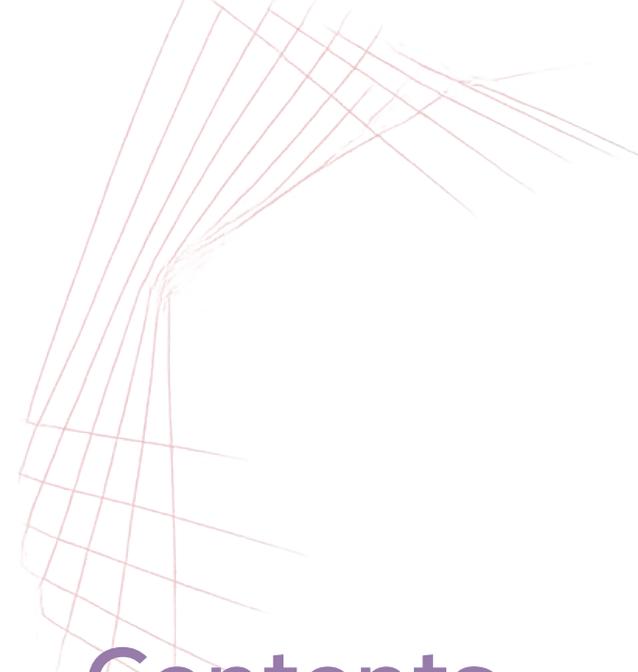# STATES OF CHANGE

Signals from

Apolitical Day 2025

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Authors' Note

This paper comes from inside the practice of public innovation, at a moment when many practitioners are trying to understand what has shifted beneath their feet.

We attended Apolitical Day 2025 as practitioners working inside public innovation, embedded in different systems and contexts. Rather than observing the event from the outside, we experienced it as people carrying responsibility for change inside institutions shaped by uncertainty, speed, and constraint. This paper reflects a practice-led interpretation of what surfaced during the day and is written independently, not on behalf of any single organisation.

Over the course of the event, we noticed how often the same themes surfaced across conversations, even when people were working on very different issues in very different places. That repetition felt meaningful. It suggested a shared moment in the field, rather than a collection of isolated perspectives.

This paper is offered as a contribution from within the States of Change network to the wider public innovation community. It reflects a collective sensemaking effort, grounded in lived experience rather than abstract analysis. Our aim is to surface what appears to be emerging across the field and to help practitioners recognise their own experiences within a wider landscape of change.
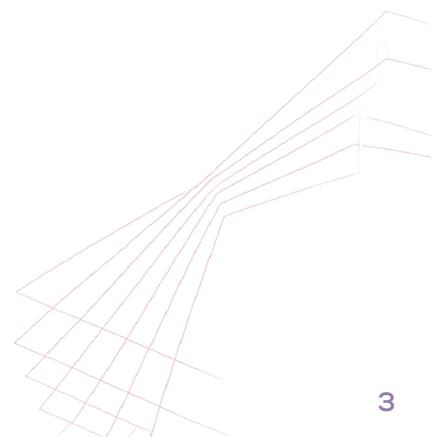
Executive Summary

Apolitical Day 2025 brought together public servants, technologists, politicians and system leaders from across contexts to reflect on the state of government and the pressures shaping public work. The conversations revealed a field operating inside and around institutions built for stability while facing conditions defined by speed, uncertainty and interdependence.

This working paper treats the event as a moment of collective insight rather than a sequence of panels. It draws out patterns that surfaced across discussions, focusing on what practitioners are noticing, grappling with and trying to develop in response to the conditions they face. Five themes emerged across the analysis.

First, governments are being pushed to develop new institutional reflexes. Innovation is increasingly about building shared capacity to sense change early and respond with intention, rather than relying on isolated projects or specialised teams.

Second, the practice of public innovation is shaped by tensions that cannot be resolved through tools alone. Practitioners are navigating competing demands such as speed and stewardship, clarity and ambiguity, and central authority alongside distributed action. Third, new capabilities are becoming central to effective public work. These include working with uncertainty, stewarding powerful technologies responsibly, building relationships across systems and adapting quickly without undermining trust.

Fourth, the lived experience of innovation is deeply human. Practitioners are carrying responsibility inside stretched systems, balancing purpose and fatigue, and sustaining momentum under pressure.

Finally, the discussions point toward institutions that learn continuously. Signals suggest a shift toward ways of working that rely on distributed awareness, ongoing sensemaking and judgment grounded in practice.

The implications are clear. Governments need environments that support steady learning, roles that bridge boundaries and structures that allow adaptation without losing legitimacy. They also need to recognise and support the emotional and relational dimensions of public work.

This paper is offered as a contribution from the States of Change network to the public sector innovation community. It aims to support practitioners in seeing their experiences reflected in a wider landscape and to help make emerging patterns more visible at a moment when clarity is difficult but essential.
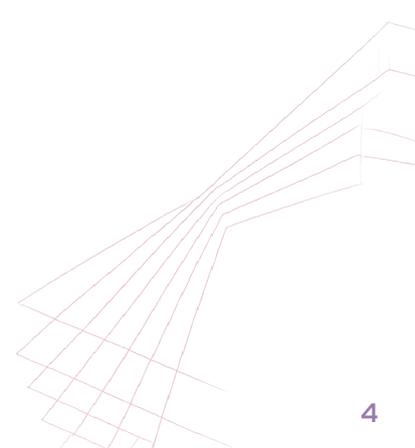
Introduction

When practitioners working inside public systems gather, something different happens than at a typical conference. The value is not only in the ideas presented or the expertise on display. It lies in what becomes visible when people speak from inside their work, often without intending to make a point. The questions they return to, the concerns that surface repeatedly and the language they use to describe their challenges offer insight into how the field is experiencing the moment it is in.

