

BOOKS

A REVIEW OF RETHINKING DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

by Robert D. Behn

Reviewed by Nancy P. Pursley



Robert Behn offers an insightful and carefully considered discussion of public accountability in a democratic society. He begins his book by asking, “What do we mean by accountability?”, and through a series of questions,

leads the reader on a thoughtful exploration of the current state of public sector management vis-à-vis accountability for performance.

So what do we mean by accountability? Behn asserts that while our definition of accountability is constantly changing, it usually means that one party is holding another party accountable for one of three things – finances, fairness, or performance. The first two deal with process (how government accomplishes its work) and the third – performance – deals with results (what government does). Traditionally the public sector has focused on finances and fairness where measures are clearer and more objective. Clearer measures also make it easier to convince others of any wrongdoing that is found. Behn calls this the “accountability bias.” This bias results in a focus on money and equity instead of results, encourages cautiousness among public officials (both elected and appointed), and may damage government’s operating capacity.

Not only is there bias in our accountability system, there is also what Behn calls an accountability dilemma. The dilemma occurs when accountability rules for finances and fairness hinder performance. To highlight this point, Behn quotes Paul A. Volcker and William F. Winter:

Not even the most public-spirited government workers can succeed if they are hemmed in on all sides by rules, regulations, and procedures that make it virtually impossible to perform well. The most tal-

ented, dedicated, well-compensated, well-trained, and well-led civil servants cannot serve the public well if they are subject to perverse personnel practices that punish innovation, promote mediocrity, and proscribe flexibility... (p. 11).

This accountability dilemma is more pronounced when viewed in the context of new forms of public management that emphasize innovation and seek to improve public sector performance.

Why do we hold public officials accountable? We insist on accountability because we fear abuse of power by public officials. We want to limit their discretion and seek to constrain their behavior particularly in relation to finances and fairness.

Everyone wants other people to be held accountable. Behn uses the terms accountability holders and holdees to describe the two parties in the transaction. Accountability holders may not be able to define what accountability means, but holdees know that it means punishment. Behn is highly critical of accountability holders and suggests that they believe they are accountable to no one, they don’t have to do anything particularly right, and if it turns out that their findings are wrong, they can claim that they were “just doing our job.”

This threat of punishment keeps some from serving in elected office and keeps others from staying in public service, which results in a loss of talent in the public sector. I would add that the threat of scrutiny and “second guessing” is a strong deterrent to attracting and retaining highly qualified public managers and elected officials. In fact, it may be more of a deterrent than the threat of punishment. In addition the complex accountability environment in which public servants are accountable to many masters can discourage some from entering public service.

One of the important contributions of this book is Behn's discussion of accountability for performance in terms of public administration and the new public management. He carefully guides the reader through the history and principles of the public administration paradigm of accountability. He then discusses the characteristics of the new public management that he defines as "the entire collection of tactics and strategies that seek to enhance performance in the public sector" (p. 26). Because of the focus of this new paradigm on improving performance and increasing flexibility in rules and procedures, it is critical that we find ways to ensure accountability for performance.

Behn suggests that one of the problems associated with the new public management is the conflict between entrepreneurial government and accountability to citizens. The public administration paradigm offers a simple and compelling theory of political accountability that public management has yet to match. The imposition of rules and regulations that focus on finances and fairness and the creation of watchdog agencies, e.g., regulatory commissions, GAO, Inspectors General, has made it easier for elected officials, the news media, and concerned citizens to hold agencies accountable for process (but not results).

It is this concept of democratic accountability with which Behn is most concerned. The four basic questions of democratic accountability include:

1. Who will decide what results are produced?
2. Who is accountable for producing these results?
3. Who is responsible for implementing the accountability process?
4. How will the accountability process work?

It is easy to agree with him when he asserts that the new public management needs an accountability paradigm that addresses all four questions. I would also suggest that developing this accountability paradigm is critical to the future of the new public management. In order to introduce innovations in government and achieve flexibility vis-à-vis rules and regulations, citizens must be assured that public sector organizations are achieving the desired results while being good stewards of financial resources and treating all parties fairly.

Accountability requires both discretion and trust. We fear allowing public officials to use their judgment and elected and appointed officials are reluctant to exercise discretion. The accountability environment is not characterized by trust. We have created a culture of mistrust in which we focus on errors rather than accomplishments. As Behn points out, to improve performance the new public management requires trust. If citizens lack this trust, they will not appreciate the need for flexibility, deregulation, and empowerment that is critical to the new public management. Behn concludes that "... to replace the traditional

public administration paradigm with the new one of public management – we need to invent mechanisms and institutions to enhance the public's trust" (p.86).

