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## The conundrum of absenteeism in the Canadian public service: A wicked problem perspective

*Abstract:* Absenteeism has received increasing attention in public sectors across the world. In Canada's federal public service, absenteeism cost the government approximately \$871 million in lost wages in 2013 alone (Barkel 2014a). Current and previous Canadian governments have attempted to reform sick-leave policy to reduce absenteeism, but simple solutions to a complex problem will likely result in negative and unforeseen consequences. This article conceptualizes absenteeism as a "wicked problem" to explore its complexity. Addressing absenteeism requires a deeper understanding of issues and factors by government representatives, unions, NGOs, and policy experts, which can lead to multifaceted solutions.

*Sommaire :* L'absentéisme a fait l'objet d'une attention croissante dans les secteurs publics du monde entier. Dans la fonction publique fédérale canadienne, l'absentéisme a coûté au gouvernement environ 871 millions \$ en salaires perdus en 2013 seulement (Barkel 2014a). Les gouvernements canadiens actuels et précédents ont tenté de réformer la politique des congés de maladie pour réduire l'absentéisme, mais de simples solutions pour faire face à un problème complexe auront vraisemblablement des conséquences négatives et imprévues. Cet article conçoit l'absentéisme comme un « problème perniciosus » pour étudier sa complexité. Pour s'attaquer à l'absentéisme, il faut que les représentants gouvernementaux, les syndicats, les ONG et les experts en politique aient une compréhension plus approfondie des questions et des facteurs en jeu, et cela pourra conduire à des solutions multiformes.

### Introduction

As governments worldwide seek to reduce spending, one area that is currently receiving a lot of attention is public sector absenteeism, which many argue costs governments millions of dollars each year (Barreix 2012; De Paola, Scoppa and Pupo 2014). For instance, in the Australian public service, employees were absent approximately 11.6 days per year in 2014-2015, costing millions of dollars (Australian Public Service Commission 2014, 2015: 22). This is no different in Canada, where absenteeism in the federal public service is said to have cost the government approximately \$871 million in lost wages in 2013 alone<sup>1</sup> (Barkel 2014a).

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In Canada, the former Conservative federal government under Stephen Harper (2006-2015) made absenteeism reforms one of its major economic reform commitments in 2014. The government believed that reducing what it described as a generous sick-leave package, particularly, employees' ability to "bank" sick days and roll them over into accumulated sick days over the years and use them particularly prior to retirement, would help resolve the problem and save the government a significant amount of money (Jay 2015; Kennedy 2015). This approach has, however, been described as a narrow and unsustainable approach for dealing with a difficult problem both public service unions and experts (Wells 2014; May 2015a). To many, simply reducing sick-leave and dismantling "banked days" and aligning with private sector practice can have disastrous consequences to the overall performance of the public service. They contend that the proposed approach would lead to increased presenteeism, where sick employees come to work but are impaired, costing organizations up to three times more in the long run (Stewart et al. 2003; Hemp 2004; May 2015b).

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As will be discussed below, absenteeism is a complex issue, touching all departments and aspects of the lives of public servants. A minor change in one area of absenteeism policy could have unintended consequences throughout the public service, such as employees working impaired (presenteeism), an increase in severe, long-term illnesses, increased stress levels, and decreased productivity, as well as potential other unknown and unforeseen circumstances. With a change in government after the October 2015 federal election from the Conservative Party to the Liberal Party, the current government has already indicated its willingness to abandon some, if not all of the previous government's plans to overhaul absentee and disability policies of the previous government (May 2016a). In fact, the government reached a tentative agreement with many union members in late 2016 to keep existing sick-leave policies in place, including banked sick leave, until the issue can be studied in more detail (May 2016b). Hence this issue is relevant, important, and worthy of discussion. With this in mind, this article seeks to answer the following research questions: Can absenteeism be classified as a wicked problem? And if so, what are the implications of understanding absenteeism as a wicked problem on possible solutions?

Examining absenteeism as a wicked problem, that is, a problem that is multifaceted, unpredictable, fluid and/or intractable (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head 2008; Head and Alford 2015), this article seeks to demonstrate how the proposed quick fix solutions would be largely ineffective and likely evoke grave repercussions. Thus, we argue that in resolving such a problem, a much more nuanced, complex, and multifaceted solution is of essence. It requires a deeper understanding of absenteeism as a difficult problem that requires the participation and action of all the major stakeholders such as government representatives, unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and policy experts including academics.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we will provide a brief discussion about the Canadian public service, show how absenteeism is a major problem, and how it is currently being discussed and addressed in the Canadian context. Second, we review the literature on wicked problems and absenteeism in order to develop a deeper understanding of the two concepts. This will be followed by a discussion on the methodology employed in the article. In the third section, using the data collected, we will show how absenteeism can be defined as a wicked problem. The fourth section will demonstrate how previous approaches were too narrow, and how using a wicked problem framework will help policy-makers create more effective solutions through a multi-faceted approach. The last section concludes the article with some suggestions on how to tackle such problems in the future.

### **The Canadian public service and the issue of absenteeism**

The Canadian federal public service is comprised of over 250,000 employees, in more than 100 departments, agencies, tribunals, councils, commissions and the like. These are generally divided into the core public administration and separate agencies like Canada Revenue Agency, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and the civilian employees of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It is non-partisan, merit-based and representative (Public Service Commission of Canada 2016), and is largely represented by 26 unions including the large Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), as well as smaller unions such as the Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE) and the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC).

