negotiated policies across levels of governments; insufficient dialogue and focus on effectiveness, excessive focus on jurisdiction; increasing prominence of Indigenous authority and responsibility.
Use of markets, both public and private, to foster innovation and competition	Governments have sought to work through and been bound by international trade agreements and global supply chain networks.
Flexibility in ways of working or in how resources are assembled and used.	More effective use of existing resource reprofiling or reallocation, ability to tap into or procure from various places
Federal systems add important vertical differentiation across levels of government, which may vary by number, degree of decentralization, and expectations about cooperation and collaboration.	Canada has a very decentralized federation, with thirteen provinces and territories and hundreds of diverse Indigenous, Metis, and Inuit governments. Increasingly, provinces are challenging how the federal government induces cooperation with shared-cost initiatives.

Source: Authors

processes, and some reforms have sought to identify where best to locate digital units within government and whether and how to incorporate the insight of innovation labs and more iterative approaches to policymaking into practice (Brown, 2023; Clarke, 2019; Lindquist, 2022).

In reflecting on the applicability of NWS2 for appraising the Canadian case, we wondered about the specific measures and whether it was sufficiently encompassing, given the overall goals it seeks to further. In particular, we see critical gaps with respect to how to *operationalize* the adaptive and nimble NWS2 capabilities required to achieve the four criteria, even for jurisdictions that more closely fit the NWS formulation and certainly for federal jurisdictions with distributed government responsibilities. Table 3 below suggests that furthering those criteria requires not only state-of-the-art digital platforms and cultures disposed to investing in and levering them in government but also cultures of collaboration with and across governments and with key stakeholders and citizens. It also suggests that realizing NWS criteria also requires the assiduous use of market mechanisms, fostering innovation, and providing more flexibility in how policy and program resources are allocated, presumably with high-quality performance monitoring.

Governing Canada at the best of times is a negotiated practice, with extensive networks of public servants working across levels of government in every policy and administrative domain, conditioned by the rolling menu of federal-provincial-territorial issues on which first ministers are publicly contesting or collaborating. Turbulent contexts not only heighten the need for collaboration and boundary-spanning but also require more rapid and innovative ways to meet public expectations. However, recent Canadian experience suggests increasing resistance on the part of provincial and territorial first ministers to federal incursions and inducements into their areas of jurisdiction and even shared jurisdiction. Increasingly, though, all levels of government are responding to, engaging, and collaborating with Indigenous communities seeking to exercise their authority and take leadership roles with respect to not only self-government but also the governance of shared traditional territories and investments. All of these develop-

ments require new and robust public service competencies, especially with respect to collaboration and engagement. However, these challenges are uniquely expressed in Canada and, therefore, suggest a fifth dimension for future iterations of the NSW, which is to treat the unitary-federal state system as an important variable that may be handled differently across jurisdictions.

Conclusion

The more recent articulation of the NWS2 ideal-type is an important addition to the panoply of public governance approaches. It provides an important alternative to both NPM and NPG, particularly in the new era of more complicated and turbulent governance we are experiencing and see on the horizon. It usefully prompts researchers to reconsider and rethink the appropriate normative and empirical role of the state, and specifically public service institutions, in public administration. Despite making progress in public sector reform on many fronts, we have shown that Canada does not fare well against the criteria outlined by the "neo" NWS framework developed for considering how governments ought to grapple with contemporary governance challenges. Moreover, we have identified gaps in the NWS2 framework regarding how to operationalize or progress towards those criteria – especially the necessary digital and collaborative leadership capabilities – and we identified other dimensions to consider.

Based on the findings of our analysis, we conclude that Canada's reform pathway has been marked by modest pragmatic and negotiated incrementalism, which has involved initiatives associated with the NPM, DEG, and NPG approaches but mediated by a tendency to cautiously and slowly integrate reforms into existing administrative institutions and culture: Canada reflects a hybrid pragmatic and negotiated approach (not pure NPM, NWS or NPG), an exemplar of an alternative pathway. The implication that Canada ought to become more of an NWS state, which would involve major constitutional reform and unproductive political debate, is not an option in our view. However, the questions animating the "neo" NWS framework are important for any jurisdiction in the current global governance environment. The NWS2 criteria raise important questions for Canada, and exploring the operational questions about how to further them in HPN contexts will be interesting for scholars and practitioners to pursue. We have also suggested that the next iteration of the NSW approach might explicitly consider incorporating federalism into its framework, treating federalism and multi-level governance as an important variable as well as an important coordination and collaborative challenge.

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