

ACCOUNTABILITY, RATIONALITY, AND NEW STRUCTURES OF GOVERNANCE: MAKING ROOM FOR POLITICAL RATIONALITY

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Abstract: This article argues that the new institutional arrangements and results- or performance-based accountability run the risk of overlooking several political realities and considerations. The new arrangements and processes represent a preference for economic rationality over bureaucratic rationality. They give little consideration to political rationality, which is concerned with collective values and power relationships. In managerial terms, it is not clear that the new arrangements will be any more durable than their numerous predecessors. The focus on performance targets has led to a decline in program evaluation. It tends to marginalize a number of ethical concerns, reduces the role and scope of citizens, and ignores the conflicts that frequently arise when clients' interests are at odds. Performance management and results-based accountability represent a constitutional revolution, but there is little sign that Members of Parliament are interested in or able to make good use of the new management reports. *Accountability*, at any rate, is a word that should probably be used only for the relationship between a subordinate agency and the authority from which it obtains its mandate and resources. *Accountability* also implies a theory of motivation. It is worth considering the strength of motivation for executive agency leaders to conform to what their political masters want from them. Finally, a postmodern look at *agency* suggests that targets cannot replace attention to public-sector ethics.

Résumé: Cet article prétend que les nouveaux arrangements institutionnels et la reddition des comptes basée sur les résultats ou le rendement risquent de négliger plusieurs réalités et considérations politiques. Les nouveaux arrangements et processus représentent une préférence pour la rationalité économique sur la rationalité bureaucratique, mais ils font peu de place à la rationalité politique, concernée, elle, par les valeurs collectives et les rapports de force. Du point de vue de la gestion, il n'est pas certain que les nouveaux arrangements puissent réussir à

durer là où tant de prédécesseurs ont connu de courtes périodes de popularité. L'accent sur les indicateurs du rendement a mené au déclin de la fonction d'évaluation. Il tend à marginaliser plusieurs préoccupations éthiques, à réduire le rôle des citoyens, et à négliger les conflits qui peuvent survenir entre les intérêts de différents clients. La gestion selon les résultats et le rendement représente une révolution constitutionnelle, mais il y a peu d'indications que les députés veulent ou peuvent profiter des nouveaux rapports de gestion. On devrait réserver le mot imputabilité pour la relation entre un mandataire et le mandant, de qui il détient sa tâche et ses ressources. L'imputabilité implique aussi une théorie de la motivation. On doit se demander ce qui motive les gestionnaires des nouvelles agences à se conformer à la volonté de leurs patrons politiques. Enfin, un regard post-moderne sur les relations entre patrons et agents suggère que des cibles ne pourront pas remplacer le souci de l'éthique du secteur public.

■ The new structures of governance offer the promise of flexibility, dynamism, and accountability. The most important of these new structures are the new autonomous agencies that have been introduced in Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as the great variety of partnerships that have been grouped under the umbrella of alternative service delivery. Most of the debate about these innovations has been instrumental; the question being asked is, will they work? The purpose of this article is to widen the scope of this discussion, in order to highlight a number of political questions.

My argument will be made in four points. First, I recall that politics and governance involve power relations, but also collective value choices. Second, performance management represents the latest in a series of attempts to rationalize the management of public resources. The new forms of organization, as well as other elements of the new public management, were designed to do better than the old bureaucratic ways. However, they represent a reduced notion of rationality. Third, the new forms of organization represent a constitutional revolution that needs to be considered. We need to ask: accountability for what, to whom, and with what consequences? Fourth, the solution that we adopt is based on an implicit theory of motivation and incentives. Because it represents only one kind of rationality, results-based performance management may reduce the scope of ethical administration.

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

Governance is a relatively new word that is preferred by some to the more traditional *government* or *politics*. Nevertheless, they all deal with the same phenomena; they simply accentuate different aspects. Politics used to be thought of as the study of the state. However, it has long been realized that much of what we think of as politics goes on outside the state, or even in societies without states. Systems theorists tried to get at the essence of the political without starting from the state. David Easton gave the path-breaking definition of politics as the “authoritative allocation of values” (or physical and spiritual goods) in a society (1971, p. 135).