Over the past twenty years, Canada, like other western democracies, has undergone neoliberal public sector reforms. These are undergirded by the belief that public sector costs are too high, and are compounding deficits, which are harmful to economic growth (Lindquist 2000; Clark 2002; Camfield 2007). As a result, public sector reforms seek to maximize

efficiency in order to have a public service that supports rather than detracts from a country's economic competitiveness on a global scale (Nolan 2001). The Conservative government under Stephen Harper followed this premise, and its long tenure included numerous cuts to public sector spending (Jeffrey 2015). It is within this context that the focus on absenteeism appeared.

Absenteeism in the federal public service became an issue in Canada in June of 2013, when Treasury Board President Tony Clement placed the government at odds with the public service over the issue, arguing that "the [federal] public service suffers from exceedingly high levels of absenteeism, which is unsustainable for any employer looking to run a high-performing and productive workplace" (Yaffe 2013). The minister's point was based on Treasury Board statistics that noted the average sick leave for the federal public service was 18.26 days, which, according to Clement, is "excessive" (Wells 2014).

The number of 18.26 days, however, was disputed by reports from both the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO)<sup>2</sup> and Statistics Canada. For example, in a report by the PBO released in February of 2014 entitled *Fiscal Analysis of Sick Leave in the Federal Public Service*, the PBO reported that the 18.26 number actually included time missed due to workplace injuries as well as unpaid sick leave, and thus was a misleading number, especially in comparison with private sector numbers. Once these factors were removed, the PBO estimated that the average number of paid sick days per public servant in 2011-2012 was 11.52 days per year (Barkel 2014a). Moreover, once key variables like gender and union membership were controlled for, public sector workers, on average, took 1.1 more days off than their private sector counterparts (Barkel 2014a). Despite this revelation, the Conservative government pushed forward with its plans to revamp the sick-leave system, maintaining their argument that the current level is excessive.

Some, including a number of interviewees, as well as other government officials, have argued that the focus on absenteeism as a cost by the Conservative government was driven by an accounting change. Previously, sick-leave entitlements like banked sick leave days were reported as an expense for the year they were utilized. However, as of 2013, banked sick days are now recorded as a liability and count towards the accumulated deficit, with an estimated cost of \$1.4 billion (Barkel 2014a).

### **Wicked problems and absenteeism: a review of the literature**

Certain societal problems become so complex that no single individual or organization can resolve or provide straightforward answers to them. Such intractable problems have been described as "wicked problems," and their

study has become a fashion in public policy and administration circles, as well as other areas of research (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head 2008; Head and Alford 2015; Lægriid and Rykkja 2015). For instance, the concept has been used to study Indigenous/Aboriginal affairs (Head 2008; Johns 2008a); fisheries and coastal governance (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2009); responses to climate change (Head 2008); internal security and welfare administration (Lægriid and Rykkja 2015); child abuse reduction (Devaney and Spratt 2009); and various aspects of health policy (Raisio 2009), among others.

The concept of a “wicked problem” originated in the seminal work by Rittel and Webber (1973), where they argued that social policy problems are complex and “wicked” compared to more direct, “tame” hard science problems. According to them, this situation arises because the problems in the natural sciences are definable and separable, which may have findable solutions. On the contrary, the problems of governmental planning, and especially those of social or policy planning, are ill-defined and rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution. Consequently, they argued that social problems are never solved. At best they are only re-solved over and over again (Rittel and Webber 1973: 160).

To avoid the term “wicked problem” being applied to every social problem and becoming ubiquitous, Rittel and Webber (1973) identified ten key characteristics for identifying such problems. Camillus (2008: 100) notes that “the criteria are not a set of tests that mechanically determine wickedness, rather, they provide insights that help you judge whether a problem is wicked.” Wicked problems have also been defined as those where “both the nature of the ‘problem’ and the preferred ‘solution’ are strongly contested” (Head 2008: 101), which is the definition we adopt. These characteristics will be discussed in more detail later when applying them to absenteeism, but briefly they are:

1. There is no clear definition of a problem, and definitions can always be contested;
2. Wicked problems have a “no-stopping” rule—the problem has a never-ending list of potential solutions and amendments;
3. Solutions can only be evaluated along a good or bad spectrum, rather than right or wrong/true or false because those evaluating the problem will have different perspectives;
4. There is no immediate or clear test of a solution to a wicked problem;
5. There is no trial-and-error phase for solutions;
6. There are no criteria to examine whether all solutions have been identified;
7. Each wicked problem is unique (there may be some overlap of characteristics between problems, but essentially each one has different

- combinations of characteristics), thus making the generalization of solutions essentially impossible;
8. Due to the complexity of these problems, each can be understood as a result of another problem;
  9. There is no one way to define a wicked problem, and therefore the way in which the problem is framed will directly affect the potential solutions, thus leading to potentially ignored aspects or unintended effects of the solution;
  10. There is intense pressure on the policy makers to create the right solutions for the people affected by the solutions, thus compounding the difficulty of defining and listing solutions for such problems (Rittel and Webber 1973).

Although these characteristics were developed over 40 years ago, they remain relevant to describe wicked problems in contemporary public management contexts and policy challenges. One of the most important aspects of wicked problems is the lack of clear root causes, and therefore no one best solution (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head 2008; Head and Alford 2015). In essence, the way in which the problem is defined will determine the solutions available, and with wicked problems the very definition of each problem remains contentious (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head 2008; Head and Alford 2015; Termeer et al. 2015).

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The literature on wicked problems does suggest some approaches for finding the best solutions to them. For instance, Head (2008) believes that a multi-faceted approach of increasing knowledge, with more frequent and open consultation and better use of third-party partners (such as NGOs and corporations), is the best way to find the strongest solutions to wicked problems. Increasing knowledge of a wicked problem can fill in gaps in knowledge and further understanding of causal mechanisms. A deeper understanding of causal mechanisms can result in more targeted, effective solutions. Increasing consultation implies extended and continued discussion to better understand stakeholder interests and goals, reducing high levels of value divergence. Finally, incorporating third parties can increase knowledge, reduce uncertainty, and provide alternative solutions through more innovative means. This can reduce the problem of “groupthink” and potentially reduce value divergence through different perspectives (Head 2008).