In order to assure accountability for performance, legislatures have to review the choice of goals and evaluate the achievement of those goals. But the politics of process are different from the politics of performance. Laws are created through negotiation and compromise resulting in broad and sometimes vague goals. Clarifying goals may be managerially sound and certainly necessary for assessing performance, but it is politically irrational for elected officials in terms of garnering the support needed to be re-elected. Behn refers to this as the politics of rules vs. the politics of results. Politically more rules and more regulators are better.

After making a convincing argument that accountability for performance is critical to achieving the goals of the new public management, and that the accountability environment is inherently hostile to ensuring desired results, what does Behn suggest? He advises that we need to establish compacts of mutual, collective responsibility. Because public managers are accountable to many stakeholders, responsibility for performance must be shared. He suggests that informal compacts are a mechanism to create collective responsibility.

As Behn indicates, the significant distinction between management in the public and private sectors is the number and diversity of stakeholders. In order to address the questions of democratic accountability, everyone in the accountability environment must be responsible for finances, fairness and performance. He advocates a "web of mutual responsibility" in which public managers, elected public officials, journalists, and citizens are accountable.

Cooperation is key to making this informal compact work. Lack of trust and a proclivity to be the first to assign blame are strong barriers to establishing the cooperation needed for the compact to thrive. Self-interest, professional norms and competition can keep accountability holders from joining a responsibility compact. In spite of this, Behn suggests that professional friendships can be developed and competitors can develop a norm of reciprocity.

Finally, Behn recommends evolving mini-compacts into "charter agencies." Only after evolving a variety of charter agencies can we see if they are worthy of becoming a model that public agency heads and elected officials can use to improve performance. In order to earn the flexibility needed to improve performance, Behn suggests that governmental agencies can demonstrate they are competent by eliminating some internal barriers to improved performance. A series of small wins will establish the agency's reputation for competence.

Behn cautions that the organization should not seek to

become an official charter agency since a formal designation can draw attention to the flexibility they have already earned. He also maintains that using a strategy of small wins can help improve performance and earn flexibility but it will not protect the agency from scrutiny. Its only political protection will be improved performance. One wonders if improved performance will be enough.

It is not clear that creating a compact or unofficial charter agency will be worth the considerable time and effort required to develop and maintain it. Turnover among members could be a significant problem. For elected officials, compact membership may become a campaign issue raised by their opponents. Certainly changes in membership will disrupt the delicate balance of cooperation and trust vital to the success of the compact. After all, trust is ultimately personal and not institutional. One question that needs to be explored is how to foster and maintain the trust needed to ensure the survival of the compact.

Our current system of accountability grew out of our political system and our beliefs concerning public administration and the relationship between elected officials and government agencies. Our democratic form of government creates challenges in ensuring accountability, particularly accountability for performance. As we pursue innovations and flexibility in government (the new public management) we face real challenges in accountability for performance. Compacts of mutual, collective accountability may answer the challenge. In the real world, there are problems in creating and sustaining compacts but we can experiment with informal charter agencies to determine if compacts may work.

Robert Behn's book is well researched and very readable. His use of quotes brings life to potentially dry background material. He logically and systematically lays out his case for "rethinking democratic accountability." He does an outstanding job of raising the right questions concerning accountability for performance and at the same time enhances our knowledge of the new public management.

He leaves one with a better understanding of the challenges of democratic accountability. He uses accountability for performance to illustrate the differences in traditional public administration and the new public management. He raises thoughtful questions about entrepreneurial government. One wonders though if accountability is the key question in looking at differences between public administration and the new public management.

It is clear that we have much more to do in resolving the accountability dilemma. Are we "thinking outside of the box" about government or are we simply defining ways to get around the principles upon which our system is based? Behn creates a picture of legislatures creating more and more rules just so they can catch the public manager doing

something wrong. His description of the accountability environment is one of paranoia, and fixing the blame instead of fixing the problem. While this is accurate to some extent, I cannot quite share his pessimism.

I agree that we need to rethink how we approach accountability for performance. However I am not convinced that informal compacts of collective responsibility are the solution. Leaving responsibility for accountability to informal organizations that we hope will evolve into formal conventions is not only risky, but in the current environment where trust is a scarce commodity, it is unlikely that they would be successful.

While I agree that an incremental approach may work best, it is disheartening that we have to "sneak up" on accountability for performance. One is left with the impression that we must ambush improved performance. Is this the only way?

Robert Behn provides a clear explanation of the evolution of our accountability system. He raises excellent questions and highlights the unsatisfactory nature of the current answers to those questions. In some instances there is a note of pessimism in his book; however, I do acknowledge that he may view this as a sense of realism and not pessimism. One feels energized by his observations on democratic accountability, but left enervated by his arguments for unofficial charter agencies. If you are looking for bold solutions, you will not find them here. If you are looking for a realistic discussion grounded in theory, you will find it in this book. Robert Behn has raised the right questions and moved us forward in our thinking about democratic accountability.

REFERENCE

Behn, R. D., (2001). *Rethinking democratic accountability*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

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