Apolitical Day 2025 created one such moment. Over the course of the day, public servants, technologists and system leaders spoke from very different contexts, yet many of their reflections resonated with each other. People described pressures that felt familiar, even when the issues they worked on were not. They spoke about navigating change, responsibility and uncertainty in ways that suggested shared conditions shaping their work, regardless of geography or sector.

This working paper takes that moment seriously. Rather than documenting what was said session by session, it treats the day as an opportunity to listen for what was emerging across conversations. The aim is not to catalogue opinions or extract best practices, but to notice how practitioners are making sense of their work and what that reveals about the state of public innovation today.

The approach is grounded in practice. It assumes that those working inside public systems often have a clear sense of what is shifting long before it becomes visible in formal strategies or policy statements. Events like Apolitical Day create rare spaces where these signals can surface, even briefly. Capturing them helps prevent insight from dissolving back into individual experience once people return to their organisations.

This paper is written as a contribution to the public sector innovation community through the lens of the States of Change network. It reflects a belief that learning across contexts matters, and that shared interpretation is a necessary complement to experimentation and action. By paying attention to what practitioners are already noticing, the paper aims to support a deeper understanding of the moment public institutions are navigating and to make space for collective reflection on what may be emerging next.
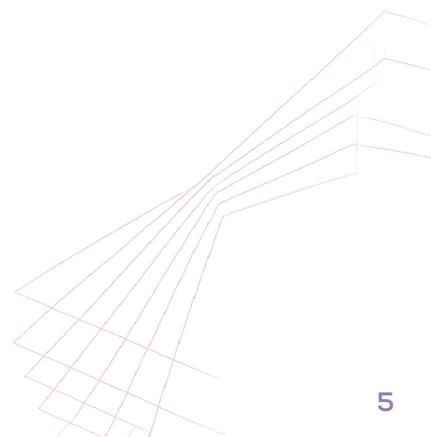
Methodology

This working paper uses Apolitical Day 2025 as a form of field-level data. Rather than treating the event as a series of discrete panels, we approached it as a concentrated moment in which public innovators expressed their challenges, ideas and uncertainties in real time. The full notes of the day (with the exception of one session held under Chatham House rules) served as the primary source for analysis.

The methodology combined qualitative coding, thematic clustering and reflective interpretation. The notes were reviewed in multiple passes. In the first pass, we identified repeated concepts, tensions, questions and phrases that appeared across different sessions. These initial codes were not tied to speakers or sectors; instead, they were treated as signals that something might be surfacing more broadly. In the second pass, the codes were grouped into emerging themes that reflected shared concerns, shifts in practice and early indicators of change.

Once these clusters were established, we looked for patterns that cut across them: contradictions, unresolved questions, gaps between aspiration and institutional reality, and emotional undercurrents that shaped the mood of the conversations. This pattern-oriented approach aligns with sensemaking practice, which aims to reveal coherence across diverse experiences rather than summarise content.

A small group of States of Change Fellows who attended the event –Alex Ryan, Stephanie Wade, Jason Pearman and Cat Zuzarte Tully– were invited to reflect on the emerging themes. Their perspectives helped refine the analysis, highlight blind spots and introduce additional nuance from different countries, roles and systems. Their contributions were interpretive rather than editorial, shaping the meaning-making process without altering the underlying dataset.

Like any such exercise, this methodology has limitations. It draws solely on conversations from a single event, even if that event brought together a broad mix of practitioners. The synthesis reflects the insights available in that moment and the lenses of those interpreting it. The purpose is not to make comprehensive claims about the global state of public innovation, but to identify early signals, patterns and tensions that appear meaningful when viewed collectively.

What follows is therefore a working interpretation: a sensemaking snapshot of what public innovators seemed to be grappling with, hoping for and trying to understand in 2025, based on what they shared –intentionally or unintentionally– in this single, dense gathering.
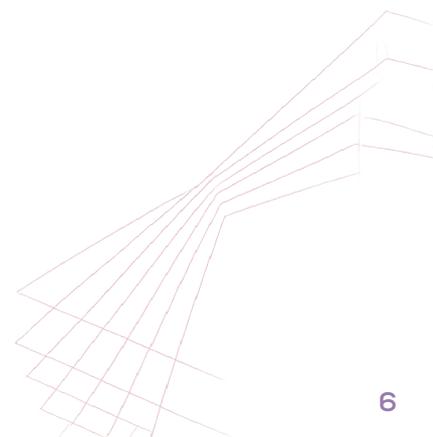
The Moment: what governments are facing

Across Apolitical Day 2025, a shared picture of government work emerged through the stories people told, the worries they named and the ideas they were beginning to test. No single conversation captured the whole picture. Taken together, they revealed a field being reshaped by seven forces that are moving faster and landing harder than the systems built to respond to them.

The first force is speed.

Technology now develops at a rhythm that outpaces how governments learn, adapt and make decisions. AI systems evolve almost instantaneously. New infrastructures appear before institutions have worked out how to steward them. Practitioners spoke about being responsible for choices whose implications they cannot yet fully see, while still carrying the expectation of public trust. The gap between the velocity of change and the reflexes of government sits at the centre of the pressure many people described in their daily work.