Moreover, traditional governmental problem-solving solutions such as relying on experts or routine bureaucratic procedures often fail or do not perform up to expected standards (Head 2008; Termeer et al. 2015). Hence, the governance system itself may need to be “enabled,” or at least be opened to alternative strategies (Termeer et al. 2015).

Understanding a policy problem as wicked can shed light on why certain policies fail, why goals cannot be met, why consequences were unforeseen, why coordination is difficult, or why solutions/programs cannot be fully monitored or measured, among others (Head 2008). Essentially, understanding a policy problem in this way enables policymakers to look for ways to expand knowledge, consultation, and partnerships to broaden the number of strategies to deal with such complex problems (Head 2008).

### **Absenteeism**

Absenteeism, most generally, “is the failure to report for work as scheduled” (Johns 2008b: 160). It is an important issue because it has been increasing in many countries, and incurs great financial costs (Gaudine and Saks 2001; Frooman, Mendelson and Murphy 2012; De Paola, Scoppa and Pupo 2014). Such costs are direct and indirect. Direct costs include the salary linked with lost days works (Conference Board of Canada 2013), whereas indirect costs are more numerous and more difficult to measure. These include employee replacement (Gaudine and Saks 2001; Biron and Saksvik 2009), decreased productivity (such as missed deadlines, mistakes, and delays), increased administrative costs (like time lost to finding replacements), a decrease in employee morale due to heavier workloads, decreased customer satisfaction (Conference Board of Canada 2013), and reduced performance or safety, like when a highly skilled or essential employee is absent (such as when a general duty nurse replaces a paediatric nurse, quality of care could be reduced) (Gaudine and Saks 2001). Given these considerations and costs, academics and practitioners have looked at absenteeism from numerous different perspectives to better understand it (Blau and Boal 1987; Frooman, Mendelson and Murphy 2012).

Absenteeism, to our knowledge, has yet to be formally defined as a wicked problem in the academic literature. However, it has come to be understood as a complex problem, that is, the product of “a variety of behaviours with different causes masquerading as a unitary phenomenon” (Johns 2003: 159; see also Johns and Nicholson 1982; Gosselin, Lemyre and Corneil 2013). For instance, absenteeism has been linked to a wide variety of causes, such as job dissatisfaction (Johns 1987, 1994, 2003; Hackett 1989), sickness (Johns 1987; Bergström et al. 2009), childcare associated problems (including sick children as well as childcare arrangements) (Johns 2003; Goff, Mount and Jamison 1990), poor weather (Markham and Markham

2005), generous collective bargaining agreements (Dalton and Perry 1981; Conference Board of Canada 2013), shiftwork (Böckerman and Laukkanen 2009), socio-demographical characteristics such as gender and age (women and older employees have higher rates of absenteeism) (Poschmann and Chatur 2013; Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté 2013; Conference Board of Canada 2013), negative attitudes towards work (Gellatly and Luchak 1998), workplace behaviour and culture (Blau and Boal 1987; Gellatly and Luchak 1998; Johns 2003; Gosselin, Lemyre and Corneil 2013), and strict managerial practices (Frooman, Mendelson and Murphy 2012), among others. Further compounding its complexity is that it is not always clear if absenteeism is a consequence of other factors, an antecedent or another variable (Johns 2003; Martocchio and Jimeno 2003).

When it comes to dealing with absenteeism, different strategies have been, and continue to be, employed by organizations and governments worldwide, ranging from simple to complex, and from carrot to stick, with several in between (Johns 1987). These strategies vary based on organizational resources, organizational culture, and the model through which absenteeism is defined. How a problem is framed limits the potential solutions to such a problem (Rittel and Webber 1973; Morgan 2006; Devaney and Spratt 2009). Absenteeism can be framed according to different models, each eliciting different responses. Here we consider the medical, deviance, withdrawal, economic, and cultural models (Johns 1987, 2003) (Table 1).

The medical model looks at absenteeism as conventionally related to various sicknesses, including illnesses as well as injuries and other general maladies (Johns 1987; Blau and Boal 1987; De Lorenzo 1997). It is used mostly when employees are asked to describe their own reasons for being absent from work, where employees generally view their own absences as justified due to uncontrollable illnesses (Johns 1987).

At its most basic level, the deviance model views presence as good and absence as bad (Johns 1994). Under this model, absenteeism is viewed as bad or problematic because of its potential negative effects such as increased costs, and organizational disruption, as well as a form of legal or psychological contractual violation (Johns 1987, 1994). An even stronger version of the deviance model views absenteeism as a mixture of malingering, disloyalty, or laziness (Johns 1994: 229). These differing causes of deviance are important, as the justifications for action can vary significantly, and therefore the choice of policy instruments will also vary. For instance, some employees choose to be absent as a tool of retaliation against the organization or management for perceived injustices like unequal or unfair access and rewards (Lam, Schaubroek and Aryee 2002).

