

The Future of Public Services

Community, Opportunity, Responsibility, Accountability

Report of a symposium
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to mark the tenth anniversary of
the Office for Public Management



*Office for Public
Management*

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The job ahead

Mark H. Moore

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When I stand before a group like this, and particularly today, having listened to the morning's speeches and your discussions, I'm reminded of the time when Johnny Carson interviewed Conrad Hilton on his popular *Tonight* show. Carson was, uncharacteristically, a little flustered and in awe of so great a businessman sitting across from him, and he asked a less than inspired question: 'Mr Hilton, is there some important piece of wisdom, knowledge or philosophy that you'd like to share with the American public? You could almost hear him thinking, 'Oh God, what a dumb question. I'm going to get my journalism degree revoked or something.' But, much to his amazement, Conrad Hilton replied that, yes, there was something important he wanted to say to the American citizens, an important piece of philosophy.

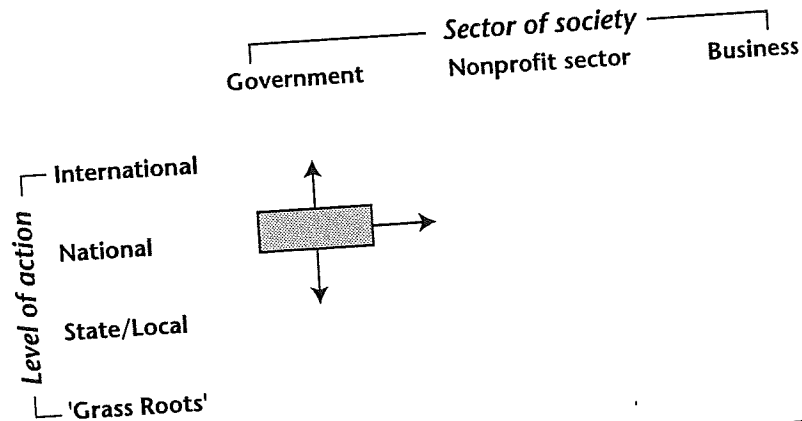
Well, Johnny Carson felt suddenly redeemed. He was excited, on the edge of his seat. Conrad Hilton cleared his throat, and the cameras moved in, and we all felt we were on the verge of journalism history and about to learn a great lesson. Hilton leaned forward and he said: 'Citizens of America ... put the shower curtain inside the bathtub.'

Why do I think this story is appropriate in this particular context? I'm an academic. I do abstractions. I do philosophy. My life revolves, though, around trying to give useful advice to practitioners, people who have to deal with concrete, particular realities rather than general conditions in society. So I always wish that I had some very good concrete advice like 'put the shower curtain inside the bathtub'.

I have been asked to respond to what we have heard from the speakers today and

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The locus of initiative in public problem solving



comment on the ideas that have been raised. Let me start with a matrix diagram that the dean of my school showed us when he took over at the Kennedy School of Government.

The dean challenged the faculty to think strategically about how to position the Kennedy School in its world. We took it for granted that our fundamental mission was to train people for leadership positions in the public sector. The important question, then, was: 'What's happening to our market?' Or, 'What people, in what institutional positions, were now providing leadership in public problem-solving?'

The dean then pointed to the rows of the matrix – the different levels at which action could be taken. He distinguished actions taken at the international level from those taken at the national, state, grass roots and individual levels. He also observed that actions were being taken not only at different levels of society, but also by different sectors of society: government, civil society (by which we mean neighbourhood associations and non profit organisations) and business organisations.

Once we had this matrix in front of us – this picture of the possible locations for public leadership – we saw that the locus of initiative in defining and acting on important public issues was shifting away from national government, and migrating to other sectors.

At one time we thought that most of the responsibility for public leadership lay at the level of national government. Now we began to see that it was increasingly being dispersed across this matrix. This had very important implications for us as a school of government. The key question for us was: 'Why was this happening: why was society looking to other levels and sectors to provide public leadership?'

One answer, of course, is that the philosophy of neo-liberalism had forced us to adopt a broader view of what constitutes public value. We have learned over the last 20 years or so that a strong economy is a foundation for a healthy society. Further, that we could no longer take a strong private economy for granted. As a society, we learned that in the context of intense international competition, the government had to take steps to help the national economy grow.