Beneath this sits a quieter but equally powerful issue: misalignment. Institutions are not only struggling to move quickly enough, they are also struggling to stay in step with the societies they serve. Organisational logics, incentives and forms of authority often reflect an earlier version of the world, while social, economic and technological realities have already moved on. This lack of resonance amplifies the strain of speed, making adaptation feel harder and more costly than it might otherwise be.

The second force is the complexity of the problems themselves

The stories shared throughout the day pointed to a world where issues do not present themselves neatly or politely. Climate stress, geopolitical volatility, economic uncertainty, demographic shifts and digital fragmentation do not wait for institutional readiness. They cut across sectors, undermine assumptions and expose the seams in traditional models of governance. Many practitioners noted that even when problems originate outside the boundaries of a department or agency, their impact lands squarely inside it. The work becomes less about solving discrete problems and more about navigating forms of uncertainty that no single actor can control.

The third force is emotional weight

Running beneath many of the discussions was a mix of urgency, responsibility and fatigue. People described the challenge of acting quickly while honouring democratic obligations, and the fear of making the wrong call when the stakes are high and timelines are tight. Several spoke about the toll of trying to move new ideas through traditional systems, pushing uphill while the ground continues to shift. At the same time, they spoke about determination: finding space for care, supporting colleagues and rebuilding trustworthiness in systems that often feel stretched thin. Innovation, in this moment, is not only a technical practice. It is emotional labour.
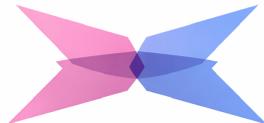
The fourth force is politicisation

Rising mistrust in institutions generally, and government in particular, has intensified the politicisation of the civil service. Populist movements in many contexts are attacking and demoralising the public sector, portraying it as bloated, inefficient, elitist or out of touch. Conversations reflected unease about how to respond. Civil servants are expected to remain apolitical and avoid the spotlight, yet when millions of jobs and the mission of public service itself are under attack, inaction feels increasingly untenable. Practitioners acknowledged the importance of improving efficiency and relevance, while expressing deep concern about efficiency narratives being used to legitimise efforts that weaken the state rather than strengthen it.

The fifth force is conflict

The day opened with discussion about the changing nature of warfare. Armed conflict, or the threat of it, has long driven the development of general-purpose technologies that now shape everyday life. It has also accelerated shifts in energy policy, industrial strategy and sovereign technology investment. Despite a widespread aversion to conflict and realpolitik, there was no clear equivalent pathway for mobilising the state around collective or individual thriving. This absence left an unresolved question hanging over the day: how governments organise with seriousness and scale around flourishing, not only defence.

The sixth force is identity

Across the day, it became clear that public innovation is no longer primarily about tools, methods or isolated projects. It is increasingly about how institutions understand themselves and their role in a changing world. Practitioners are grappling with questions that go beyond delivery: how governments adapt without breaking, what leadership looks like when predictability is no longer available, and how institutions remain legitimate when responsiveness matters as much as stability.

These questions are not abstract. They surface in the everyday experience of people trying to lead change inside organisations whose assumptions were shaped for a different era. Many described the challenge of navigating new directions while remaining anchored to inherited structures, accountabilities and norms. The work now involves reorienting institutions even as they continue to operate, holding steady enough to remain trustworthy while moving fast enough to stay relevant.

The seventh force is expectation

Practitioners repeatedly pointed to the widening gap between what societies expect governments to do and what existing institutional models allow. People expect foresight, protection, competence, fairness and speed, all at once. They expect governments to harness new technologies while preventing their harms, to show resilience in crisis and compassion in recovery. Many felt that governments are being asked to operate at a level of complexity their structures were never designed to hold. The work is no longer only about improving public services. It is about maintaining coherence in systems that are constantly being shaken.

Taken together, these forces describe a field standing in a threshold moment. Practitioners sense that established ways of organising and acting are no longer sufficient, but that new forms have not yet fully emerged. They are working inside institutions that need to change shape while continuing to operate at full speed. This creates a double burden: delivering today while inventing tomorrow.

And yet the tone of the day was not despairing. What came through was quieter and more grounded: resolve. People are experimenting, learning from one another, carrying questions forward and trying to build the reflexes and relationships this moment demands. The work is becoming less about prediction and more about preparedness, less about perfect solutions and more about the capacity to respond when certainty is no longer available. This section describes the conditions shaping public work in 2025, the pressures, constraints and forces practitioners are operating within. The sections that follow shift focus from these conditions to how practitioners are responding in practice: the ways they are adapting, the tensions they are navigating and the capabilities they are trying to develop in response.

Findings

The forces described above set the conditions in which public innovators are working. The sections that follow shift focus from those conditions to how practitioners are responding in practice.

The findings capture recurring patterns in how people described adapting their work, navigating tensions and developing new capabilities in response to the pressures they face. They are not explanations of the drivers themselves, nor a set of recommendations or a taxonomy of practice. Rather, they reflect shared ways of making sense of the moment and acting within it.

Each theme highlights a distinct aspect of this response, from developing new institutional reflexes to working inside unresolved tensions, building emerging capabilities and sustaining the human side of the work.