While employees tend to self-report absenteeism according to the medical model, and managers tend to report absenteeism according to the deviance model, scholars often tend to use a third one, the "withdrawal" model

Table 1. *Models of Absenteeism*

<i>Model</i>	<i>Key characteristics</i>	<i>Potential policy instruments</i>
1. Medical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Related to sickness and injury</li> <li>-Employees justify absence due to uncontrollable illness</li> <li>-Most common model used by employees to report reason for absence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Changes to sick leave policy</li> <li>-Disability management</li> </ul>
2. Deviance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Views absence as bad, and the product of malingering, disloyalty, laziness</li> <li>-Employees may choose to be absent as a way to retaliate against the organization, work unit, manager, etc.</li> <li>-Most common model used by managers to report reason for employee absence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Disciplinary action for absence</li> <li>-Rewards for regular attendance such as banked sick days, profit sharing</li> </ul>
3. Withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Focuses on absenteeism as a reflection of job (dis)satisfaction</li> <li>-Employees may decide to absent themselves to avoid uncomfortable situations</li> <li>-Most common model used by scholars to report reason for employee absence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Job enrichment practices</li> </ul>
4. Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Comparison of work and leisure time</li> <li>-Employees decide whether coming to work has more economic value than the potential pleasure derived from engaging in activities away from work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Flexible work-schedules</li> <li>-Scheduled paid time-off</li> </ul>
5. Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Not a frame derived from individual decision making, but rather a view of the organization as a whole</li> <li>-Absenteeism is a product of organizational culture through expectations of co-workers and management, social pressures, and organizational cultural norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Changes to management perceptions and treatment of absence</li> <li>-Recording absenteeism</li> <li>-Verifying medical notes</li> </ul>

(Johns 1987). This model focuses more on job satisfaction and argues that absenteeism rates are a reflection of job satisfaction levels. That is, when employees are dissatisfied with certain aspects of their job, they may choose to withdraw, or be absent in order to escape uncomfortable working scenarios (Johns 1987; Hackett 1989).

Another model that has been used to discuss absenteeism in the literature is economic (Brown and Sessions 1996; Treble and Barmby 2011). This model looks at work absence as more of a calculation of the value of time, where “workers will have an incentive to absent themselves if the level of contractual hours specified by the employer exceeds their desired hours” (Brown and Sessions 1996: 24). In other words, both work and leisure time are seen to have value, and depending on an employee’s evaluation of these two, they may choose to avoid work in order to participate in leisure activities (Johns 1987). Alternatively, employees who are facing economic instability or potential unemployment may value work time much more than leisure time, and therefore will be prone to lower levels of absenteeism (Markham 1985; Johns 1987).

These four models focus on the reasons why individuals tend to be absent from work, where individuals are autonomous actors whose absences are based on their own decision-making governed by personal circumstances (Johns 1987). The cultural model, on the other hand, looks at absenteeism as a product of organizational culture (Blau and Boal 1987; Gellatly and Luchak 1998; Addae, Johns and Boies 2013). In this regard, expectations of co-workers and management, social pressures, and organizational cultural norms all play a role in the level of absenteeism in the organization as a whole (Johns 1987; Blau and Boal 1987; Gellatly and Luchak 1998).

These different models are important in understanding absenteeism as a wicked problem, since how each frames the problem leads to different types of solutions. For example, in the medical model, absenteeism is believed to be reduced through changes to sick-leave policies, such as disability management and employee well-being or health awareness programs (Bergström et al. 2009; Biron and Saksvik 2009). In the deviance model, potential solutions can take two forms: one that entails disciplinary actions or punishment to the employee, or another, which rewards employees for regular attendance (Johns 1987; Sadri and Lewis 1995). Such rewards can include bankable sick days, or profit-sharing (Sadri and Lewis 1995). In the withdrawal model, potential solutions are more likely to focus on job enrichment, to increase employee satisfaction with their jobs (Johns 1987; Biron and Saksvik 2009). In the economic model, depending on how an organization is structured and how absenteeism is understood, possible solutions may include flexible work-schedules (Johns 1987; Baltes et al. 1999), or, similar to the deviance model, offering rewards such as cash

rewards or paid time-off for attendance, thus appealing to the work/leisure balance (Johns 1987; Sadri and Lewis 1995). Finally, in the cultural model, potential solutions could begin at the top with management, and attempts to change management's perception and treatment of absence (Johns 1987; Goff, Mount and Jamison 1990; Gellatly and Luchak 1998). For instance, management may be required to record absenteeism and verify medical notes (De Paola, Scoppa and Pupo 2014).

What these proposed solutions have in common is the goal of reducing absenteeism. However, recent studies have shown that simply reducing absenteeism rates without a careful and systematic understanding of the problem does not always lead to the desired outcomes of increased productivity, irrespective of the model adopted (Böckerman and Laukkanen 2009). Rather, it can lead to the phenomenon of "presenteeism," which occurs when an employee shows up for work despite being ill or otherwise impaired and is unable to maintain regular levels of productivity (Caverley, Cunningham and MacGregor 2007; Böckerman and Laukkanen 2009; Gosselin, Lemyre and Corneil 2013). The cost of presenteeism is very difficult to measure, as there is no clear measurement of an individual employee's productivity on a given day (Caverley, Cunningham and MacGregor 2007; Böckerman and Laukkanen 2009; Bierla, Huver and Richard 2013). However, some estimates put the cost of presenteeism as up to three times the cost to organizations as compared to absenteeism (Stewart et al. 2003; Hemp 2004; May 2015b), due primarily to reduced employee performance over long periods of time, and the fact that continued presenteeism can eventually lead to long-term absence (Kivimäki et al. 2005). For instance, Kivimäki et al. (2005) found that men with higher levels of sickness presenteeism were twice as likely to endure a serious coronary event than employees with moderate absence records, which led to long-term absenteeism. The fact that some solutions could lead to such unintended long-term health repercussions of employees demonstrates the complexity of dealing with the problem of absenteeism, and how a minor shift, such as simply reducing the number of available sick days to employees, can have dramatic impacts.