We also found ourselves increasingly frustrated with the responsiveness of government – at two levels. The first was at the level of the individual client, interacting with government and trying to obtain services. The second was as citizens seeking to express a collective will through the government and to create a government that reflected values we wanted for the society as a whole. Our frustration with the quality of politics and the ability of our politicians and bureaucrats to deliver the type of government we wanted, with the quality of services that we expected, had reached boiling point.

One solution was to look to the nonprofit and business sector for more efficient means to accomplish the goals that we had set for ourselves. In effect, we wanted to hire their capabilities to produce results rather than rely on old, tired bureaucracies. As a result, 'public' was no longer equated with 'government.' Many public purposes could be pursued, and much public value would be created, outside the boundaries of government. And, to the neo-liberals, that seemed like a good thing.

The general policy pushed 'decentralisation' and 'cross-sector partnerships' as improved methods of delivering services to the public. That had two very obvious and important implications.

The more obvious implication was that the government and its managers needed to become accountable to citizens as our clients and to focus on improving service quality. The second implication, less obvious, concerned the desire to operate across the boundaries defined by the matrix – from government, through civil society to business – in the interest of accomplishing public purposes. Managers in government gradually began developing systems that would allow cross-sector

networks of operational capacity to develop, and be used for accomplishing public purposes.

But a difficult problem remained. There were now government managers operating at the national, state and local levels with the responsibility for accomplishing mandated purposes. The purposes included service quality as an important goal. The means included greater reliance on civil society and business. However, they remained accountable to many different people for many different purposes, and it was often confusing to those in public sector management positions to work out exactly to whom they owed their primary accountability and for what particular purposes. As Andrew Foster said this morning, managers are facing multiple accountabilities.

It's interesting, though, that we have had an all-purpose answer to that problem. The neo-liberal government in Britain used this answer. The new government uses it as well. As you would expect in democratic government, the answer was that the government and its managers needed to be accountable to citizens. To achieve this goal, society needed an active citizenry that could demand and get from government the things that we, as citizens, wanted to have.

But 'citizen' is a complicated word. In talking about what it means to be 'accountable to citizens' I think one has to make a crucial distinction between, on the one hand, the citizen as customer, the person with whom we transact (my business friends have taught me to describe this as the 'downstream transactee') and, on the other hand, citizen as owner and authoriser (the 'upstream' owner or investor). One can make the clear distinction between where customers are positioned organizationally and why they are important to the firm,

The Activist Citizen

"Citizen as Owner Authoriser"

- Voter/Political Citizen
- Taxpayer
- "Community" Member
 - "Community" of Place
 - Community of "Interest"
 - Economic Self Interest
 - Political Aspiration

"Citizen as Customer"

- Client/Beneficiary
- Client/Obligatee
-
- Remote Beneficiary

and where owners and authorizers are positioned and what we owe to them.

'Citizen as customer' usually invokes the idea of someone who expects to benefit from the provision of a government service: it could be a student who desires an education, an ill person who wants medical care, a victim of crime who wants justice and relief from insecurity. The idea is that there's somebody who calls on the government and gets the benefit from government service. With this understanding, the important job of government is to make the client happy. The government's contribution then is to maximize the benefit to, and the satisfaction of its clients.

When I talk to my friends in the business school they say: 'Well, Mark, government is just a big service organisation, and if only you guys in government would understand the principles of service management and get your act together, we could have a high performing government.'

But there is an important distinction between the idea of client as beneficiary and that of client as obligatee. I must say, I've been looking for a better word than

'obligatee' but, on the other hand, I almost like its ugliness – it makes the point that we foist responsibility onto people. I think that happens a lot in the public sector. The organisations that I usually deal with – police forces, prisons, environmental protection agencies, tax collecting agencies, and so on – have clients who do not think they're getting services. I think those people think they're getting serviced!

The challenge in these kinds of encounters is to find some way to construct a strong feeling of obligation on the part of the obligatees so that they come into compliance without experiencing the situation as terrible. Things that start off looking like service encounters – for example when we provide drug abuse treatment to a drug addict, or welfare payments to a welfare recipient – turn out to have important obligations attached to them. We want the drug patient to get off drugs and stop committing crimes; we want the welfare candidate to get off welfare and take up a job. We have purposes for those service recipients – obligations they must fulfil – and part of our job as public sector managers is to try to accomplish that particular purpose.

