

EP 09 P1: FRANCES MCRAE

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

00:00:01 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

Applaud is proud to showcase the dedication of those who make decisions for the greater good and strive to leave the world a better place for all Canadians. All personal views expressed by guests and our hosts are their own. Applaud will continue to recognize those in public service, offer a kaleidoscope of perspectives, and operate in good faith to build trust with Applaud members and all public citizens.

00:00:31 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

I just want to bring all the skills that I have to do what I can to make the biggest difference I can, and that's the reason I'm in government.

00:00:42 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

I'm Katie Jensen's and this is The Path of Public Service from Applaud, celebrating people who have spent their lives working in Ontario's public sector.

00:00:52 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

I'm Frances McRae. I'm the Deputy Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth for the Government of Canada.

00:01:00 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

Today, Frances shares what keeps her passionate and motivated in her work.

00:01:05 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

I'm a senior public servant and I care a lot about public policy and about being part of an institution that is serving Canadians.

00:01:18 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

Career advice that she's given to her own children.

00:01:21 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

You can get a job that you care about. You can have a career that you feel is making a difference and working on issues that you're really interested in.

00:01:30 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

And the lessons from her childhood that guide her today.

00:01:33 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

My father used to say, you know, the reason you have two ears and one mouth is so you listen twice as much as you talk.

00:01:39 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

A self-proclaimed citizen of the world, Frances has had a remarkably diverse career in both the public and private sector. She started off as an analyst working on international environmental policy before moving on to Asia Pacific issues.

00:01:53 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

Maybe one of my favorite jobs was I was the director of communications for the G7 Summit in Kananaskis, Alberta.

00:02:02 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

She's worked in the Privy Council office under three different prime ministers.

00:02:06 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

Which was really exciting. Privy Council office is the department that serves the Prime Minister.

00:02:12 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

And she wasn't afraid to shake things up.

00:02:14 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

After 10 years working in government, I got bored and so I quit and I started working for a private sector firm doing consulting work.

We did a lot of work for various government clients, whether it was Ontario government, the Government of Canada, different First Nations governments, and I really realized I liked public policy work. I was really interested in doing everything from consulting on the future of libraries in Ontario, to how to get more people to do organ donation, to agricultural policy doing consultations with farmers all across the country. And so the common denominator – there is public policy and public good. And I started realizing that if I really wanted to make the biggest difference, I had to be actually inside government.

00:03:06 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

We started off with talking about Frances' early life growing up in farmland in a big family.

00:03:13 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

I come from a very big family, the 13th of 14 kids.

You know, it's hard to imagine in this day and age, right? My parents started off their life in Alberta. My mom was from Saskatchewan from a big farm family. There was always someone around to help. The older ones really had to do a lot of work. But there was just a lot of work to do.

00:03:40 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

Everybody had to help in the garden because the garden meant that we were able to have healthy food over the winter. We canned it, we put it away. We had chickens, pigs, cows. So we had milk. We had meat. We had fresh food. We had big, big area to play in. We played together. To this day, like, my siblings and I are super close. There are 10 girls in that family and four boys and it's really difficult to describe how it feels that no matter what you do in your life, they're with you.

00:04:21 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

You're a team.

00:04:22 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

We sure are. We do so much together. A lot of us do live in Ottawa and we spend as much time as we can together. Everyone's really different. There's a common bond, but we're all pretty different people and becoming that different person and thinking about your own potential as an individual, that it's not necessarily tied to everyone else's identity.

That's something that as you get older, you kind of grow into.

00:04:54 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

Do you have a nickname or like a personality that everyone kind of knows you for within the family?

00:05:01 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

Yeah, I do. Actually. When I was a little kid, I mean, you know, I was always known as a talker. And so my brother, who was working away and sending money home, he didn't have a lot of time. When he would phone home to get the news, so, he would always ask for me to get on the phone so that I could tell him everything in like a minute.