## Methodology

Our analysis of potential policy solutions to absenteeism as a wicked problem was explored through document analysis and elite specialized interviews. Document analysis is a qualitative approach that involves the evaluation of documents in order to "elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen 2009: 27). This method is advantageous for the study of government policy documents because generally these documents are easily accessible; it is cost-effective; documents

are non-reactive and stable, meaning that documents cannot be altered nor are they affected by the researcher's presence; and exact information such as names, dates, and specific details can be analyzed (Hodder 2000; Bowen 2009). Documents analysed included all recent publically released government reports pertaining to absenteeism obtained through various Government of Canada websites. Other recent comprehensive reports on absenteeism (within the last five years) from NGOs, unions, and think tanks were also analyzed. While this list is likely not exhaustive, it is extensive and, with the government documents, provides a multitude of perspectives and ways of measuring absenteeism providing a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Newspaper articles were also used in order to fill in gaps left by hard-to-reach interviewees as well as provide some context as to how the issue of absenteeism was being reported to the general public. In this case, these documents enabled us to examine not only actual changes to absenteeism policies, but also proposed changes, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of what policy instruments the Canadian federal government has used, or could potentially use, in order to address the problem.

Documentary analysis was supplemented with elite interviews as a way to grasp a fuller, deeper, and more detailed understanding of absenteeism in the Canadian public service. For our purpose, we used the concept of elite to refer to senior officials who have specialized, intimate knowledge of the inner workings in the Canadian public service. We identified approximately twenty elites that were approached for an interview. These include a wide range of perspectives, from leading politicians, upper-level bureaucrats, union leaders, as well as experts on issues like absenteeism and sick-leave in both academia and the private and non-profit sectors. As is common with this methodology, these elites proved difficult to reach, and as a result, the response rate was just under 40% (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Harvey 2010, 2011). In terms of representation of these groups, at least one interview was obtained from almost all of the aforementioned groups, with the exception of politicians. Where leading politicians could not be reached, newspaper articles were used in order to demonstrate Conservative party perspectives on the issue. Based on their integral roles in changing sick-leave policies, we extrapolated policy positions of the Conservatives from speeches and quotes specifically on the issue given by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President of the Treasury Board, Tony Clement.

We used semi-structured interviews because, as noted in the literature, elites generally do not wish to be confined to closed-ended questions, as their expertise is being sought. Furthermore, closed-ended questions limit the ability to obtain a rich description of a phenomenon, which is often the general purpose of using this method (Aberbach and Rockman 2002). Second, a semi-structured format allowed us to probe further on issues

raised by some interviewees at different times, which enabled other interviewees to elaborate more where needed, as well as frame things according to their perceptions (Aberbach and Rockman 2002).

### **Analyzing absenteeism as a wicked problem**

Through the interview and document analysis process, it became clear that absenteeism, at least in the Canadian case, does indeed fit well with all ten characteristics of a wicked problem outlined by Rittel and Webber (1973). First, there is no one clear definition of the “problem” of absenteeism in the Canadian context. In this case, one interviewee hesitated to even refer to absenteeism as a problem, but rather the Conservative government made it a problem based on a dislike of the banked sick-leave days system. As noted by one union interviewee:

[w]hat we’re objecting to is the fact that the motivation for the government majorly revamping the sick-leave system and dismantling it seems to be because of a change in accounting standard which required them to book the future liability of these banked sick-leave days in their public accounts and they’ve never had to do it before. So particularly with the Conservative government, it increased the deficit and they were all of a sudden required to recognize this liability. And that, in our view, is the sole driver for the change and they don’t seem to be interested in looking at the root causes of absenteeism.

A further component of problem definition is, as one bureaucrat asked rhetorically, what is a tolerable level of absenteeism? As noted above, the public sector in Canada is more representative, especially in terms of women and older employees, and, as noted by an expert interviewee, Canada’s federal public unions are far more powerful than their private sector counterparts. Therefore, a level of absenteeism equal to the private sector is an inherently flawed goal and likely impossible to achieve without severe consequences. Consequently, what a tolerable level is for the federal public service needs further investigation and has yet to be agreed upon by relevant stakeholders (including parties in power, unions, departments, and agencies, as well as those outside the workforce like academics).

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The second characteristic of a wicked problem is a never-ending list of potential solutions. In the Canadian case, while the Conservative government wanted to remove banked sick-leave days entirely and reduce the

allowable number of sick-days per employee, the current Liberal government has reversed this decision, based on the fact that it was done unilaterally without consent from the various stakeholders, agreeing to negotiate in good faith with unions on the issue (May 2016a, 2016b). That said, no clear solution has emerged yet from current rounds of negotiations. Similarly, interviewees also had different solutions tackling different facets of absenteeism, running the gamut from moving to a three-tiered sick-leave system, improving managerial accountability for enforcing sick-leave regulations, and improving a “toxic” institutional culture, among others. This sentiment had earlier been echoed in a report by the MacDonald Laurier Institute,<sup>3</sup> which pointed out that a weakness in the system is that managers are generally the ones who evaluate sick-leave claims, a process for which they have little or no training (Cross 2015). The three-tiered system aims to remove the need for banked days and to make sick-leave more equal across age groups. According to one expert interviewee, “the three-tier system. . . is short-term personal leave, no questions asked. . . funerals, children are sick, dealing with your parents, that kind of thing, and secondly, short-term leave and long-term leave. And the vast majority of employers have such a system so that there is no need for such a banking of sick-leave.” Several interviewees and documents pointed out that the current system discriminates against younger employees in terms of leave, as they often do not have enough banked days for an extended sick-leave, and many of their ailments do not qualify for long-term disability leave (PIPSC 2013; Clement 2014; Cross 2015). One union report, as well as an interviewee from another union, however, estimated that possibly as few as two percent of the entire public service falls into the gap between basic leave and long-term disability leave, and therefore an overhaul of the system is likely unnecessary (CAPE 2015).