Theme 1: Governments are trying to develop new reflexes for a world that no longer waits

Across the conversations at Apolitical Day, a central concern kept resurfacing in different ways. People talked about the strain of working in systems that move slowly while being asked to respond to problems that shift and intensify at speed. Technology was the most visible example. New tools arrive quickly, public expectations rise with every breakthrough, and project teams are left trying to understand and apply capabilities that did not exist a year ago. The speed of change was described not as a technical challenge but as a deeper mismatch between how governments are built and the conditions they now operate in.

Practitioners described a growing need for institutions to develop something closer to reflexes. They spoke about the importance of reading situations early, noticing weak signals, and adjusting before risks turn into crises. Planning still matters, but people increasingly rely on sensing. They pay attention to patterns, to shifts in behaviour, to what teams are struggling with across different contexts. The ability to sense has become as important as the ability to decide. Several speakers hinted that this is where innovation is moving. It is less about launching new projects and more about building a shared capacity to recognise change and respond with care and confidence.

Even when people work on very different issues, the same tension came through. Teams want to act quickly, but they operate inside systems that were designed to slow things down for the sake of fairness and accountability. This creates a kind of emotional strain. Practitioners understand why safeguards exist and also see how they can limit the ability to protect the public when conditions evolve faster than the rules. They carry the weight of responsibility, especially when decisions must be made with incomplete information. Many described moments where they had to work outside familiar processes simply because waiting for certainty would have meant missing the moment to act.

Responsiveness, as people described it, cannot sit with one team or one leader. It needs to be a shared capability across departments and levels of seniority. What emerged from the day was a sense that governments are being pushed into a new institutional posture, one that relies more on distributed awareness than centralised planning. People are no longer trying to build faster versions of traditional structures. They are trying to build structures that can stay attentive and flexible without losing legitimacy or grounding.
The early signal here is subtle but unmistakable. Legitimacy in the future may depend as

much on a government's ability to adjust as on its ability to deliver. The pressure people feel in their work suggests that innovation is shifting from something done by a specialised group to something that operates more like muscle memory. Governments need reflexes, not only strategies. They need ways of working that match the speed and texture of the world they are in. This was described in different ways across the day, but the underlying message was the same. Institutions need to learn to move differently.

Theme 2: The work of public innovation is defined by tensions that no single tool or team can resolve

A second pattern that surfaced throughout the day was the presence of shared tensions that shape the daily experience of public innovators. These tensions are not the kind that can be solved with a better framework or a new service model. They sit underneath how work gets done and influence the direction and texture of change efforts. What makes them so striking is that they appeared in conversations about defence, climate, digital services, social care, AI governance, and community engagement alike. The contexts shifted, but the tensions stayed the same.

The tension between speed and stewardship was the most visible. People described feeling responsible for protecting the public while also being expected to act quickly in situations where hesitation carries its own risks. They spoke about the discomfort of knowing that moving too slowly could cause harm, but so could moving too fast. This created a mood of careful urgency, a sense that teams are constantly weighing what is responsible against what is possible in the time available. No one framed this as a failure of process. It was described more as an unavoidable feature of the moment we are living through.

Another tension was the pull between clarity and ambiguity. Practitioners want to create structure and direction for their teams, yet most of the problems they face fold back into bigger, systemic conditions that no single organisation can define neatly. People expressed the need for clearer mandates and expectations, while also accepting that clarity can be impossible when decisions depend on incomplete information or uncertain outcomes. This tension pushes leaders and teams to work in the space between knowing and not knowing. It requires a kind of grounded confidence that does not wait for perfect certainty.

A third tension came from the relationship between central control and distributed capacity. On one hand, institutions still depend on central oversight to guarantee fairness, accountability and standards. On the other, many challenges require fast, local responses that cannot wait for approval chains or detailed coordination. Practitioners described this not as a power struggle but as a structural misalignment. The people closest to the problem often hold the knowledge and context needed to act first, yet the authority to do so sits elsewhere. This creates a practical friction that slows down learning and limits the ability of institutions to adapt at the speed required.

The final tension that surfaced repeatedly was the balance between innovation and institutional resilience. People want to introduce new methods, technologies and ways of working, but they also carry the responsibility of protecting core systems that millions rely on. The risk of breaking something essential weighs heavily on teams. Several speakers described innovation not as disruption, but as a continuous effort to help institutions stay coherent during change. This reframing suggests a deeper shift in the field where innovation is viewed less as experimentation and more as a form of stewardship.

These tensions are not problems to solve. They are conditions practitioners must navigate. What makes them patterns rather than isolated experiences is how consistently they appeared across topics, roles and countries. They show where the field is stretched and

where its energy is focused. The presence of shared tensions suggests that public innovators are working inside a landscape of competing demands, each one legitimate, each one unavoidable. Progress in this moment seems to depend not on resolving these tensions, but on learning to work inside them with more intentionality and shared understanding.

Theme 3: Governments are being pushed to develop capabilities that are still emerging and often undervalued

A third pattern across the conversations was the way people described the skills and capabilities needed for the work ahead. These were rarely framed as formal competencies or training needs. Instead, they came through indirectly in what practitioners found difficult, where they felt unprepared, or what they wished their institutions could do more easily. The capabilities that surfaced are not new in theory, but the intensity of the moment means they now sit at the centre of effective public work.