00:05:24 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

I always say that, you know, you're the 13th of 14, you could probably fall off a cliff and nobody would notice, but I was known as the talker in the family for sure. One thing I have learned though over time is it's important to listen. My father used to say, you know, the reason you have two ears and one mouth is so you listen twice as much as you talk.

00:05:49 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

And so this was something that I have worked on my whole life. I think I'm better at it now, but it's a work in progress.

00:05:57 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

What's a lesson or a value that you feel has come from growing up in such a large family?

00:06:01 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

I do feel that growing up without a lot of material things, without a lot of opportunities,

with a pretty clear sense that I was going to have to figure out how to make it on my own.

00:06:16 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

In a way, it's a real blessing because your choices are your own.

00:06:24 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

Nobody in my family tried to tell me what I should do with my career or anything else, and I think about that with my kids, that it's really important that as you make choices about your life, they are your choices and you're going to make mistakes sometimes, and that's OK, but that's where you learn.

00:06:49 **Katie Jensen (Host)**

Do you think having so many sisters in your family informed in any way the fact that you are working on the standing of women in society, and whether you'd be in the same situation if you'd been the only daughter in your family?

00:07:01 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

You know, The funny thing is about these jobs is I did not pick this job for myself. The way that it works is you get a phone call when you get asked to, well, decisions are basically made that you need to go to this place.

00:07:16 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

But I can tell you that as soon as it happened, I felt like I had won the lottery. Like I just, I honestly say that to people. This is the perfect job for me. I work so hard at it because I care so much about it.

00:07:37 **Deputy Minister Frances McRae**

I did not necessarily see myself in this role, and others did see that for me, and I am eternally grateful that I get to work on these issues.

00:07:51 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Working in public service is a real honor.

It's our job to work with government. People who are elected by citizens to make things better for people. And I can tell you that no matter which governments I've worked with, there's that common objective, which is to make things better for people, and I have a lot of faith in our democratic systems, I have a lot of faith in our institutions to be able to manage through ups and downs through different governments, through different economic cycles, through different crises.

I have a lot of faith that we are keeping the needs of people front and center, as a guide in what we do, and so I would say for anyone who wants to make an impact on people, public service is an incredible career and it is why I came back to public service after working in the private sector. I was working on really interesting public policy issues with government.

00:09:08 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Whether that was agricultural policy or organ donation, or how libraries play a role in our community.

00:09:16 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

The common thread was, where's the benefit for people? And I wanted to come back to public service to be on the inside of that.

00:09:23 Katie Jensen (Host)

I'm intrigued by the throughline of agriculture and the economics of that as well, because growing up in a farm family, it really is challenging to make that work. We have to be careful that the policy that we implement in cities doesn't disadvantage people in rural environments because we might not have the daily perspective of what needs to be prioritized and preserved.

00:09:41 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

That's actually a really interesting point, and I've been thinking about it lately from the perspective of First Nations and reconciliation too.

00:09:48 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

I mean, we have to really be careful about our environment, about preserving culture history. I was doing an event the other day with some folks from Haida Gwaii, and the Haida leader that was on the panel basically said when people are mentally well, they can devote their energy to taking care of the planet. You know it is so important to be thinking about how we put ourselves in the best condition we can in order to do what we need to do for the planet. Whether that's for marginalized populations or particular ecosystems, there is a lot that we have to be thinking about in terms of the barriers that people are up against.

00:10:40 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Both my kids are adopted from China, and what they go through every day on the street without me because they're getting older now, they're 14 and 16, They do go through a lot of discrimination, for sure, people look at them differently when I'm there versus when I'm not.

00:10:59 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

And it's not something I can experience. They're the ones who can experience it. You know, you do realize there's a lot going on in the world that you don't see that people are up against. And just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there. You know, you just can't know what it's like to be another person.

