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# Accountability, Committees and Parliament

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by Jean-Robert Gauthier, MP

Let me start by quoting Peter Drucker, a management consultant, who just published a new book entitled *The Post-Capitalist Society*. "Any government, whether that of a company or a nation, degenerates into mediocrity and malperformance if it is not clearly accountable to someone for results."

In the climate of Public Service 2000 and increasing challenges for public servants, accountability appears as a panacea for the woes that beset those of us working in the public sector. If only we can improve the structures and systems of accountability, then we can single-handedly renew the faith of cynical Canadians in their politicians and in their public servants. We can empower public servants and boost morale. We can trim public spending through greater efficiencies.

If we are to reach for such goals, then we need to start at the beginning by defining what is meant by "accountability." In one concise definition that I particularly like, accountability is "the obligation to explain how one has used one's responsibility." Accountability is only meaningful when used in tandem with authority and responsibility. Authority is the ability to direct resources, to take decisions, ensure compliance and provide services while responsibility is the duty to respond appropriately using one's authority.

An important distinction must also be drawn between general accountability, administrative accountability and accountability to Parliament. As the former Clerk of the Privy Council, Gordon Osbaldeston said in his study on the Accountability of Deputy Ministers:

The distinction drawn by deputy ministers between general accountability, administrative accountability and accountability to Parliament is important in terms of maintaining the integrity of the parliamentary system of accountability. For example, if deputy ministers received

their instructions or orders directly from parliamentary committees, they would be less accountable to ministers and to government. If the deputy ministers felt that they were accountable to their clients, in addition to the minister, their actions could impede the duties of the democratically elected government.

*The dilemma is clear. In a parliamentary democracy, defining powers, duties and controls is essential to order and good government.*

I would wager that we would all agree that a profound malaise exists within the federal bureaucracy. A sort of bureaucratic paralysis has set in in virtually all areas of the machinery of government.

To extract ourselves from this predicament, we have only one option, namely to make public managers "accountable" by imposing a new bureaucratic culture. We must instil in them concern for efficiency, effectiveness and administrative simplicity. Henceforth, they must be motivated by their performance, by their desire to meet objectives, to consistently improve services and satisfy clients, precisely as if they worked in the private sector.

Mention is often made of entrepreneurship in the private sector. The Austrian economist Schumpeter clearly demonstrated how entrepreneurial spirit stimulated new ideas. Now, we must speak of "intrapreneurship", that is to say the creation of entrepreneurial ideas originating from within large organizations. This entrepreneurial revolution must also take place within the federal administration.

In order for public servants to set for themselves the goal of achieving the best possible performance within an organization, the power to make decisions must be delegated to them.

Public servants must also stop giving in blindly to bureaucratic constraints. They must adjust to specific

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The Canadian Study of Parliament panel on "Accountability, Committees and Parliament" included: (l to r) Robert Vaive, Deputy Clerk of the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly; Denis Desautels, Auditor General of Canada; Jean-Robert Gauthier, MP and Harold Martens, MLA, Saskatchewan (Photo: Martine Bresson)

situations and to the needs of the public. We must rely on the judgment of public servants and trust in their creative ideas.

In December 1990, the federal government announced the launch of Public Service 2000, an initiative aimed at reforming the federal public service, at providing better service to Canadians and to breathing new life into the institution. One of the goals of the reform process was to stimulate creativity among public servants. To achieve this end, the government proposed to radically overhaul the way in which it managed human resources. Preparations are under way to deregulate the bureaucracy and to inspire public servants to excel.

This type of reform is desirable. The time has come to stimulate a public service that has grown demoralized and that is bound by controls and restrictive processes that limit innovation. This bureaucratic reform process does, however, present one problem. PS 2000 makes no provisions for reconciling the delegation of decision-making authority with the requirement for accountability.

As part of the process of public service reform, accountability, parliamentary control and the entrepreneurial ideas of public servants must be reconciled. Decision-making bodies must be held

accountable to taxpayers and demonstrate how their innovative ideas have been beneficial. Public servants must carry out the wishes of Parliament and meet its requirements. Overly rigid controls on public servants would jeopardize the very objectives of Public Service 2000, but we must also be careful not to reduce parliamentary control.

I believe that we should review how the present parliamentary committee system works. It is a parliamentary structure that needs to be modernized to make it more responsive to public expectations, and more efficient by giving Members of Parliament greater authority and powers.

The Public Accounts Committee, which I chair, is ostensibly the conduit to Parliament for the Office of the Auditor General, and is the only reason for the existence of this committee. Yet the committee has no authority over the Office of the Auditor General. We are not consulted on priorities in its program of audits. We play no role in budget setting although we do look at the estimates once they are established. We cannot even protect the Auditor General if he gets squeezed by the media. Sometimes we wonder if the Office of the Auditor General in its annual reporting to Parliament with pre-release secrecy, lock-up, and all the media hoopla is

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really building up populist appeal and street power at the expense of the representative institutions of government and Parliament.

Last November, the committee travelled to Britain to examine how the system works over there. In Britain, the Comptroller and Auditor General are named by Parliament on the recommendation of the chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. The expenditure plan for the Office of the Comptroller and the Auditor General are reviewed by an audit commission that overlaps the Public Accounts Committee before they become estimates and can no longer be changed.

***Real reform must touch Parliament and the committee system. Canadians are demanding more accountability from their parliamentary institutions. More visible and effective accountability could go a long way to answering this demand.***

As you know, once the estimates are tabled in the House, they are "untouchable". Even the estimates for the Office of the Auditor General are frozen into the formal estimates of other departments. In my view, this costs the Office of the Auditor General something in terms of its democratic legitimacy. The power of the Office of the Auditor General is diluted with other government estimates and Parliament's role of scrutiny of the financial cycle is on auto pilot. This in my view explains why many Members of Parliament have abdicated their role on committees as representatives of their electors. The system is not working, the system needs change.

I often hear the proposal that if MPs were allowed more free votes, Parliament would work better. The only free vote that I know of is the secret vote, and that is not in the interest of more visible and effective accountability. What we need is an in-depth reform of parliamentary institutions so that members can fully participate in meaningful accountability.

The time has come to make sweeping changes in the way public funds are managed and how public management is evaluated. Given the current climate of budgetary austerity, which is likely to continue for a number of years, improving the quality of public management is probably the only remaining means of maintaining government programs.

We must contemplate a new partnership between senior managers and parliamentarians. Accountability should be decentralized in the same way power is decentralized. Furthermore, confrontation must become a thing of the past. As long as public servants continue to be the targets of unfair criticism, they will refuse to be properly accountable to parliamentary committees. Elected representatives and senior public servants must trust each other if they are to find a way to improve managers' accountability, otherwise we will always be hesitant to give public servants greater decision-making powers.

We must create a climate of mutual respect and trust between Parliament and senior public servants. We must find a way to better reconcile bureaucratic objectives with political objectives. Politicians, policy-makers, and policy executors must all view themselves as partners working together to improve the well-being of all Canadians.