

***Pathologies of Governance Reform:
Promises, Pervasions and Perversions
in the Age of Accountability***

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Remarks prepared for public lecture at
Monash University Faculty of Business and
Economics
Governance Unit
Navy and Military Club,
27 Lt Collins Street, Melbourne, AU
March 15, 2006

Also presented at Seminar at the Key
Centre for Ethics, Law Justice and
Governance, Griffith University, Brisbane,
AU
March 17, 2006

We live in the Age of Accountability – or at the least that is what it feels like if you are engaged in or subject to any form of management, and that includes a growing number of us in the public, private and nonprofit sectors.

It seems that in almost every aspect of our lives – from family life and schooling to corporate governance and public administration – we are subjected to ever greater demands for accountability. What makes matters as interesting is that we are increasingly likely to demand more accountability from those we deal with – from our kids and the corner grocer to the public servants and the managers of the corporations that now permeate our lives.

What is driving this growing pervasive preoccupation with accountability is the belief that account giving – that is, the demand for more reporting, measuring, excuse-offering and justification-making behavior – is the best means through which to satisfy our some of our most cherished objectives as members of an open, modern globalized society.

We believe, for example, in the capacity of accountability to deliver justice in the form of satisfying the needs of victims to hear the confessions of their abusers. We are convinced that accountability in the form of transparency is the secret to democracy, or that by insisting on adherence to explicit rules and codes of behavior we can make our elected and corporate officials more ethical.

Most relevant to those of us concerned with the work of the public sector is the pervasive – almost obsessive – belief that through greater accountability we will enhance the performance, productivity and value of that broad range of goods and services for which government is responsible. We believe that through various account giving mechanisms our streets will be cleaner and safer, our children better educated, our health care more cost effective, our social services more efficient, our city services less costly, and even our highway traffic more tolerable and less dangerous.

Collectively, I call these the “promises of accountability,” and they are central to this new Age of Accountability.

In many respects this is nothing new – it is merely an extension of the four century old Enlightenment Project which gave birth to the equally pervasive Age of Reason and its promise that through the development and collective application of our rational capacities we can more effectively deal with the problems that have plagued humanity through the ages.

What is significant about the current obsession with accountability are not the promises it has generated, but the fact that they are rooted in beliefs – strongly held beliefs, but beliefs nonetheless -- and little more. What I find interesting and most disturbing in all this, is that we have come to the Age of Accountability relying so much on blind commitment to untested assumptions, and so little on our proven capacity to inform ourselves of the nature and implications of our choices. Our decision to rely on powerful beliefs rather than knowledge is all the more frustrating because it is endangering the very foundations of modern governance that we are intent on improving.

The general question I want to raise here is whether our belief in any of the promises of accountability has been or is now justifiable. On a more specific level, I want to focus attention on the promise of performance – a promise that is so central to the major administrative reforms of the past quarter century. It is time, I argue, to bring the promises of accountability to account.

I realize that this call for greater knowledge about the promises of accountability will be met with skepticism in political, administrative and corporate circles where the belief in those promises is deeply and firmly rooted. It is the “conventional wisdom”, the “common sense” of today’s

approach to management. That said, such a commitment to an unframed and untested set of beliefs is unwise at best, for these promises have proven dangerously powerful when put in action and can generate costly consequences, not merely in terms of time and other wasted resources, but (as I will argue) in the distortions and perverse behavior they produce.

But as I launch this argument against the promises of accountability, let me be clear that my intent is not to challenge or question the basic relevance of accountability to governance. Quite the contrary, my argument is premised on the observation that accountability is in fact a core – if not THE CORE – defining characteristic of modern governance. But not all forms of accountability are alike, and the accountability of governance is not the same as the accountability of managerialism which is the subject of my criticism.

To understand the difference, we have to start with the basic fact that when all is said and done, accountability is the expectation that an individual will be able to give an account of her or his actions or choices. Account giving is a relatively simple idea – it involves excuse-making, justification, explaining oneself, offering a rationalization, and so on. It is quite simply the capacity and ability to give an account.

But where accountabilities differ is in the way they become manifest in the behavior of the accountable individual. The accountability of governance – the good form of accountability from my perspective – is an embedded and internalized commitment to account giving. It is embedded in the very relationships that the individual has with those she serves, or the clientele group he works with. It is the found in the way a third grade teacher relates to his students, or the obligation a firefighter feels to those who might be trapped in a burning building. It is internalized to the extent that the account giver regards the commitment to accountability to come from within and not be a reaction to some outside pressure.

The accountability of managerialism, in contrast, is imposed on those same relationships rather than embedded in them. It tells that third grade teacher that his relationship with his students must be defined in terms of higher test scores. It assesses the firefighters' performance on the basis of measureables such as emergency response times. And in both instances the account giver does not take personal ownership of those standards – they are never internalized, but remain associated with the outside source.