00:11:19 Katie Jensen (Host)

When you are pursuing your Bachelor's and your Master's and your Executive Master's, what were your career goals for yourself?

00:11:25 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

You know, I didn't have a lot of career goals. Oddly enough, I think what I was most concerned about when I was choosing something to do post high school was finding a job that was going to be well paying. A big part of that was because growing up without a lot of money, that was the thing that was of concern to me. There really was no back up plan.

I mean my father passed away when I was 10, and my mother luckily was a nurse so she was able to work. But there really wasn't family money, and so I knew really quickly I was going to have to stand on my own 2 feet as soon as I graduated.

00:12:09 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

So, I picked a degree that I thought would be very practical, which was in translation. And I thought well, I could be a translator.

00:12:18 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

But my main concern was not so much a career, it was economic security.

00:12:24 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

As I kind of did other education, it was always about learning more. And I just always was very curious about things I didn't understand that I thought I needed more grounding in. It was never about, "oh, this will help me get ahead or that will help me get ahead," it was either economic security or curiosity and just thirst for knowledge.

00:12:57 Katie Jensen (Host)

Really, what was the point where you felt like you had reached that period of economic security?

00:13:02 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Probably when I bought my first car by myself, that was the moment that I felt, "You know what? I can do this, I can do all of this by myself."

00:13:16 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

The rest of it kind of came later, but it was that sense of independence, of not needing anybody to cosign for a loan for me because I had enough income to do it by myself. And I think that was a big, big moment.

00:13:35 Katie Jensen (Host)

Let's talk a little bit about volunteering. Can you share any experiences that you've had that really have enriched your experience at work and what you think about volunteering as a supplement to any work that someone does in public service?

00:13:47 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Yeah, maybe I'd have two answers to that. I mean, there is volunteering within the public service. We have what we call the Government of Canada Workplace

Charitable campaign, a lot of people call it the United Way campaign. And I've been involved in that ever since I became a public servant.

00:14:02 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

And in one of the departments I was working in, I was what they call the co-champion of that for the department, which basically means you have to show leadership, you have to work with volunteers at different levels to develop the campaign, figure out what you're going to do. And one of the things that I loved about that was, you know, you had to really be creative in thinking about what will get public servants' attention to have them step up and donate, and sometimes it's donating time as well.

00:14:30 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

When I was at the Privy Council office, we did a sock drive because we went to talk to Operation Go Home and they said we need socks.

00:14:40 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

You know, kids come in here and they don't have the basics. It was really appealed to people's kind of sense of being able to do something concrete by collecting socks and donating hundreds and hundreds of pairs of socks to Operation Go Home.

00:14:59 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

So that was really tremendous. And of course, you're also hoping by that to get people to think about donating funds as well. But I think to me, it's being able to give people a sense of what their impact can be and having a concrete goal like collecting socks makes you realize how much we have and

how much others don't have. So that was pretty important.

00:15:27 Katie Jensen (Host)

Sometimes we need to be reminded that people who are struggling don't need cast-offs. They need basics. So they need diapers, formula, bread, milk, whatever their staple food is, they don't need some like bizarre specialty cake mix that's been sitting in a cupboard or some ill-fitting garment that's too hideous to wear. They need something that's not embarrassing, something that's practical and useful to them.

00:15:51 Katie Jensen (Host)

And sometimes I think when we think of charity, we just think of leftovers when I think it's actually about giving someone something with dignity, not just because it's another way for us to recycle stuff we don't want.

00:16:04 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Yeah, you make a really good point, Katie. And I, I mean, I'll give an example of an organization we work with quite a lot and I'm sure you've heard of called Dress for Success, and one of the things that they do is they try to make sure people have good clothes, good footwear, that makes them feel good and also make a good impression as they're going out and looking for work. It's not just about any clothes, it's about dignity. And it's about confidence, self-regard, self-esteem as much as it is about putting out a good impression. You know, you're really right to talk about those issues. People are people first and foremost, and cast offs are not given with a kind of sense of wanting to support people, not just in material things,

but in their own dignity. As you say, that's not really giving.