Another interesting idea that Anthony Giddens raised in his talk is that of government as a kind of insurance entity: it offers protection against unemployment by having an unemployment insurance compensation; it offers protection against economic disaster for people who are disabled by having an insurance program for disabled workers. But Tony also pointed out that the difficulty with offering benefits is that people who 'don't deserve' them or aren't entitled to them will come and get them anyway. He described that as the problem of 'moral hazard' in insurance schemes. So not only are government agencies expected to impose obligations, they're also expected to impose barriers that distinguish between people who are entitled to the available benefits from those who aren't. So now we have not only the citizen as customer, but the citizen as someone who has to be turned away as undeserving and suspect – a potential bum.

We have an additional image of citizens as remote beneficiaries. In this view, the reason that we impose rules on individuals is because, in the end, society as a whole – which is, after all, made up of individuals – will benefit. I would observe that one imagines that the reason we have these rules is that they benefit everybody in the society in terms that each individual would value for themselves, so that's why we can do cost-benefit analysis of government agencies. But I also want to suggest that the idea of a citizen carries us to the idea of the citizen as an authoriser, because when we invoke the idea of a remote beneficiary we have in the back of our mind, 'Oh yes, citizens will vote for this policy because they can anticipate that they will benefit from it.' But I want to argue that the idea of a citizen as an owner and an authoriser is actually a different and harder concept than that, and I want to develop that idea – very, very quickly – in order show why

community turns out to be an important part of our discussion.

One idea of citizen as authorizer is the idea of citizen as voter. Citizens vote. We owe accountability to citizens who vote as well as to citizens who are customers. We have a picture of people going in to voting booths and voting as individuals and, typically, voting for their own self interest.

As voters, we all now feel entitled to vote for our own self-interest. But I was startled to discover that John Stuart Mill, one of your great political philosophers and, in many ways, the champion of individual liberalism, did not take that view. He was against the secret ballot. He reasoned that if no-one could see who an individual was voting for, that individual would be tempted to vote for his own self interest. And Mill thought that was wrong. It was alright to pursue your self interest in a variety of other ways, but when you walked into a voting booth to decide, as a member of a collective, about what was to be done, it was important for you to feel the weight of the collective power of your neighbours.

A second idea of citizen as authorizer: citizen as tax payer. One of the worst consequences of neo-liberalism was the idea that a tax payment was a payment by a citizen for a service that they got from the government. It was partly that idea that was used to justify the importance of delivering high quality government services to individual tax payers. But that's a terrible idea. Citizens pay taxes not for a discrete service to them as individuals, but to support a collectively adopted aspiration. That's what taxes are for: to pay for those purposes that we collectively embrace.

That is an ideal of citizenship that is very hard to accomplish. John Rawls, the American philosopher, wrote a book called *A Theory of Justice* in which he addressed the question of what would constitute a

just set of social arrangements. He proposed, as an answer, the following idea: that it would be that set of social institutions and arrangements that individuals would choose to live under if they didn't know what particular position they would occupy in the society. He called this 'the veil of ignorance.' The idea was that individuals in society would all get together and think about a set of social arrangements. As long as they didn't know whether they would be rich or poor, powerful or weak, the set of institutions that they would agree to would be the set of institutions that was just.

Now it takes a bit of a stretch to bring that into the public policy making world, but you could imagine something like a just police system, a just health system, a just educational system. That would mean the system of policing, health or education that we would agree upon if we weren't sure whether we were going to be a tax payer, a childless person, a prisoner, or a victim. And you could imagine us all trying to get together in a disinterested way and talk about what kind of system we would like to be in if we didn't know what particular position in society we would occupy.

Now, I think that's probably the right vantage point from which to think as a citizen, and when I'm thinking about a public policy I'm always trying to think about how it would look to a person who was operating behind Rawls's 'veil of ignorance'.

How do we make this idea practical and concrete? I think this is where both the experience of politics and the practice of political leadership become very important. One thing that can help us develop a Rawlsian imagination is an unmediated deliberative encounter with people differently situated than we are. We might be helped further in this imaginative effort by skilful political

leadership which could help transport us from our own particular social position to an empathic concern for all their fellow citizens.

Now it may seem like a very big step to say that we could bring individuals to this Rawlsian position, But I would suggest that the discussion we were having today about communities is in many respects an effort to find ways for people to get involved in politics again and recreate a sense of connection and commitment to others. One characteristic of modern life is that we have lost that; we don't feel a kinship with the large numbers of people with whom we share even our street, let alone our city, let our country. In thinking about this interesting problem of communities, we can visualise those different levels of aggregation that are shown in the dean's diagram, as representing the different kinds of communities that one can begin participating in. There are communities of interest, of place, of identity, and of shared political aspiration.