Other systems analysts came to consider that politics concerns the processes by which societies and organizations regulate relations among their components and with their environment (Deutsch, 1966; Lapierre, 1973; Lemieux, 1979, p. 5). Such a definition broadens the notion of politics to include these processes in any complex organization, not just the state. The way was thus cleared for the more recent notion of governance. Although this concept means a variety of things, depending on whether one is speaking of the developing or the developed world, in the latter it is used to allow consideration of other forms of societal regulation than those coming from the state. Gilles Paquet, an apostle of the new usage, calls governance “the process whereby an organization or society guides itself” (1999, p. 23).

So the notion of governance uses the broader meaning, and allows for politics to happen in organizations as well as at the societal level. It is still about power relations and “the art of the possible.” As Bélanger and Lemieux put it, a social relation is political when it involves acting upon the preferences or the behaviour of an actor (1996, p. 28). So politics is about persuasion, bargaining, and compulsion, outside the realm of straightforward exchange.

Politics is about power, control, and influence, but it goes beyond that. The above definitions show that it is also about the choices an organization or a society makes about its value orientations. Values and interests are closely linked, and if power relations are one sign of politics, value choices are another.

WHICH RATIONALITY?

The new forms of organization introduced in recent years were trying to escape from too many central controls and from excessive re-

liance on adherence to rules. The accent on results has been part of a move away from the old “command and control” pattern to one of “steering not rowing,” where creativity and accountability for results would go hand in hand.¹

The problem arises because of what agency theory considers the impossibility of knowing what subordinates will do (Frant, 1996; Harmon, 1995), or the problem of administrative discretion. Bureaucracy tried to tie the agents to rules. Performance management tries to tie them to results. We need to look at this new trend both in terms of its own technical claims, and in the wider terms of public administration and management.

Many authors have noted that performance management or management by results is the latest in a long series of methods designed to rationalize the conduct of public business (Harmon, 1995, p. 11; Lindquist, 1998; Pollitt, in press). The list includes planning programming, budgeting system (PPBS), management by objectives (MBO), cost-benefit analysis, zero base budgeting (ZBB), and program evaluation. This recognition is significant. It makes one wonder if performance- or results-based management can do any better than these previous attempts, or if the considerable mobilization of resources and energy will pay off (Carroll & Dewar, in press). Moreover, for all its rationalism, results-based management suffers from confusion about its purposes: is the objective better performance, control, or accountability? Carroll and Dewar, reviewing the literature, advise that if the goal is improved management, performance results should not be used for other purposes. Managers and other responsible agents are not willingly going to provide information that will be used to beat them over the head.² Typically, however, the public sector tries to pursue several objectives at the same time, and such admonitions as Carroll and Dewar’s are not likely to be heeded.

Two other comments merit mention here. The current approach is one more in a series of administrative reforms public servants have had to deal with. The hope is that this one will succeed in introducing permanent, sustainable reform where the others did not. But it is a fair bet that agencies and departmental units will get the most out of the exercise in the first round or two, and that in time they will learn to use it to their advantage. Laframboise (1971) reckoned that a new reform gave central agencies up to 18 months’ advance over operating units, but that the latter eventually caught up. The

same author spoke of increasing stress among managers faced with the never-ending stream of reforms they were expected to implement, of a “saturation psychosis” (in 1971!). A recent study speaks of a culture of disillusionment (Rouillard, 1999). According to Lindquist, “Most managers know that new reporting regimes will quickly be superseded by a new format” (1998, p. 175). In this case, the need for a relatively stable series of measurements over time (Pollitt, in press) cannot be met.

Moreover, results-based management may suffer from the same failing of proliferation of controls as did bureaucracy. One researcher has noted, in New Zealand, a tendency to increase specificity of performance standards over time (Kettl, 1997, p. 452). According to Hood (Pollitt, in press), “regulation inside government has grown tremendously in the U.K. public sector in direct staffing and spending over the last 20 years.” This is a parallel to the increase of bureaucratic regulation that most governments experienced in the West until the end of the 1970s.

Results-based accountability is narrowing the range of matters for which managers are accountable, not enlarging it. On the one hand, the move to citizen’s charter-type results has come at the expense of traditional program evaluation. *The Economist* (“Missing the Point,” 2001) writes:

More than any country, Britain has taken to relying on output targets as a way of getting the best out of its public services. Government departments are currently striving to meet around 600 of them ... Targets need to be simple, or they are no good as a management tool. Yet public services are often trying to fulfil many objectives. If public servants are asked to focus on one measure, they will (rightly) ignore the others.

It concludes that transparency should get more attention than targets.