One of the clearest capabilities was the ability to work with uncertainty. People described situations where decisions had to be made before the facts were complete, where signals were faint, and where timelines did not allow for the comfort of exhaustive analysis. This was not about being reckless. It was about acting responsibly when clarity is not available. The skill here is not prediction. It is judgement under pressure, informed by sensing, experience and collective reflection. Practitioners spoke about the need to build this capacity in teams across all levels, not only within specialised innovation units.

Another capability that came through strongly was relational awareness. Across topics, speakers emphasised the importance of trust, negotiation and the ability to work across boundaries. Problems that cut across sectors require people who can bring others into the work, who understand how decisions land in different parts of the system, and who can maintain coordination without forcing alignment. Several comments hinted at the growing importance of roles that sit between traditional functions: people who translate between technology and policy, between operations and strategy, or between institutions and communities. These roles rely less on formal authority and more on credibility, listening and presence.

A third emerging capability was the ability to steward powerful technologies. This is more than digital literacy. It involves understanding the implications of AI systems, data infrastructures and predictive models well enough to guide their use responsibly. People described feeling caught between enthusiasm and unease. They want to harness new tools, but they also want to protect the public from unintended consequences. The capability required here is neither purely technical nor purely ethical. It combines the two in a way that allows governments to adopt new tools without outsourcing their judgement to them.

Adaptability appeared as a fourth capability that is becoming increasingly important. Practitioners talked about the need for teams to reorganise quickly, test small approaches, learn from failure and switch direction without losing momentum. This capability is often assumed to be cultural, but many speakers hinted that it is also structural. Institutions need processes and authorising environments that support experimentation rather than inhibit it. Adaptability, in this sense, is the result of alignment between mindset, mandate and method.

Finally, emotional resilience surfaced as a capability that is rarely named but deeply felt. People described the personal cost of carrying responsibility in high-pressure environments, the challenge of leading without certainty, and the need to maintain clarity and care when situations become overwhelming. The ability to stay grounded, to work from

purpose rather than anxiety, and to support others through ambiguity was described as essential to sustaining both teams and institutions.

Together, these capabilities point to a shift in what public work requires. The emphasis is moving away from technical expertise alone and toward a more integrated form of practice that blends judgement, relational skill, technological understanding, adaptability and emotional maturity. These skills do not sit neatly inside traditional competency frameworks, but they shape the ability of governments to respond to the moment they are in. They also suggest that the future of public innovation lies not in new methods alone, but in the development of people and cultures that can navigate complexity with steadiness and intention.

Theme 4: The practice of government innovation feels stretched and deeply human in ways that are easy to overlook

Another strong pattern across the conversations was the way people described the lived experience of doing this work. Innovation is often discussed as a technical activity, a policy choice or a strategic priority. What came through much more clearly during the day was that it is also an emotional and relational practice. People carry the strain of systems under pressure, the weight of public responsibility and the challenge of working in environments where the answers are rarely obvious and the stakes are always real.

Practitioners spoke about feeling stretched in several directions at once. They need to move quickly, but they also need to be careful. They need to collaborate, but the structures they work in still reward siloed control. They need to bring energy and creativity to their teams, but they are often working inside environments shaped by fear, scrutiny or fatigue. Many described a sense of constantly switching between modes: protecting the core functions of government while trying to open space for experimentation, stabilising systems while trying to introduce change, calming teams while absorbing the turbulence around them.

Confidence was another recurring theme, not as arrogance but as the quiet clarity required to act without perfect information. People described moments where they had to rely on judgement and shared sensemaking rather than established processes, especially when dealing with new technologies or conditions that did not fit into familiar categories. This kind of confidence is not about certainty. It is about staying grounded when the surrounding context is moving. Several speakers hinted at how rare and undervalued this form of leadership is, despite its importance.

A different kind of emotional experience also surfaced in the reflections. There was a strong sense of purpose that anchored people even when the work became overwhelming. Practitioners expressed a commitment to shaping systems that could serve both present and future generations, and a belief that public institutions can adapt and evolve when given the right conditions. This sense of purpose acted as a counterweight to the fatigue and frustration. It helped people stay focused on the broader arc of change rather than being consumed by the pressures of the moment.

At the same time, there was an undercurrent of vulnerability. People were honest about feeling uncertain, exposed or isolated in their roles, especially when leading change inside systems that do not always understand or value innovation. They described the emotional labour of holding optimism in environments that often default to caution, or of naming uncomfortable truths in rooms where people are hesitant to confront complexity. This vulnerability was not presented as weakness. It was part of what makes the work real and grounded.

What stood out most, however, was how relational the practice has become. Many of the challenges described cannot be addressed through technical expertise alone. They require trust, negotiation, shared interpretation and coordinated action across boundaries. The emotional tone of the day suggested that innovation is increasingly defined by the quality of relationships inside and across institutions. People spoke about the need for leaders who can connect, listen, frame uncertainty, create safety for experimentation and help others navigate ambiguity with steadiness.

Taken together, these reflections show that the practice of government innovation in 2025 is not only about methods or new organisational models. It is about people working in demanding environments, trying to stay clear, connected and purposeful while carrying responsibility for systems that matter deeply. The work feels stretched because the systems are stretched. The work feels human because the problems cannot be reduced to technical fixes. This emotional landscape shapes how practitioners act, how they learn and what they believe is possible.