00:17:07 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

And then volunteering in other ways, I mean, we all do that in our own lives, right? You know, you take your skills and you say is there a need for these somewhere? Can I be helpful? And boy you learn a lot.

00:17:22 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Every board works differently. Every board chair runs things differently. Every board is at different stages of maturity. So it's really exciting, it's interesting. It's a whole other place to learn that we can't discount for our own personal development and for our own development as a leader, frankly,

00:17:45 Katie Jensen (Host)

What about your passion, your activism and your work are you hoping to share through our conversation today?

00:17:50 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

I'm a senior public servant and I care a lot about public policy and about being part of an institution that is serving Canadians.

00:18:02 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

And I've done that under different kinds of governments with different prime ministers, different political parties.

00:18:09 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

And I've always found something really rewarding about that. My work is about doing the very very best using all the skills I have to provide the advice that governments need to make the best decisions, and then I need to

lead people into executing on those decisions.

00:18:34 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

So, I don't consider myself an activist in areas of equality for women and gender-diverse people, except that I really care that people know and understand that there's a lot of work to do on equality. Yes, we've come a long way and a lot of that is on the instigation of generations of women who came before me. And I feel like it's my job to do the best I can to identify and continue to shine a light on the inequality that remains, and help government figure out what are we going to do about that and how can we make even more progress.

00:19:18 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

So I've always found it to be inspiring to work with folks who have the courage to run for office, because I know that for the most part, and certainly everything that I've ever seen, people want to do their best for this country and it's my job to help them figure out what that looks like.

00:19:40 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

I am passionate about public service. I'm passionate about the public good and I do believe in the institution of government as a force for good. I really do. And I've seen it and I've been part of it for a long time, so I have faith that at the end of the day government will serve the needs of the people.

00:20:04 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

I just want to bring all the skills that I have to do what I can to make the biggest difference I can and that's the reason I'm in government.

00:20:12 Katie Jensen (Host)

I'm curious about your children and if you have a sense of whether they're going to enter the private sector or the public sector when they decide what they're going to do for their first job.

00:20:20 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, they think my work is pretty cool, they love what I work on. I talk a lot about different things that I do at work. But neither of them feel like, you know, I think I probably would have felt at their age too like, they're like, "Mom. I don't want a desk job." So we'll see.

00:20:40 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

Honestly, my big hope is that they see that you can get a job that you care about. You can have a career that you feel is making a difference and working on issues that you're really interested in. So that's kind of what I want to impart to them more so than public, private, nonprofit, it's just that desire to make an impact wherever you are.

00:21:05 Katie Jensen (Host)

This has been part one of our conversation with Frances McRae. In Part 2, Frances shares what it was like to work in the Privy Council Office under three different Prime Ministers.

00:21:15 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

The constants are there. The foundation is always there. So the public service in Canada, at least at the Government of Canada level, is the permanent public service. My role is not a political role. I have very strict rules around the type of political engagement I can do, which is basically the

only thing I can do is vote. And that's a very, very key part of our values as a public service.

00:21:39 Katie Jensen (Host)

Work-life balance.

00:21:40 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

You can be a parent, you can be a good mom and also be a public servant. That is very dedicated and passionate and career-oriented at the same time.

00:21:54 Katie Jensen (Host)

And the importance of public service workers experiencing new environments.

00:21:59 Deputy Minister Frances McRae

I think everybody in a region should come to work in Ottawa for a little while, and everybody in Ottawa should really go to a region for a while. You just need to learn about how to serve the entire country.

00:22:18 Katie Jensen (Host)

Thanks for listening. Applaud is proud to showcase the dedication of those who make decisions for the greater good and strive to leave the world a better place for all Canadians.

00:22:28 Katie Jensen (Host)

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