I have no quarrel with the accountability of governance – in fact, I believe that it is being sacrificed on the alter of the new managerialist accountability and the false promises support it.

So much for preliminaries – let me get on with the argument.

As with most false beliefs, the promises of accountability are reflected in errors of commission and omission. I have already drawn attention to the major error of commission – the strong belief in the validity of accountability and those highly desirable conditions it supposedly fosters. The strength of this “strong belief error” is in part due to its simplicity. In all four cases, one can think of the promise as a simple input-output model: in goes accountability, out the other end comes justice/democracy/ethics/performance. Beautifully simple – to a fault!

A second error of commission is the “tautology error” and is uncovered when you begin to examine both sides of that input-output relationship very carefully. Justice, which has traditionally been based on assessments of outcomes (such as “is there a fair and just distribution of resources” or has the victim achieved retribution) is reduced in this case to account giving in the form of confessionals or declarations of one’s role in a previous unjust regime. Democracy, once tied to majority rule, minority rights and deliberation, is transformed to transparency, openness and answerability. Ethical behavior, once linked to the achievement of happiness through reflection, is converted to restraints and compliance with articulated codes and rules. Performance, which once encompassed competencies and craftsmanship, is now reduced to measurable outcomes.

In each instance the ends have been transmuted into something narrower or different in order to retrofit them with the promise of accountability.

The third error of commission – which I term the “human nature error” – is as old as modern management theory itself. Think of the assumptions about human nature inherent in Frederick Taylor’s scientific management and its view of the human resource factor as just another part of the well engineered operation. While this error met its empirical match in the human relations research of the 1920s, it hangs on as a convenient bit of folk wisdom that underpins much of today’s administrative reform. Popular reforms, you must remember, are most likely to be accepted and implemented if they can be offered in a simple, no nonsense package that can be put together between

two covers in large print, easy to read books that can be marketed on the shelves of booksellers in city centres, shopping malls or airports. At its worse, this Theory X view of human nature – and its equally simplistic Theory Y and Theory Z companions – reflects a one-dimension view of those being held accountable. At its best, in the hands of some careful analysts, it can represent sophisticated models of human behavior that have been reduced to their bare bones in order to facilitate the design of reforms. Most often, however – and most important – is the fact that these assumption about human nature are rarely posited critically or made subject to empirical testing. One result is that when a reform fails to deliver, the blame is shifted to the uncooperative or rebellious human factor.

As for errors of omission, I think there are two which, if resolved, would offset the damage done by all the other problems. I've already hinted at what these errors are in focusing on the unframed and untested nature of each of the promises. The “unframed assertion error” is basic – there is no theoretical frame within which to understand how the promised relationships operate. Returning to our input-output model, what we have between accountability and performance, for example, is a “black box” that somehow transforms accountability into more productive activity. There is little, if any attention paid by proponents of administrative reform to what goes on in that black box, and when we try to get some insight what we find are clear indications of those one-dimensional assumptions about human nature that I spoke of earlier. In short, when we base our administrative policies on these promises, we are flying on “a wing and a prayer”, if that.

The second error of omission is the lack of a valid testing protocol for any of the promised relationships. Yes, there are efforts made to assess various accountability-based reforms, but if you look carefully at what is being evaluated you find that we are measuring compliance with requirements of reform rather than whether the reform has actually helped us improve performance, enhance justice, and so on. And given the tautological nature of the promises – that is, that each promised outcome was modified to fit into the input-output scheme – we are unlikely to get a valid assessment of any of these reform efforts in the current unframed context. In short, under current protocols for assessing the various accountability-based reform efforts, we are locked into a game of self-fulfilling false prophecies.

So much for the logical flaws among the promises of accountability. Among those who are not quite convinced by such arguments, let me turn to the

more fundamental issue that is expressed in the title of my talk – that is, under the promises of accountability, well intended reforms have become pathological. It does so in two ways, first through the diversion of resources and attention away from the desired objective (what I term the paradox of accountability) and second through the creation of incentives for perverse behaviors by those whose very behavior we are trying to change. Here I will focus my examples in the area of performance.

First, let me address the paradox of accountability – that the greater effort and emphasis we place on the technologies of accountability, the less we are able to devote time and energy to the promised objective of improved performance. By requiring the development and implementation of performance measures, for example, we are by necessity placing much of our limited resources into the input side of the equation – and we are doing so without any grounds for assuming that this investment will generate the promised performance output. What it does produce are the very things that went into it – measures, and little more. The only performance generated by accountability is the acts of accountability! With such a diversion of resources to these efforts, there is that much less to actually apply to the improvement of performance.

But that problem pales in the face of the perversities of accountability as applied to performance. We see this most explicitly in the area of education where increasingly the testing of student performance on certain examinations has become a high stakes game for teachers and school administrators.