I've been working with Professor Robert Putnam who's been developing the concept of 'social capital' – this has become one of the 'buzz words' of late. People challenge him by saying: "You act as though social capital were good in itself. Don't you agree that there are some bad forms of social capital?" Well, yes. We can all imagine one thing that makes social capital bad: when the social capital supports bad behavior – rape and extortion and armed robbery.

But there's another form of social capital that might also be destructive. Imagine that there is a kind of social capital that gets created when birds of a feather flock together, and another kind that's created when birds of different feathers flock together. The second kind of social capital, which we call 'bridging social capital', is more valuable to the prospects of a

democratic society than the first kind of social capital. The reason is that the second kind helps to create the imagination and habits of interaction that allow people to will things as citizens, not as individual claimants. And if people could will things as citizens then we, as public sector managers, would know how to act.

That's the end of the philosophy. Now I want to turn to the 'put the shower curtain in the bath' part of this and, in doing so, I shall be borrowing a great deal from what other people have said today.

Let me be clear that I'm speaking as though to an audience made up of government managers, that is, people who have the authority of the state, the responsibility of spending the money of the state on behalf of collectively defined purposes.

To those people, I think the first point to understand is that other people, not just you, must be viewed as public managers. Other important public managers are community leaders and business leaders, as well as people who share with you the privilege of being a civil servant and spending the people's money and authority.

The second point is that it is important for you to accept a high degree of accountability, not just to the professionals you are trying to lead, and to the purpose that they define as important, but also to the purposes that citizens as customers as well as citizens as authorisers would have for you. Make yourself and your organisation accountable.

Finally, you need to strengthen the voice of citizens as authorisers. We haven't done enough work yet to have a political theory of what it means to be a citizen or how citizens can be 'created.' As long as we lack that theory, we don't really know what this collective body is that we need to be

accountable to and for. But a first step might be to learn how to strengthen the voice of the citizens as authorisers and, in the course of that, to build communities. This is important for at least four reasons.

First, to meet the obvious desire to become more responsive to citizens as authorisers and to restore the legitimacy of government.

Second, to strengthen the government's mandate and be more confident about the base on which you're standing. It is hard for you as public managers to stand there day after day with public money and authority leaking out through your fingers. You are providing benefits and imposing obligations on people. But on behalf of whom or what? If you don't have a theory about the specific or concrete purposes that citizens have authorized you to pursue, then you cannot be sure that you are doing the right thing. And that's a terrible place to be. It seems to me that the best way to restore your confidence about what you are doing is to convene the right political community and get them to articulate what it is that they want you to do.

The third reason to be interested in strengthening the voice of citizens as authorisers is that if we do that we may implicitly be recruiting an army that can help us accomplish our purposes. If people agree about their aims; and feel urgently enough about them to talk to you about achieving them; then not only will they authorise you to act on their behalf, but they may go ahead and act on their own in helping you achieve the objective.

And fourth, strengthening community may not only be a means to an end; it may be an important end in itself. Indeed, it may be that the most important end of a democratic government is to strengthen the democratic polity of which it's a part. Developing the techniques of performance measurement – not just as a technique for

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running organisations, but also as a way of convening the discussion within the political community to whom you are accountable – might turn out to be a crucially important skill for public sector managers to use. It will increase transparency to your authorisers as well as improve quality and your accessibility to your customers.

We have been talking a lot today about networks and partnerships. I have heard people describe the Third Way as being a collaborative style that emphasizes negotiation. I think that that's very important. We all know that organisations have to be set up with structures, with accounting systems that manage financial flows, and with audits to ensure you have spent the money appropriately. All this automatically creates a set of rigidities controlling an organisation's performance. Can we out-perform the structure that we are given? The only answer to that

question depends on whether we can find it in our hearts and in our skills to develop a collaborative style that allows for us to help each other, at some risk of accountability.

The job that you have been given as public sector managers has become less clear. You have to work harder under more uncertain circumstances, at greater risk, and for less status. I keep wondering what's in it for you. I know the managerial challenge is interesting but, when you think about it, it's amazing that talented people will dive into these murky waters – putting their lives, careers and reputations on the line, and on behalf of what?

In the past, we used to say it was 'the pleasure to serve'. I think that must still be the motivation. But the pleasure to serve has now become the pleasure of helping to create a democratic community that's worth serving. And that may turn out to be the most challenging part of your job.