Theme 5: Early signals suggest a shift toward institutions that learn in real time

Throughout the conversations, a series of small but consistent signals pointed toward how government practice may be evolving. These were not bold declarations or formal commitments. They appeared instead in the language people used, the capabilities they valued, and the challenges they returned to repeatedly. Together, they suggest that institutions may be moving toward a model where learning, adaptation and shared sensemaking sit much closer to the centre of public work.

One signal was the growing emphasis on understanding context as it changes. People talked about sensing, reading patterns, watching for weak signals and staying aware of how decisions in one part of the system affect others. This attention to movement rather than snapshots hints at a future where governments operate with a more dynamic understanding of their environment. The work becomes less about reacting to events and more about recognising shifts early enough to adjust with intention.

Another signal was the way practitioners described the relationship between technology and judgment. Rather than focusing on tools alone, people kept returning to the importance of guiding principles, oversight, calibration and responsible decision making. This suggests a shift away from seeing technology as a solution and toward seeing it as something that must be stewarded. The idea that governments require capacities to interpret, question and shape technology, not simply adopt it, marks a quiet but meaningful change in posture.

A third signal was the recurring focus on cross-boundary work. Collaboration has long been a theme in public innovation, but the tone this time felt different. People did not speak about it as an aspiration or a value but as a practical necessity. Problems that cut through sectors and regions demand relationships that are maintained continuously, not assembled in moments of crisis. This signals a move toward forms of governance that rely on networks and distributed capability rather than single points of authority.

There was also a signal in the way people talked about trust. Instead of focusing on how to restore trust from the public, many conversations centred on how to build trustworthiness within institutions. This shift away from managing perceptions and toward strengthening integrity, transparency and accountability suggests that legitimacy in the future may rest on institutions being able to show how decisions are made, not simply what outcomes they produce.

A striking insight from our collective conversations is that people are bolder than the institutions they are part of. In 2025, no one needs to be convinced that conditions in the world are changing faster than our institutions can effectively respond. But fiduciary duty to preserving the institutions that employ us and protecting the interests of the partial constituencies we represent creates a strong conservative pull that avoids risk or deep reform in favour of perpetuating a broken system.

A final signal came from the emotional tone of the day. Despite the pressures described, there was a sense of quiet determination that cut through the worry. People spoke about the need to take care of their colleagues, to pace themselves, to stay grounded and to protect space for learning even when timelines are tight. This attention to collective well-being and clarity suggests that the future of public innovation may depend as much on how institutions support the people doing the work as on the methods they adopt.

These signals do not add up to a new model of government, nor do they point to a single direction. They hint at a gradual shift in posture. Institutions may be moving toward ways of working that are more attentive, relational and adaptive. They may be learning to work with uncertainty rather than trying to eliminate it. If these signals hold, the next phase of public innovation will be defined less by new tools and more by the capacity of institutions to learn in real time and act with intention when the ground moves beneath them.
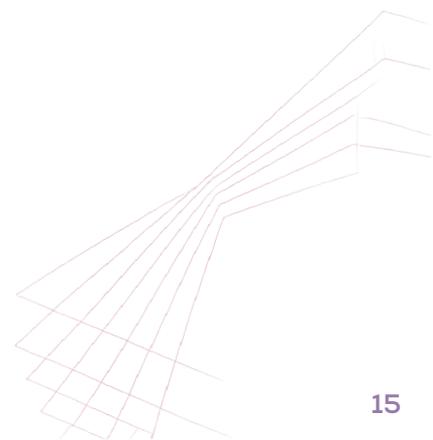
Tensions Shaping the Field

Across Apolitical Day, a set of tensions surfaced beneath the practice of government innovation. They did not appear as direct questions or explicit topics. Instead, they showed up in the way people spoke about their work, in the pauses between ideas and in the contradictions that emerged even when participants shared a strong sense of purpose. These tensions form the background conditions practitioners must navigate. They are not problems to resolve, but realities that shape what is possible and how the work is experienced from the inside.

A central tension runs between the need for speed and the need for care. Practitioners described situations where waiting for full clarity meant missing the opportunity to act, while acting quickly carried risks that were difficult to fully assess. They understood why public institutions are designed to slow decisions down in the name of fairness and accountability, and at the same time felt the cost of that slowness in moments when timely response mattered. Working between urgency and responsibility is becoming a defining feature of public work.

Another tension sits between the desire for clarity and the reality of ambiguity. Many practitioners spoke about wanting clearer mandates and more stable direction. At the same time, they recognised that the challenges they face rarely allow for neat definitions or predictable pathways. The issues are intertwined, the context shifts quickly and information is often incomplete. People are required to act and make judgments in situations where certainty is not available, even as expectations for confidence remain high.

A third tension emerges from the relationship between centralised control and distributed action. Public institutions continue to rely on hierarchical decision making to protect fairness, consistency and legitimacy. Yet many of the problems described throughout the day require local knowledge, rapid coordination and responses that cannot wait for formal approval chains. The authority to act and the understanding needed to act often sit in different places. Practitioners experience this gap as friction, particularly in moments when collaboration across boundaries is essential.

There is also an enduring tension between maintaining stability and creating space for change. Public institutions carry responsibilities that cannot be paused. People depend on them to function reliably every day. At the same time, the conditions around them are shifting faster than internal structures can easily adapt. Practitioners described the difficulty of protecting core systems while opening room for experimentation and learning. Transformation can feel slow, not because of resistance, but because of the weight of what must be preserved.