Similarly, Cabatoff reported at the 2000 meeting of the Canadian Evaluation Society that, under the impulse of the results-based management system adopted in Quebec, program evaluation is being eclipsed (Cabatoff, in press). He likened performance measurement and evaluation to a kind of ministerial accreditation process similar to those already in use in the education and health sectors.

The new management framework provides for annual management self-evaluations that will be reviewed by experts in the Treasury Board and by the province's National Assembly. In analogous experiences so far, the failure rate has been very low, around 1%. Managers also like accreditation better because it is less time consuming. Cabatoff concluded that in accreditation processes the organization gets approval, whereas with evaluation it gets nothing, and asks how to compete with a process where the players cannot lose.

At the same session, Barrados (2000) of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada addressed "the atrophy of the evaluation function in the federal government." She spoke of a decline of public service values, of weak accountability for collaborative arrangements, and of more attention to objectives and outputs than to measurement and impacts in departmental reports.

Targeting exacerbates a problem that has been around since the early days of PPBS, namely, that some values are not as easily or as often measured as others. Economic values (efficiency, effectiveness, and economy) have taken the fore in today's measurement systems, at the expense of political and legal values. As Haque (2000) put it:

Accountability of public governance for market-based performance does not necessarily imply its accountability for citizens' rights, accountability for competition and productivity does not guarantee accountability for representation and equality, accountability for higher profit does not connote its accountability for welfare and justice. (p. 602)

What these examples reveal is that there are three kinds of rationality: the first, which is economic and managerial, deals with obtaining the maximum return on available resources; a second, which is legal, concerns respect for the rules; and a third, which is political, takes into account the state of power relations in seeking solutions to problems. The usual instruments of political action are persuasion, bargaining, and constraint. Where economic rationality may seek maximum return on investment, in political matters the test of an action is its acceptability. In a compromise, no one obtains the maximum.

The point is that these managerial techniques seek to mask the political relations underlying most programs. The customer-client vo-

cabulary completely fails to capture the situation where regulation and control are the priorities, where there is a general public interest at stake, beyond those of individual clients. Even in cases where public organizations have a business or service orientation, most programs have multiple stakeholders. Frequently, different departments and agencies are in conflict over whether producers', consumers', or third-party groups' (e.g., environmentalists') values are to have priority (Gow, 1995, pp. 571–573). British documents for Fundamental Performance Reviews identify stakeholders as citizens, users, taxpayers, and the business community (Halachmi & Montgomery, 2000, p. 403) but fail to mention agency personnel, unions, or politicians. Just as a partnership may be quite unequal, favouring the more powerful partner, here the sanitized, technical language of management leaches out the underlying political realities.

A CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION

Kettl (1997) and Aucoin (1995) consider that there has been a managerial revolution in the government of developed countries. In Kettl's view (1997, p. 456), performance accountability stands traditional accountability on its head. It changes relations among elected politicians, public officials, and citizens-as-clients. Both the requirement to discover clients' preferences and that to report on performance in light of published objectives dilute and alter the traditional responsibility to serve the government of the day above all.⁴

New institutional arrangements are diffusing traditional responsibility that passed from public servants through their ministers to Parliament. The British use of agencies has been based on the idea that it would be possible to take some management functions out of the realm of politics and leave them in the hands of professional managers. According to Rhodes (1997, pp. 18–19), the separation is far from complete: Parliament is confused about degrees of responsibility, most agency chief executives claim to have policy input, and some of them have lost their jobs over political differences or unpopularity. The Auditor General of Canada (1999) also considers that the new collaborative arrangements put accountability at risk.

The ideas underlying performance management are wrong if they imply that results-based reporting is not political. The whole operation is political, involving as it does the choice of variables on which to report (Aucoin, 1997, cited in Lindquist, 1998, p. 170). Any col-

lecting of relevant facts involves an implicit theory implying what variables are worth measuring.⁵ The question is whether the delegation of political power implied in new forms of organization (agencies and partnerships in particular) can be justified by improved accountability by results.

