Information, Parliament, and the "New Public Management"

by Evert A. Lindquist

Advocates of the new public management reforms to governance suggest that performance measures and business plans will help improve both the efficiency of the government and the ability of legislators to scrutinize the public service. While supportive of the main tenents of the new public management, this article suggests that these reforms will not be sufficient and that additional, more basic information must be made available.

I want to address the question of whether the reforms recommended by advocates of the New Public Management movement for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the public service will better prepare legislators to scrutinize the budgets and programs of the government. While I am generally supportive of many of the ideas advocated by the NPM, I worry about whether legislators will be able to properly evaluate the information that will emerge from the new reporting regime. The government and legislators should invest more effort in producing more basic information on departments and the programs they deliver, so that NPM-inspired reporting can be properly evaluated. If creative ways can be found to convey such information to legislators, a potential byproduct will be improvements in the quality of various Parliamentary and government consultations with citizens and groups.

The New Accountability Tools

The New Public Management approach to reforming governance has informed thinking in several jurisdictions. It calls for a radical shift in the traditional

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interest of legislators and governments on inputs and process towards results and performance, and for more transparent accountability regimes.[1] Proponents believe these goals can be achieved by delineating policy responsibilities and program delivery responsibilities; by devolving authority, responsibility and accountability for the management of program operations; and by relying on performance contracts for senior officials.

The fourth means for improving governance, and the one on which I wish to focus, is to improve accountability regimes. NPM advocates want to put several new tools at the disposal of legislators and others interested in public service accountability. They include:

- performance indicators
- benchmarking
- service standards
- Citizen Charters
- business plans/outlooks
- better audit and evaluations

I will refer to them collectively as the "new accountability tools." They are to supplement the traditional methods of promoting accountability, such as Question Period, oversight by central agencies, the work of the Auditor General of Canada, and scrutiny by the Public Accounts Committee and standing committees

and a host of ombudsman-type entities, as well as access-to-information procedures.

The argument of proponents of the NPM is that , by employing these new tools, better information will be put in the hands of legislators, citizens and the other individuals and organizations that comprise the accountability network, and that, with this additional information, the accountability of public servants will increase.

I want to inject a cautionary note into this debate, while not seeming contrary to many of the ideas proposed by NPM advocates. Making performance information available will not necessarily lead to improved accountability or better management reforms; nor will it necessarily lead to increased confidence in our public services, or to achieving better morale or to a keener sense of mission on the part of public servants.

> *Unless other information supplements the new accountability tools, they may well serve to continue the corrosive tradition of partisan scrutiny and bureaucrat-bashing.*

I want to suggest that if legislators, citizens and groups are to be more fully engaged in a constructive engagement with governments and public servants, then other, more basic information must be made available; information that will provide a solid foundation for evaluating the meaning and pertinence of information provided by the new accountability tools.

Will the New Tools Improve Accountability?

Accountability tools, whether old or new, do not stand on their own. They are used by a complex group of actors that I refer to as the "accountability network." These actors include program managers, citizens and clients, ministers, department management teams, audit and evaluation teams, performance measurement advocates, the Treasury Board and its secretariat, legislators and various committees, Office of the Auditor General, and other oversight organizations.

Each of these actors had their own responsibilities, tasks, authorities and interests. Since their interests are not congruent, there typically occurs much unproductive and evasive behaviour when it comes to enforcing accountability for the delivery of programs. This may lead, in practice, to the diffusion of less knowledge and understanding about how departments and specific programs are managed.

Although I do not want to overstate my point, the claim of NPM advocates is that the adoption of the new accountability tools will refocus the interests and energies of all actors in the accountability network. In this view, the deliberations of the accountability network will be moved onto a new plane: there will be a greater focus on productive and efficient management because all actors will have at their disposal more than the traditional data contained in the Estimates and the contributions of the Auditor General of Canada.

I am not so sure. Let me explain my reservations by pointing out three problems with the new accountability tools, which collectively place greater emphasis on measuring outcomes and performance. These problems, posed as three clusters of questions, are:

- How valuable can the new accountability tools be in the context of significant budget reductions, organizational downsizing, and restructuring of the federation? If a premium is to be placed on measuring outcomes and performance, and if doing so requires the existence of baseline data, how reasonable will it be to expect that we can measure many programs that can only be described as *moving targets*?

- What aspects of programs and departments will, or can, be measured and thus highlighted? Will these tools provide adequate insight into the management and inner workings of government departments? Will the new accountability tools really be serving as *windows* that cast light on how departments and programs are managed, or will they function more as *peepholes*?

- Is there potential for the new accountability tools to provide misleading pictures of the performance of government departments and programs? Can they lead to impressions of seemingly well-performing organizations when they are not, or can they create the appearance of failure when its managers are coping with complex, intractable and rapidly evolving circumstances? Put differently, will these tools lead to more *transparency* about the management challenges of departments and programs, or will they provide a *veil* on their inner workings?

One response to the critique implied by these questions is to argue that the new accountability tools should be introduced on a "trial and error" basis, and that they will certainly evolve. In this view, such tools are contestable and imperfect, and the search for better tools

is necessarily a developmental exercise that will serve to educate and inform all actors in the accountability network.

I am sympathetic to this argument. One has only to look at the Alberta experience to see how a government has moved forward with a new accountability regime in the form of business plans and performance indicators despite considerable unevenness in the first round of contributions from departments. We should not overplan such initiatives and we should experiment.