Finally, a quieter but still significant tension surfaced between optimism and fatigue. Many practitioners spoke about the potential they see for new forms of collaboration, different approaches to technology and more adaptive models of leadership. Alongside this, they acknowledged the strain of working inside systems that are stretched and often under-resourced. This tension shapes how much change feels possible at any given moment and influences the capacity of individuals and teams to carry risk over time.

Taken together, these tensions do not cancel each other out. They coexist and shape the daily reality of public work. Recognising them helps explain why progress can feel uneven and why practitioners often experience movement and constraint at the same time. These tensions are part of the landscape public sector innovation exists.

Implications for the Field

The drivers, themes and tensions that surfaced across Apolitical Day point toward a field that is changing shape. They show where governments are being stretched and where new forms of capability and collaboration are beginning to take hold. While the conversations did not converge on a single solution or unified direction, they did point to a set of implications for how public institutions may need to evolve, and what the work of innovation is increasingly asking of them.

Learning must move closer to the centre of public work

The pace and complexity practitioners described mean that governments cannot rely on periodic reviews or slow cycles of reflection. They need steady ways of noticing what is changing, understanding what it means and adjusting as they go. This is less about adopting new methods and more about creating shared rhythms of sensemaking across teams and levels of leadership. Institutions that learn continuously are better positioned to navigate uncertainty without losing legitimacy or coherence.

Boundary spanning roles are becoming essential infrastructure

Many of the challenges discussed cut across technical, organisational and community boundaries. People who can connect these spaces, translate between them and help others see the system as a whole are increasingly central to progress. These roles often operate in the background and rely less on formal authority than on trust, credibility and relational skill. As problems become more interconnected, the value of this connective work becomes harder to ignore.

Governments may need to design for adaptation, not just delivery

The conversations suggested that many of the issues practitioners face are too fluid, uncertain or interdependent for traditional project-based approaches alone. Rather than designing fixed solutions, institutions may need to focus more deliberately on creating conditions that allow teams to test, learn and adjust without waiting for perfect clarity or formal approval. This requires shifts in mindset, leadership and process, but also in how responsibility is understood. Adaptation is not the opposite of accountability. In volatile conditions, it can be a way of strengthening it.

Technology demands stewardship, not just adoption

Participants were clear about both the opportunities and risks presented by new technologies. The capability governments need is not only technical proficiency, but the ability to guide technology responsibly. This includes developing principles, governance mechanisms and judgement that allow institutions to harness new tools without outsourcing decision making to them. Technology should enhance public value and trust, not displace them.

## The "business" of public value is becoming more explicit

Several conversations pointed to a growing shift in how practitioners think about the mechanics of change. Beyond policy design and service delivery, there is increasing attention on how public value is resourced, financed and sustained in practice. Tools such as mission-oriented programmes, strategic procurement, market shaping and new forms of public and quasi-public investment are being used more deliberately to build capabilities that existing systems struggle to fund or hold.

Practitioners described efforts to mobilise capital, create new markets and establish institutional infrastructure, from innovation agencies and accelerators to public sector platforms and cross-sector investment vehicles, often in contexts of fiscal constraint. This reflects a move toward engaging more directly with the economic and institutional conditions that make transformation possible, not only its technical or managerial dimensions.

Supporting the human side of the work is no longer optional

The emotional tone of the conversations pointed to an implication that is often overlooked. The future of public innovation depends on how well institutions support the people doing the work. Practitioners are navigating uncertainty, ambiguity and pressure while carrying responsibility for systems that matter deeply. Without space for reflection, collaboration and care, the capacity to adapt and innovate will erode. With it, institutions are far more likely to sustain change over time.

Looking at these implications as a whole, suggests a shift in what it means to govern well. The work ahead is not only technical or strategic. It is relational, reflective and grounded in the ability to move with intention through uncertainty. The signals from Apolitical Day suggest that many practitioners already understand this. The challenge now is building institutions that can support and sustain this way of working.
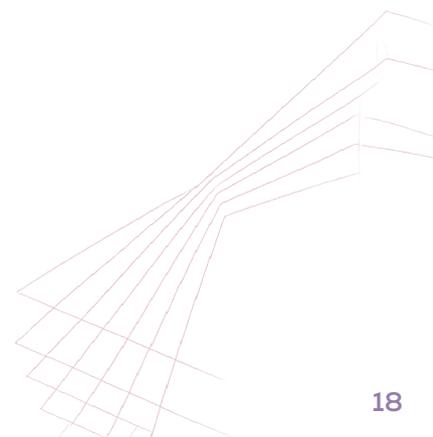
Conclusion: what this moment asks of us

Apolitical Day 2025 offered more than a sequence of panels. It provided a glimpse into the lived reality of public work in a world that is moving faster, hitting harder and demanding more than traditional systems were designed to hold. The conversations throughout the day revealed a field that is finding its footing inside new conditions. Practitioners are working in stretched environments while trying to grow capacities that match the moment. What was striking was not the difficulty of the challenges but the clarity and determination with which people described their attempts to meet them.

Across these discussions, a picture of shifting practice emerged. Innovation is no longer a specialised function or a side project. It is becoming part of the everyday reflexes institutions need to stay coherent in unpredictable conditions. People spoke about the importance of sensing movement, making decisions without perfect certainty, learning at the pace of events and adjusting with care rather than waiting for clarity that may never arrive. This way of working is more distributed, more relational and more grounded in judgment than in any single method or toolkit.