Parliamentarians in Westminster systems have shown little interest in the new performance reports (Lindquist, 1998, p. 178). MPs have not been able to use new information very well. Lindquist quoted a *Globe and Mail* journalist according to whom most annual reports are more read before than after printing (Lindquist, 1998, p. 153). According to Aucoin, Members of Parliament have also shown no recognition of the constitutional subordinate position of public servants, nor have they been able “to ensure due process and fairness of Parliament’s treatment of subordinate officials” (1995, p. 79). High rates of turnover in the House of Commons work against the accumulation of fair practice in this matter. Accountability is not going to improve much if the same partisan attitudes prevail in the future (Franks, 1987, pp. 251–256; Sutherland, 1991a, 1991b; Thomas, 1999). At any rate, experience with accountability of public corporations should lead us to be sceptical about the capacity of parliamentary committees to examine thoroughly the results obtained by a significant number of new agencies.

There is still much confusion about what *accountability* means. One of the best recent attempts to clear it up came from the 1997 Tait Task Force on Public Service Values and Ethics. In their report, *responsibility* refers to having authority to act in a certain area. *Accountability* means giving account of the exercise of this responsibility and accepting the consequences. *Answerability* means a duty to inform and explain, but does not involve accepting personal consequences. The two examples given of the latter were public servants testifying before parliamentary committees and the relevant minister answering to Parliament for Crown corporations or independent tribunals. Finally, the task force members defined *blame* or *discipline*. Here the key question was whether the responsible person “caused the problem or should have taken steps to avoid it” (Tait, 1997, p. 3).

The choice of words seems very significant here; the task force did not use the words *positive* or *negative consequences*, only *blame* or *discipline*. We are trying to get away from the old “command and control” mode, but far from going for unambiguous improvement,

we have a strong tendency to “blame, shame, and punish.” We still have a strong “control lobby” that worries most about misconduct (Roberts, 1996).

Two or three patterns of accountability emerge from the above. Surely Osbaldeston was right when he wrote that accountability is the obligation “to answer to a person or group for the exercise of responsibilities conferred on him or her by that person or group” (1989, p. 5). In this perspective, managers are responsible to clients, staff, other departments, and so on, but not accountable to them, and they may be answerable to Parliament, but they are not accountable. Sometimes this distinction is presented as between internal and external accountability, but I believe that we need some vocabulary change to distinguish external accountability from real accountability to those who have given you your specific mandate and who may reward or punish you. Aside from damaging reputations, Parliament has little means to discipline agency heads. Even so, the confusion over how much the minister is answerable for their performance is likely to remain for a long time.

A THEORY OF MOTIVATION

Two new approaches might be worth considering in looking at the problems posed by the new autonomy of organizations and the need for some responsibility and accountability. They go in opposite directions, but may serve to illustrate my point about what is missing from results- or performance-based accountability schemes.

A first approach, based on transaction costs, comes from Frant (1996), who distinguishes between high-powered incentives (HPIs) and low-powered incentives (LPIs). In the private sector, HPIs are those in which efficiency gains flow to the parties involved. LPIs are indirect rewards like a raise or a promotion. If the HPI leads to risks of opportunistic behaviour, they can be avoided by bringing the function inside the organization (merger or buyout) or by having recourse to the non-profit form of organization.

In the public sector, all the rewards to public servants and other public-sector employees are LPIs. However, Frant (1996) suggests that the HPIs in the public sector are the votes that politicians may hope to win. Thus, in the public sector there are no great incentives to efficiency or cost cutting, but there is some allocative efficiency, in that the system will ideally lead to programs that voters want.

Opportunism here comes from the fact that voters are not well informed, and so may not know when resources are being taken from some important but little-known program and diverted to visible, vote-getting activities. The choice of an authority or agency makes sense here for functions one wants to protect from political opportunism.

The reader may not accept all of this, as Canadian politicians seem lately to have been motivated by a desire for greater efficiency. The transaction cost approach points out that creating more or less autonomous agencies may produce motivation to economize (although it is not usually an HPI), but it runs the risk of not producing allocative efficiency, for there is less incentive to adjust to public demand.

So it might be useful to look at motivation in this light and to ask if new arrangements will produce cost efficiency and allocative efficiency. As is typical with economic approaches, however, this one leaves out the public service motivation identified by Zussman and Jabes (1989) as intrinsic, that is, the inherent interest of the work, the sense of public service, and the gratification of participating in public decisions.

A completely different approach comes from what might be called a postmodernist school (Hansen, 1998; Harmon, 1995; McSwite, 1997; Paquet, 1999). These authors are sceptical about the entire rationalist discourse. They reject the dichotomies put forward by rationalism: ends versus means, values versus facts, politics versus administration, public conduct versus private life. The paradox here is that if people are free to choose what they do, then they may violate their obligations (Harmon, 1995, p. 8); if they are not free, then they can hardly be held accountable for what results they achieve. These authors want to move beyond what they see as a false dichotomy between freedom and responsibility, in order to add to the external, formal dimension of personal responsibility the inner one: the "irreducibly subjective character of individual moral agency" (Harmon, 1995, p. 65).