In wicked problems, evaluations of solutions cannot be done using a right/wrong spectrum. This is because those evaluating the problem will have different perspectives, and thus solutions may not be as much objective as they are dependent upon how one frames the problem (Devaney and Spratt 2009). As a result, it can be argued that all solutions to wicked problems can be deemed a failure in some way (Head 2008). Furthermore, there is no agreed upon criteria to evaluate whether all solutions have been identified and no solution can be clearly tested. In this case, the framing of the problem deeply affects the solutions themselves (Rittel and Webber 1973; Camillus 2008; Head and Alford 2015). When one examines absenteeism, it can be found that these characteristics are present. For instance, unions feel that the unilateral removal of banked sick-leave days is entirely wrong, that the changes “should definitely not. . . be unilaterally imposed” as one interviewee quipped. On the other hand, the Conservative government clearly felt that this was the right way to go, as former President of

Treasury Board, Tony Clement (2014) noted in reference to absenteeism rates in the public sector:

This is unsustainable for any employer looking to run a high-performing and productive workforce. . . This model is failing our employees, and in turn, failing Canadians. And so it is time to fix this inefficient and outdated system. . . This is a fair proposal. It is reasonable, and it is efficient and effective. My proposal for a modernized sick-leave and disability system is at the heart of these negotiations, and I remain committed to a fair and reasonable outcome.

This was echoed by then Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who was quoted as saying that “we’re reforming sick leave and disability benefits to make sure that sick leave and disability benefits are there, and in fact, the system is stronger for people who are actually ill and need help. . . but we’re not going to pay people who are not sick, sick leave” (Kennedy 2015). Hence, a right/wrong analysis is not helpful, as it depends on the point of view of the person. Moreover, given that the issue of absenteeism in the Canadian public service is so contentious, with so many perspectives as to what is right and what is wrong, there is no way to tell if all potential solutions have been identified.

As for testing solutions, the implications of an overhaul of the sick-leave system will likely never be fully understood or measurable, not only because the repercussions may be felt in numerous unforeseeable ways, but also due to the privacy rights of individuals on sick leave, as well as legal protections with respect to information sharing between insurance companies and their clients. For instance, when Canada Post’s sick-leave system was changed in 2013, the prediction was that it would save costs. However, these benefits have yet to materialize, and according to some, likely never will, due to the aforementioned privacy reasons (Ireton 2015). When third-party insurance becomes part of a sick-leave system (such as when a three-tiered system is implemented to bridge the gap between sick-leave and long-term disability leave), much of the information between the insurance corporation and individuals remains private, and thus true costs of the system cannot be evaluated (Ireton 2015). In Ontario, for example, a recent change to the sick-leave benefits of teachers and education workers that included a removal of banked sick days has received mixed reviews. A report (but yet to be released to the general public) by the non-profit School Boards’ Co-Operative Inc. indicates that the removal of banked sick-leave days has actually increased costs and absentee rates. Under the banked system, teachers could get a pay out on retirement of about 50% of the value of days. Without this, teachers are now taking more days off, at 100% pay, which is increasing costs (Alphonso 2016).<sup>4</sup> In addition, it has been acknowledged that the solution to the problem proposed by the former government could likely lead to high levels of presenteeism, which could

actually cost taxpayers more in the long run (Wells 2014; May 2015b; see also Stewart et al. 2003; Hemp 2004; Caverley, Cunningham and MacGregor 2007). The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives<sup>5</sup> had echoed this earlier in a report which claimed that Harper's plan would "make workers either go to work sick or not be paid for potentially long periods of time" (West 2015: 79). Corroborating this, one interviewee noted:

[b]ecause [the Conservative government] was going to unilaterally establish a short-term disability plan that had one week waiting periods for benefits, the income placement rate wasn't great, [it] was going to essentially do away with sick-leave banks and given a choice, to either stay at home with no income or come to work, I expect a lot of people would have chosen to go to work sick.

Finally, as should be clear from the previous discussion, how one frames the problem is directly related to the solutions that may be proposed. The Conservative government, as already noted, viewed absenteeism as a major problem in terms of cost, and sought to solve it by eliminating what they viewed as the high-cost of banked days. Others view the problem of absenteeism as a more systemic one stemming from a toxic work environment, and believe that improving institutional culture and employer-employee work relations may solve the number of sick-leave days being taken. According to the MacDonald Laurier Institute, the organizational culture of some departments is to blame, where sick-leave is seen as a form of compensated time off, leading to "Friday-itis" where employees use sick days on Fridays to extend their weekends (Cross 2015). This same report further argued that motivation is a key factor contributing to absenteeism, supported by the fact that managers and people with more control over their work take far fewer days off than clerks or those with repetitive mundane tasks (Cross 2015). Inversely, some interviewees argued that absenteeism in the public sector is problematic due to the need for banked sick days to cover short-term leave, and should be reformed along those lines.

Unfortunately, there is no trial-and-error phase in terms of implementing potential solutions. In theory, changes to the sick-leave system require months and even years of negotiations between government and union representatives, and as a result, once a solution is implemented, it likely will be in place for a long time.

