K. Kernaghan, “Speaking truth to academics: the wisdom of the practitioners,” *Canadian Public Administration* 52 (December 2009)

**Overview:**

There is a gulf between theory and practice in public admin. Public servants can speak “truth to academics” broadly speaking, in providing information, analysis, and counsel concerning the applicability of scholarly writings on their work. Article profiles several public servants who continued to make contributions to the scholarly world. Listed among factors that limit such contributions include time constraints, scarcity of publication outlets, and lack of senior-level support.

**Analysis:**

* Paper is concerned about the extent to which public servants are transferring their knowledge to academic scholars (acts as a bit of a response to Carroll’s piece – which focuses on the relationship but in the other direction)
* Paper thus focuses on the “reflective practitioner” – *reflection-in-action* involves a deliberate effort to analyze events and actions so as to draw out learning points and inform future decisions
* Differs a bit from Kernaghan’s idea of reflection-*on­*-action – the extent to which practitioners think about, articulate, and disseminate what they have learned from practice
* Paper privileges the importance of the scholarly practitioner as a source of learning and provides a list of 10 current/former public servants whose contribution to scholarly literature on PA have had substantial influence

**Observations**

* Lack of time is the primary explanation given for the paucity of scholarly writing by public servants, as well as lack of support
* General perception that scholarly practitioners are “not one of us”
* Some noted that “the senior federal public service does not read, is not aware of the larger debates on PA, does not have a deep awareness of or interest in comparative PA… and is generally uninterested in theory or research”
* One respondent distinguished between truly self-reflective practitioners, and those whose writings can be attributed in part by self-interest. The former uses writing as an outlet of their thinking – testing ideas before embarking on some action – while the latter looks to their own future (i.e. finding an academic position) or writes for their own sense of accomplishment

**Conclusions:**

Practitioner contributions to scholarly writing can be fostered by such activities as co-authorship with academics, communities of practice and senior-level encouragement. To sustain and extend the tradition of Canada’s public service as a “learned profession” promoted by reflective practitioners, the public administration community needs to make a concerted effort to document and disseminate the wisdom of practitioners.