There is nothing new or untoward about testing students to evaluate their relative standing among their peers in terms of knowledge and scholarly potential. For students who use such tests to gain admission to top schools or to obtain scholarship support, such exams are and always have been high stakes. But for their teachers and school administrators a solid or poor performance of their students on those exams was a point of pride or embarrassment, but little more.

But this has all changed as the Age of Accountability intruded on education in recent years in the US. During the 1980s and 1990s and growing number of American states instituted policies that tied various ratings, rewards, and sanctions for schools and teachers to the performance of students on basic knowledge tests given intermittently, usually in the 3rd, 8th and 10th grades.

Although the stakes varied from state to state, the trend was clearly to increase the pressure on teachers and administrators to “perform” better – which effectively translated into having their students score higher on these tests. In early 2002, this became a national policy through President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” Act which passed in the shadow of the post-9/11 rush of anti-terror legislation.

What has been the result? The promise of greater “performance” through accountability in elementary and secondary schools has resulted in changes, but not of the sort originally contemplated. And here is where we see the perversions of accountability.

First, the high stakes approach applied to teachers has not made them better teachers, but it has altered their approach and commitment to teaching. There is ample evidence that a growing number of individual teachers and entire schools have adopted a “teach to the test” perspective, a development that could only be welcome if there was consensus about what ought to be tested and how it should be tested.

This leads to a second perversion: the forced acceptance of arbitrary standards as a basis for performance. What should we expect of a third grader or eighth grader or tenth grader who has successfully completed his or her curriculum for the year? Can the level and quality of education and skills be measured? And, if so, can it be measured through an objective test? There are doubts raised about the reliability and validity of such examination even among the best known developers of such tests. To bring this closer to home, what exactly is a “job ready” university graduate?

A third perversion – one we like to avoid talking about – is the tendency of these managerialist standards to promote cheating among those being held accountable. One of the most quoted sections of the recent US bestseller, *Freakonomics*, is the chapter that shows how high stakes accountability testing has created perverse incentives that lead teachers and school administrators to at least consider ways to beat the system – that is, to engage in various forms of cheating! And even more to the points, their analysis of test scores in at least one jurisdiction indicate quite clearly that these pillars of the community do more than just consider such things....

Most damaging in the long run is the perverse impact the managerialist accountability is having on the curriculum itself – changes are being made to

the very nature of education that we might not be able to reverse in the future when attempts are made to repair the damage being done. The same can be said for other areas where the managerialist accountability has altered or eliminated the capacity of our public service systems.

The lessons we see emerging in the education sector are becoming clearer, and they indicate that we need to rethink what we are doing in the name of the promises of accountability.

My own sense is that the most fundamental pathologies of the managerialist accountability will not be evident at all, and that is the damage being done to the accountability of governance which is being pushed further into the background by this virulence. A wiser approach to government reform would be one that doesn't attempt to repress or replace the skills and commitment of those engaged in the delivery of our public sector good and services. Instead we need to build on the accountability of governance that is already in place.

This is the conclusion reached by one group of scholars in the US who systematically examined the impact and implications of what they terms the "New Accountability" in US public schools, and what they found was that the most successful efforts to bring about improvement in performance were found in those schools where the reforms were designed to align with the norms and values of those subjected to the reforms. Careful design based on knowledge rather than beliefs is the secret to success.... There are lessons to be learned from the education arena....

Which leads me to my final topic: What is to be done?

First and foremost, seek knowledge where ever you might find it. The loud sales pitch used by advocates of the various promises of accountability can often drown out the lessons that can be drawn from the real world experience of practitioners who have been subjected to the many schemes that comprise managerialist accountability. I have drawn heavily from the education field, but there are other examples from public works, health care, social service deliver, law enforcement, and so on to be mined.

As important, it is not enough to find out whether these various examples succeeded or failed. It is also necessary to find out why, and this means

looking beyond the surface evidence to see what went on inside that “black box” that led to the success or failure.

Third, make what contributions you can to developing a better theoretical understanding of accountability and its role in governance and administration. This may sound like an academic’s special plea to his colleagues, but it is more than that. Designing effective policies and programs requires more practical knowledge rather than stronger beliefs, and if there is something that we social scientists know all too well it is that useful knowledge comes from the development and testing of theories under real world conditions. And for those who might believe that theoretical work is only for academics, the history of public administration and management indicates otherwise. Perhaps the most influential work in public management theory of the past century was authored a little over six decades ago by Chester Barnard, a highly respected public and private sector executive in the US who was invited to Harvard to offer his thoughts on management in the mid 1930s. Barnard’s work inspired at least one young scholar at the time to develop his insights even further, and the result was the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Herbert Simon four decades later.

If that is the payoff from listening to our practitioner friends, we academics will certainly be “all ears”.

Thank you.