The tensions that surfaced throughout the day showed how much emotional and structural complexity sits beneath this work. Practitioners described the strain of needing to move quickly and carefully at the same time, of being asked to provide clarity while navigating ambiguity, and of carrying responsibility inside systems where authority and insight do not always align. These tensions are not problems to solve. They are conditions to navigate. They explain why innovation is demanding in ways that rarely get formal recognition and why people often describe the work as both energising and exhausting.

New and deepening capabilities are emerging in response. The ability to read context, steward technology responsibly, work across boundaries and stay grounded through uncertainty is becoming essential. These capabilities have always mattered, but the moment makes them unavoidable. They are not easily captured in job descriptions or competency frameworks. They develop through experience, reflection and shared practice, often in communities where practitioners learn from each other's contexts rather than in isolation.

This is where States of Change naturally enters the picture. The reflections throughout the day echoed the very reasons SoC exists: to help practitioners learn across boundaries, to surface what is emerging before it becomes visible in formal reports, and to strengthen the craft of public innovation through shared inquiry. What the event demonstrated is that governments need exactly this kind of connective tissue. They need ways to see across contexts, to understand the pressures others are feeling, and to translate those insights into clearer, more adaptive practice. The Fellows who contributed to this paper are already working in these ways, bridging sectors and systems, carrying lessons from one context into another, and helping shape the capabilities institutions need to grow.
The signals identified in this paper point toward a future where governments will require more of this connective intelligence. They show a field that benefits when practitioners can pause, interpret and make sense of what they are experiencing together. Apolitical Day acted as a temporary space for that kind of learning. Capturing its signals ensures that the insights do not stay locked in the moment but travel back into the field, where they can support others navigating similar pressures.

If governments are to evolve into institutions that learn in real time, they will need partners and networks that help them see more clearly across the complexity they face. They will need communities that support reflection, offer honest insight and hold space for the emotional and relational aspects of the work. States of Change is well placed to play that role. Not as an external commentator, but as a trusted companion to the practitioners doing the work, helping them turn lived experience into shared understanding and shared understanding into more confident, grounded action.

This moment asks for more learning, not more certainty. It asks for deeper relationships, not more isolated expertise. It asks for institutions that can adapt without losing their values and for networks that help them stay attentive to the signals that matter. The conversations at Apolitical Day showed that practitioners already sense this shift. The opportunity now is to build the structures that can support it, sustain it and help the field grow into what the moment requires.
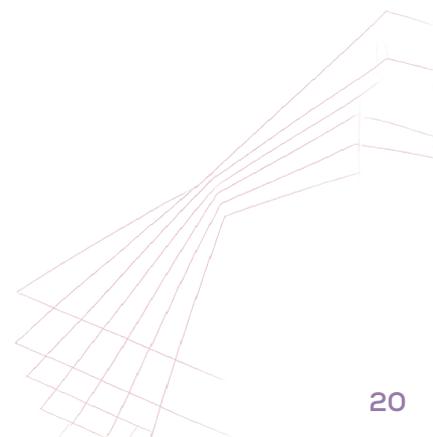
About States of Change

We live in a world facing many urgent, overlapping challenges. But we're hopeful. There is no single answer to climate change, social justice or inequality, there's an infinite number of them. That's why we need collective learning on a scale never seen before: to help us understand what works, where, for who and why.

Our philosophy is that there are no silver bullets; that people understand the nuance of their own context better than anyone; and that every context is different. So we don't offer ready-made solutions to your problems, we instead work those answers out together.

We're trusted by individuals, institutions and governments to help them learn, as fast as they can. That's what we do. Because in an uncertain age we believe it's the fastest learners who will flourish. Our role is to help you flourish.

We test your assumptions, facilitate your learning and act as your guides. We use experimentation, practice and reflection to create an environment that accelerates your understanding of what works, and what doesn't.
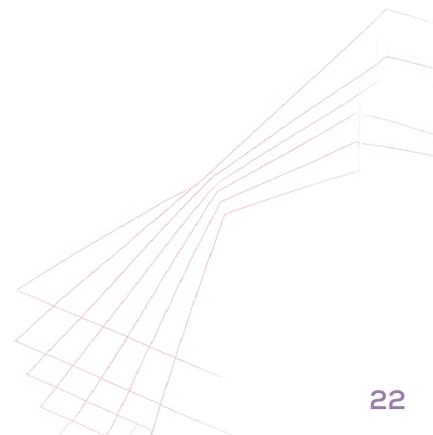
About the authors

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Stephanie Wade is Founder and CEO of Ascendant, a consultancy dedicated to solving complex civic challenges through innovative programmes, services, and organisational change. She previously led Innovation Programs and Design at Bloomberg Philanthropies, supporting over 100 cities worldwide to apply innovation for measurable impact. Earlier, she served as Director of Lab@OPM, the first human-centred design lab in the U.S. Federal Government, working across departments to embed design capability and deliver new digital and physical services. Stephanie holds a Master's in Public Policy from Harvard Kennedy School.

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Cat Zuzarte Tully is founder and Director of the School of International Futures (SOIF), a UK-based not-for-profit collective using futures thinking to inspire change at local, national, and global levels. SOIF works with organisations including the UN, NATO, Omidyar, the Royal Society, and national governments to support fairer outcomes for current and future generations. Cat also leads SOIF's work developing a global network of next-generation foresight practitioners, strengthening futures capability across public and civic systems.

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