However, I worry that the introduction of these new accountability tools may serve to perpetuate the difficulties I associate with the traditional accountability practices. These difficulties include: too much of a focus on whether ministers and officials have strictly adhered to particular administrative policies; too much attention on particular errors or failures to achieve certain standards; and too much interest in blaming or berating particular ministers or officials. I do not want to condone, of course, any inappropriate actions or behaviour, but the common problem is the lack of a *general* perspective on the management challenges that must be dealt with by ministers and officials when delivering programs.

> *The answer, I believe, is to find better ways to convey how departments, agencies and programs work as organizations.*

When I think about the context in which the new tools would be placed, I worry that unless other steps are taken they might serve to still encourage critics to see the public service as an unresponsive and seemingly incompetent black box. They might also serve to give ministers and officials incentive to avoid error or to pick uncontroversial indicators of performance. Finally, they might impede the ability of outsiders – and I would include members of Parliament – to comprehend the complexities inherent in managing a broad set of responsibilities when grappling with particular issues or problems.

Supplementing the New Accountability Tools

One can take seriously the points I have just made and also support many of the important ideas and goals espoused by NPM advocates, particularly their interest in increasing transparency and accountability. In my view, the key question is, how can we encourage a more balanced, intelligent discussion of department and program management and performance during a time of significant change?

There are people who believe that there is a surfeit of information to be found in the Part III documents of the estimates. However, in my experience as a researcher, and when working for the government, I found that consulting the estimates in order to develop a better sense of how departments or given programs worked as organizations was rarely a satisfying experience. It was difficult to get beyond basic information on budget categories, broad organizational structure, and key accomplishments.

My fear is that the business plan and outlook documents, and other of the new accountability tools will not do much better in this regard, particularly for legislators and others who work outside departments and programs. Advocates of the new accountability tools tend to presume that those who will use them are as familiar with the structure, competencies and clients of the programs as those staff in the central agencies and in the Auditor General's office who monitor the programs on a full-time basis. But most people do not have that depth of knowledge and experience.

I want to argue that, if the new accountability tools are to be useful for legislators, they will need more fundamental information on departments and programs. This suggests that good organizational descriptions and profiles should be developed. Not only would they help legislators to better carry out their responsibilities in the accountability cycle, but they would also be useful for legislators and the government when conducting public consultations on policy issues. Such information is a public good that goes beyond the work of committees.

What would constitute a good description or organizational profile? It would have to address the following dimensions: key tasks and authorities at the program level; key competencies and expertise of staff; the location of corporate, program and regional offices; the nature of task environments, such as the kinds of clients they have to work with, the kinds of outputs they must produce, and how they must transform "inputs" into "outputs;" and finally, key trends and the implications of those trends for the program. Such profiles would attempt to convey to legislators, and others, the latent knowledge possessed by program managers and staff in the central agencies and the Auditor General's office.

Would it be difficult to develop profiles that could help legislators quickly come to grips with the important attributes of departments and programs, and the challenges they confront? Students in my course on organizational analysis have to do this all the time. They produce term papers that, in a relatively short amount of space, give the reader a very good picture of how an

organization works and what the key issues are. The Australian government also provides extensive documentation, along with what we would consider to be traditional estimates data, that give readers a better sense of the work of departments.

Can such documentation be produced without relying on thick, costly documents? Can the information they contain be conveyed in an easy-to-absorb manner? Paul Thomas, for example, has argued that estimates and other documentation should be made available in electronic format to legislators and other interested observers.[2] In addition, I think we have not taken advantage of the great strides that have been made in information technology and in graphics and software capabilities to convey the work of government departments and programs. We have all seen creative ways in books and magazines of conveying complex ideas, structures, and industries or history with geographic dimensions. The same can be done to show how the government and its public service is organized and does its work.

Who will undertake this project? I am acutely aware these sorts of ideas would alarm officials in operating departments and central agencies, because everyone is having to do with a lot less resources. On the other hand, this is a public resource that could be used by many individuals that have an interest in scrutinizing the operations of government. We should have a cooperative effort involving Members of Parliament, journalists, academics, students, and other organizations. Involving a wider group of actors would simultaneously allow the needs of users to be taken into account *and* increase the likelihood of tapping into state-of-the-art technology and creative designs. Some sort of protocol might be required to guide the development of profiles, but creativity or innovation should be encourged.

Conclusion

It is with such background information that the new accountability tools advocated by the NPM movement can be interpreted and debated in a more constructive manner. Legislators and others will begin to see departments and programs as complex, but fathomable entities. They will be better able to discern the difficult trade-offs between different resource levels, performance and program outputs. I also think it will help backbenchers on both sides of the aisle to learn more about the details of managing departments and programs *before* they become ministers.

This proposal will not, of course, remove the tensions and confrontation that will always animate accountability networks. In particular, Paul Thomas has pointed out that better information will not alter the incentives confronting members of Parliament.[3] However, it should help to better educate legislators, citizens, interest groups, journalists and academics about the organizations and programs that they are scrutinizing. It would allow outsiders to move beyond stereotypes, or a simple focus on particular events or indicators, and engage in a more constructive and balanced debate on the directions that departments, programs and their managers should take.

Notes

1. See Peter Aucoin, *The New Public Management: Canada in Comparative Perspective* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1996).

2. Paul Thomas, "Parliament and Money: Some Points to Consider," paper submitted to the Sub-committee on the Business on Supply, November 30, 1995.

3. *Ibid.*