Wicked problems can be viewed as the product of other problems. In the case of absenteeism in the Canadian context, this point also became clearer in the interviews conducted and documents examined. Potential problems that lead to, or affect absenteeism included lazy, entitled employees, weak management, lack of enforcement of existing policies, a stressful work environment, harassment, unions with too much power over the negotiating process, an outdated system, as well as combinations of these issues. What is clear is that the root causes of absenteeism in the Canadian public sector

Table 2. *Absenteeism as a Wicked Problem*

<i>Characteristics of wicked problems</i>	<i>Absenteeism characteristics</i>
1. No clear definition of problem	Stakeholders have differing opinions: the Conservative government argues that excessive absenteeism in public sector is too costly. Unions argue that there is no problem. The PBO reports find public sector absenteeism is higher than the private sector, although not significantly so. High ranking bureaucrats say no one is clear on what is a tolerable level of absenteeism, or if it has been passed.
2. Never-ending solutions and amendments	Numerous solutions proposed, like removing sick days, removing the ability to bank days, changing the sick-leave system to three-tiers, tackling toxic work culture, providing managers with more training etc. All of these have benefits and drawbacks, and all likely, if implemented, would require future amendments due to unforeseen consequences and changing work environments.
3. No right or wrong evaluation of solution	Definitions of the problem of absenteeism vary (as above), and therefore evaluations of any solutions (see above) will always be highly debated. No one solution will ever be the "right" one because there is no agreement on the root causes of the problem.
4. No immediate test of solution	Any solutions will require a long period of time to analyze whether certain goals have been met, such as less sick days taken. Moreover, if third-party insurance companies become involved in a sick-leave overhaul, accessing information will be limited due to privacy issues.
5. No trial-and-error phase	Any change to policy will be an official change with long-lasting consequences.
6. No criteria to know if all solutions have been identified	Without knowing all future consequences, in addition to different frames of absenteeism as a problem, it is not possible to know if all solutions have been identified. Some can be identified using the literature, but whether this list is exhaustive cannot be known for sure.
7. Each wicked problem is unique	Solutions to other wicked problems like climate change and Indigenous affairs all remain highly debated. Moreover, who is impacted and how differ from those impacted by absenteeism.
8. Wicked problem can be the result of another problem	What causes absenteeism is not clear in the literature, from documents or from interviewees. It is viewed by some as symptom of a toxic work environment, lazy and/or entitled employees, weak managers, etc. Each of these is a major problem requiring different solutions. This also links to problem 4—solutions do not end when the problem being addressed is symptomatic of other problems.

Table 2. *Continued*

<i>Characteristics of wicked problems</i>	<i>Absenteeism characteristics</i>
9. Framing of the problem affects and limits potential solutions	The literature states there are five frames to absenteeism, each with their own solutions. The government appears to use a medical model solution, but does not clearly state absenteeism as a medical problem. In theory, solutions should match the frame, but this is not seen in practice.
10. Pressure on policy makers	Conservative government attempted a unilateral change, but the current Liberal government repealed it. Negotiations continue on sick-leave policy, thus this remains an issue on the public agenda and in the public eye.

are not known, and without knowing these, with incomplete information, potential solutions will likely always be limited.

A ninth characteristic is that each wicked problem is unique; consequently there are, and cannot be, any generalized solutions (Rittel and Webber 1973). This means that, in viewing absenteeism as a wicked problem, one cannot turn to other wicked problems and their solutions, for example, climate change, to provide answers or generalized solutions. Absenteeism is a unique wicked problem and cannot adopt solutions from elsewhere. This became quite clear during the interview phase of this research. For instance, one interviewee with extensive expertise in collective bargaining issues stated that private sector absenteeism solutions cannot be applied to the public service context because “collective bargaining in the public sector is very different from collective bargaining in the private sector.” Moreover, even if one is to use sick-leave solutions that were applied elsewhere in the public service, such as in the case of Canada Post, the incomplete information available due to privacy reasons will prevent the solution and its implications from truly being understood and analyzed, and therefore limit the confidence in applying it as a solution in another context.

The last characteristic of wicked problems is that there is intense pressure on policy makers to find the right solution (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head and Alford 2015). This was clearly what the Conservative government had in mind when it decided to push forward with its unilateral decision and the unwillingness to stretch out negotiations with unions. This is also what likely prompted the quick response of the Liberal government to start addressing the issue of sick-leave once it assumed power. Indeed, absenteeism and sick-leave continues to receive wide coverage in the Canadian media, thus putting pressure on policy-makers to resolve it in one way or another (Table 2).

## Implications

Absenteeism fits the characteristics of a wicked problem. But what does this mean for policy-makers? If one is to understand and approach absenteeism as a wicked problem, then the chances of developing a policy that produces some benefits is more likely. First, analyzing absenteeism as a wicked problem makes it clear that all potential basic or uni-dimensional solutions, like that proposed by the former Conservative government, will likely fail. For instance, simply cutting sick days could lead to presenteeism and increased stress levels. Taking away banked sick days might not alleviate costs because it may spur employees to seek to maximize sick days each year since saving them provides no benefits. Alternatively, unilaterally removing banked sick days also seemed to spark a lot of fury from unions and could have resulted in retaliatory absence as a form of deviance against perceived injustice (see Lam, Schaubroek and Aryee 2002). Incorporating a new sick-leave system with three-tiers has yet to produce known results in other sectors, and is very difficult to measure results because the necessary information is not accessible due to privacy reasons. Providing training to managers is likely to have no impact on employees who take sick-days for regular illnesses. It is also important to note that this is not a phenomenon linked only to the Conservative Party-absenteeism, regardless of the party in power, will remain a wicked problem that will not be remedied by employing quick-fix, one-size-fits-all solutions.

Understanding that these previous solutions will be ineffectual leads to another lesson learned from wicked problems: a multifaceted approach is required (Head 2008). Using a multifaceted approach implies three characteristics: increasing knowledge, improving stakeholder negotiations, and incorporating third parties. First, knowledge must be increased. This means that absenteeism needs to be better recorded and understood across departments (Barkel 2014a). For instance, knowing whether people are taking sick days for basic illnesses, stress, family obligations or other reasons will help frame the problem better and create more agreement among stakeholders. It is quite likely that employees in certain occupations and departments have different reasons for being absent, and that a one-size-fits-all solution across the public service will not meet expectations.