This approach moves away from shaming and blaming in order to promote "the dynamics of internal dialogue that enable and inform action" (Harmon, 1995, p. 129). Shaming and blaming produce all kinds of defensive reactions, like denial, justification, dispute, and cheating. The postmodern approach seeks to promote a discourse of inclusion, self-regulation, and effective action (Hansen, 1998). Paquet

speaks of “social learning [and] ... a society based on participation, negotiation and bargaining” (1999, p. 33).

Such an approach may seem very far from the day-to-day realities of the lives of public servants. However, it is not. Carroll and Dewar (in press, pp. 19–20) praise the new performance management initiatives in Ottawa precisely because they do not conform to some ideal of rationalistic perfection, but avoid over-quantification, and allow departments and agencies the flexibility to develop measures that are meaningful to them, even if it means that Parliament is not getting everything it wanted. Moreover, a learning, bargaining approach would have the advantage that more change would be self-generated, as in the “local heroes” stories discovered by Borins (1998), with presumably less of the saturation psychosis and disillusionment I spoke of earlier. Of course, as Tennyson put it in *Ulysses*, any one good custom may corrupt the world over time; too much learning and bargaining could be used for the corporate advantage of the producing employees.

Where the postmodern approach is more easily conceivable is where there is a renewed concern for ethics. Bowman notes that alongside technical dimensions, decisions of governments take on moral and symbolic character, “as they publicly represent both the symbolic and real authoritative allocation of values in a society” (2000, p. 683). For this reason, ethical standards are more demanding in the public sector: “a concern for the ‘bottom line’ of technical skill must be complemented, if not superseded, by the ‘top line’ of ethical responsibility.” Performance targets and the accreditation approach described by Cabatoff run the risk of evacuating the need for ethical administration.

CONCLUSION

I began this article with considerations about the nature of politics: it has to do with power relationships manifesting in influence, persuasion, and coercion. Just as political processes are those that regulate the internal and external relations of complex organizations and societies, so they provide for the major collective value choices of such systems. Politics is present both when power relations are in evidence and when group value choices are to be made. In addition to the familiar legal and economic rationalities of bureaucratic and managerial thinking, political thinking adds another type of

rationality that requires taking into account support and opposition for a measure, and careful attention to its goals and objectives.

Governance, and agency, means the need to have reporting or feedback systems. The move to performance measurement has many things to recommend it. Even so, it seems quite unrealistic to believe that this approach can deliver rational, efficient, and effective government where so many approaches have failed. If it is like the others, something will remain of it, and a kind of learning will occur. If it allows for greater participation of employees and citizens in decisions that concern them, so much the better. Insofar as it does work, our political classes will have to learn some new virtues, and practice restraint and self-denying discipline to make it work as a model of parliamentary accountability. I have argued that the true accountability of public servants is to those who give them their mandates and who determine their rewards and punishments, and that incentive systems should include the personal dimension of accountability. Rather than limit our attention to the fulfilment of a variety of targets, we need to continue to pay attention to how things are done, to the respect of democratic values, to the balancing of the various interests involved, and to public service ethics.

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NOTES

- 1 The component list of the new public management varies from one source to another, but many authors consider that it represents a new paradigm or model of administration that aims to replace the bureaucratic model (Charih & Rouillard, 1997; Gow & Dufour, 2000).
- 2 This point was also made by Paul Thomas during discussion at a session entitled "Meaningful Accountability" at the conference of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, Ottawa, August 28, 2000.
- 3 A good example of this problem is given by the Poitras Commission report (1998, vol. 2, p. 786) on the Quebec provincial police. Detec-

- tives of the SQ display, in common with those of other forces, an excessive concern with results and not enough concern with how they obtain them.
- 4 A chart posted by the U.S. government on its Customer Satisfaction Initiative shows two sources of information that should feed agencies' strategic plans: customer information and the White House and Congress (<<http://www.customersurvey.gov/bp1.htm>> of April 4, 2000).
 - 5 As Bélanger puts it, "Calls for rationality have, by necessity, to make appeals to goals of some sort" (1985, p. 12).

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