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Reclaiming Public Administration

After thirty years of reform and experimentation, it is now time to outline a new, integrated model of public administration more relevant to the complex challenges of today, argues Jocelyne Bourgon, President Emeritus of the Canada School of Public Service.

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Public administrations are a vehicle for expressing the values and preferences of citizens, communities and societies.

The past thirty years have been a rich period of experimentation in public administration, aimed at making government more efficient, effective, productive, transparent and responsive. It was also a period where much was learned about the importance of good governance and the shared responsibilities of the private sector, the public sector, civil society and citizens to ensure a high standard of living and quality of life. As a result, the current practice of public administration is no longer entirely consistent with the Classic model. Yet, practitioners do not have a modern, integrated theory adapted to today's circumstances.

It is time to integrate the core values of the past with the lessons of the last thirty years to develop a new synthesis of public administration to guide practitioners serving citizens in the 21st century.¹

NOT ENTIRELY OF THE PAST

The Classic model emerged in the latter part of the 19th century, during the industrial revolution. It was founded on a number of conventions, including a strict separation of political and professional activities, public service anonymity and political neutrality. The power structure was vertical and hierarchical. It was ideally suited to repetitive tasks performed under precisely prescribed rules. The influence of scientific management led to an expectation that it was possible to define the “best” way to achieve complex results by breaking them down into simple tasks and that rigorous controls would ensure performance and accountability.

Today, few government activities come close to matching the Classic service delivery model which was organised hierarchically and controlled by delegated authority.² A recurring theme of the global government reform movement is the growth of non-traditional, nonhierarchical, and often non-governmental approaches to service delivery.³

NOT YET OF THE FUTURE

In public policy today, one finds a web of diverse policy tools, provided by a vast network of agencies, some in government but most outside. They are not managed in the traditional way but instead through networks of interdependent relationships.

Indirect tools, such as contracts, loans, transfers, grants and tax credits, account for most government services. They differ from the direct service delivery of the past. The more government uses indirect means of delivery, the less relevant the traditional model of accountability becomes.⁴

An increasing proportion of government services are intangible and knowledge-based. The quality and the nature of the services provided depend on the accumulated knowledge of the organisation and the know-how of the public servant providing the service. Controls do not improve performance and may even forestall innovation.

New ways must be found to encourage coordination in a non-hierarchical environment where powers and responsibilities are broadly dispersed.

Coordinating complex operations is the new trademark of public administration. On important issues, it is necessary to develop a coordinated response to problems that stretch across boundaries. No government agency or country controls all the tools or has all the levers needed to address these modern issues. One cannot command collaboration (not even among agencies of the same government) or order trust. New ways must be found to encourage coordination in a non-hierarchical environment where powers and responsibilities are broadly dispersed.

Modern information and communication technologies allow citizens to reclaim their democratic institutions. It is no longer about democratic institutions providing services to citizens but about creating an enabling environment to empower citizens to take part in, even take charge of, the design and delivery of services provided to them. This is “initiating a dramatic change, a big U-turn, heading government back to the people”.⁵

An increasing number of public policies require the active participation of citizens, as agents, to achieve the desired policy outcome, in particular when issues require a change of societal behaviour which is beyond the state’s legislative authority and ability to act (e.g. obesity and global warming).

The hierarchical structure and authority-based public organisations created to meet the challenges of the industrial age are not well-suited to manage a highly dispersed system of relationships and shared responsibilities needed to respond to citizens’ expectations in the 21st century.

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POLICY CHOICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

A good policy is one that achieves its intended results at the lowest possible cost to society, while minimising unintended consequences. While policy decisions get the most public attention, policy implementation is where success is defined.⁶ The role of public administration is to transform good ideas into solid results to serve the public interest.

Modernising public administration will involve:

- *New approaches to service delivery* that empower citizens to play a key role in service design, delivery and innovation. While the traditional face-to-face approach will remain, particularly for highly complex services, the aggressive use of information technology makes it possible to maximise opportunities for users to take ownership of service delivery functions.
- *New approaches to public policy* through citizen engagement. Citizen engagement elevates public discourse, expanding the sphere within which citizens can make choices. It encourages debate, leading to broader consensus on government initiatives. It enhances the legitimacy of government action with other governments in international forums.⁷
- *New systems of accountability* to balance the impact of rules and constraints to pursue policy goals, with reasonable risk-taking to innovate and improve performance, and with the obligation to maximise the achievement of results for citizens. The emerging focus on results is important. No organisation should be judged as successful if the cost burden of required compliance is at the expense of achieving results or exceeds the overall benefits to society.
- *New forms of accountability to citizens*: Public reporting on the achievement of societal goals based on evidence, comparative analysis, peer review and benchmarking with countries of a similar level of development, would elevate the public discourse and enrich the current system of accountability for the exercise of power.
- *Network management* across agencies as a complement to vertical authority and accountability structures, supported by common information management systems transforming individual knowledge into the shared property of the collective and encouraging system-wide innovation.
- *Partnership and shared governance* as the management model of non-hierarchical relationships. Partnerships require lead time upfront in order to define common goals, purpose, decisionmaking mechanisms and roles and responsibilities. They also require sustained commitment, respect and trust.

None of these were trademarks of the Classic model.

CONCLUSION

As Donald Kettl has noted, “Public administration is in trouble because it does not match up well, in theory or in practice, with the problems it must solve.” He goes on to summarise the challenge very well, “Public administration without a guiding theory is risky; administrative theory without connection to action is meaningless. That dilemma is the foundation of a genuine intellectual crisis in public administration.”⁸

It is time to reclaim public administration and refashion it for a new century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The **Honourable Jocelyne Bourgon** served as President of the Canadian Centre for Management Development from 1999 to 2003. Her work led to the creation of the Canada School of Public Service. She became President Emeritus of the School in 2003. From 2003 to 2007, Ms Bourgon served as Ambassador to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where she played a key role on behalf of Canada in guiding OECD reforms. Since 2007, she has been Distinguished and Visiting Professor Public Administration and Public Service Reform, University of Waterloo and Distinguished and Research fellow at Center for International Governance Innovation. Ms Bourgon also serves as special advisor to the Privy Council Office and she pursues her work in support of the public service and public service reform as President Emeritus of the Canada School of Public Service. As an eminent expert in governance and public sector reforms, Ms Bourgon provides advice to various Governments around the world.

NOTES

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ADDITIONAL SOURCE:

- Bourgon, Jocelyne, (unpublished), Why Should Governments Engage Citizens in Service Delivery and Policy Making, Paris, October 2007

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