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*Absenteeism, regardless of the party in power, will remain a wicked problem that will not be remedied by employing quick-fix, one-size-fits-all solutions.*

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Increasing knowledge about absenteeism in the Canadian public sector can have two effects: first, it will make it clearer what the causal

mechanisms of absenteeism are, which is not yet known at the individual level; and second, it will allow for policies to be better tailored to different organizations, departments, and positions in order to maximize the impacts of proposed solutions. For instance, nurses are likely to fall into the medical model, due to their frequent contact with ill patients, thus medical model policy instruments may be best suited for their positions. Meanwhile, younger, well-paid employees without frequent contact with the public will be better targeted with policy instruments such as flexible work schedules.

Similarly, it is known that the amount of sick-leave taken varies significantly by department (Barkel 2014b). Trying to tackle the problem system-wide cannot be based on a one-size-fits-all solution because this implies that the causal mechanisms are all roughly the same. In reality, it is clear from the interviews and past research that why and how often employees are absent can vary greatly by position and department. As per wicked problems, it is likely that departments and positions will have mixed reasons for employees who are absent from work, therefore no one solution will work for everyone. That said, a multi-pronged list of solutions based on gathered knowledge about causal mechanisms will have a much more likely chance of success overall in reducing absenteeism.

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*Trying to tackle the problem system-wide cannot be based on a one-size-fits-all solution because this implies that the causal mechanisms are all roughly the same.*

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A second aspect of a multi-faceted approach is that it requires more frequent and open consultation with stakeholders and third parties like NGOs. Although negotiations are, and have been, occurring between government and union representatives, it is not clear what is being discussed, because these are not made public. However, it is known that negotiations between the Conservatives and unions were quite hostile on this issue, and that under the Liberals the hostility has largely subsided, but the policy positions remain far apart. By labelling absenteeism as a wicked problem, it provides goals for stakeholders to achieve in their talks. For instance, a tolerable level of absenteeism in the public sector that is not pegged to the private sector needs to be developed.

Third, increasing consultations with third-parties can help in creating better, more comprehensive solutions by providing further knowledge and alternative solutions, and can act as a neutral mediator in helping to get diverse actors, like government officials and union leaders, in coming to an acceptable agreement (Head 2008). Here, it is clear that academics,

organizational experts, or other consultants could help in this process, either in terms of helping measure absenteeism, finding a tolerable level of absenteeism, providing additional information on how frames fit solutions, and mediating between two very distinct views.

## Conclusion

This article sought to examine the issue of absenteeism and sick-leave in the Canadian public service, as it remains an important issue. It is widely understood in the literature that absenteeism is a complex issue, but simply describing it as complex has not led to more complex solutions. Even by parsing out various frames and the policy instruments each frame lends itself to have not resulted in multi-faceted solutions. By understanding absenteeism in the Canadian public service as a wicked problem, light is shed on possible policy solutions. For instance, narrow, one-size-fits-all solutions are likely to fail because they will result in long-term consequences and costs, and because policy instruments mismatched with models will not sufficiently target various causes. From this discussion, it should be clear that a more cohesive, multi-pronged solution is needed in order to minimize these long-term costs. In order to provide such a solution, however, it is necessary that all potential stakeholders must be involved in serious discussion over possible solutions. This would require agreeing on an acceptable definition, or at least understanding, of the problem. Furthermore, absences need to be better recorded so that there is an acceptable form of absence measurement, and so that information across departments can be better understood and compared. Also, a deeper understanding of the reasons behind absences in each department will shed better light on which policy instruments are most applicable in that setting.

From this, a number of research questions arise for future research and understanding of absenteeism and sick-leave policies, both within the Canadian public service and elsewhere. Absenteeism is often discussed in terms of its impact on the budget in terms of work days lost or the cost of replacement employees, but how does it actually impact productivity? Is there a way to better measure and understand productivity, to see if an employee taking a few sick days to recover and returning to work quickly at full capacity is actually better than an employee coming into work impaired? With the recent rise of work on presenteeism, it appears that employers and academics alike are trying to measure this, but much more work remains to be done. Another issue to look at is banked sick days, which is used as a policy instrument to combat absenteeism in a deviant model. Banked days have recently been removed in other jurisdictions, such as in Ontario, but it remains to be seen whether or not this has potential long-term value, or is simply a one-time savings (Alphonso 2016). This

further links to the framing of the issue—how absenteeism is framed should affect the solutions proposed. This is true not only for matching policy instruments more closely with causes of absenteeism, but also how negotiations between policy makers and bargaining agents are structured. For instance, had the Conservative government framed absenteeism more positively, perhaps from a public service motivation perspective, then negotiations with the unions possibly could have gone better. This frame, and many others, need to be further explored in the future if a long-term solution is to be discovered for reducing absenteeism not only in the Canadian public service, but in public sector organizations across the world.

### Notes

- 1 Due to a number of factors such as uneven reporting across departments, and disagreements on how to calculate the direct costs of absence, this number is highly approximate.
- 2 The PBO is an independent office that provides analysis on Canada's finances, trends in the economy, and estimates financial costs of proposals under Parliament's purview. For more on the PBO, see Lee (2013)
- 3 The MacDonald Laurier Institute is an Ottawa-based think tank.
- 4 This report has yet to be officially released, and the Government of Ontario is also yet to release their own studies of the issue, so whether or not this is true remains to be verified, but it does further demonstrate how hard it is to measure the impact of solutions to absenteeism.
- 5 The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives is another Ottawa-based think tank

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