



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

ACCOUNTABILITY

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Accountability is the obligation, on the part of an individual to whom a responsibility has been delegated, to give an account of how he or she has discharged that responsibility. This account-giving concerns the use of powers and resources attributed to an individual or an organizational unit in view of accomplishing objectives.

As a term related to governance, accountability is difficult to define, because the parent term of “responsibility” refers both to the duty to take action and the duty to give an account of one’s actions. Both senses are present in the *Federal Accountability Act* of 2006, which in French becomes *La loi fédérale sur la responsabilité*. The link is found in the idea that an agent must inform his or her principal or mandator about his or her actions and decisions, justify them, and possibly be subject to sanctions in the event of mismanagement or misconduct.

Historically, one factor that has contributed to confusion over the meaning of accountability stems from the use, in parliamentary traditions, of the terms “responsible government” and “ministerial responsibility,” which actually should be construed to mean “accountable government” and “ministerial accountability.” As was noted by the Public Service 2000 Task Force (1990, p. 10), “Ministers are individually and collectively responsible to the House of Commons for the activities of government including the management and conduct of the Public Service.” Indeed, one of the major legacies dating to the era of the United Province of Canada (1840-1867) is the granting of responsible government by the Colonial Office in 1848, whereby the government (i.e., the Executive Council) had to hold the confidence of a majority of the legislative assembly. Furthermore, as was shown by Professor J. E. Hodgetts (1955), in order for responsible government become a reality, ministers had, effectively, to be able to control what happened in their departments. What is more, for many years, ministers alone had the authority to address the members of the Senate or House of Commons – whether in plenary sessions or before a parliamentary committee – concerning the management of their departments.

With the expansion of government that took place following World War II, the doctrine and practice of ministerial responsibility was thrown into question. From 1976 to 1990, four reports were tabled at the Quebec National Assembly that called for greater accountability on the part of senior public servants before the legislature. All four reports began with the same observation, first formulated by Claude Forget (1978, p. 235), a former deputy minister and subsequently a member of the legislature: “Parliamentary control over the public administration is inexistent at this time.” In his annual report of 1976, the Auditor General of Canada declared that “...Parliament – and indeed the government – has lost, or is close to losing, effective control of the public purse.” This

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declaration prompted the Trudeau government to create the Royal Commission on Financial Management and Accountability (Lambert Commission).

Such reflections prompted committees of both houses to propose several changes with regard to the structure and methods of program evaluation as well as the mission of the auditor general. Henceforth, this official would be required to examine not only the legality and lawfulness of expenditures but also their worthiness in relation to efficiency and value for money as well as the targets and performance indicators used to audit the accomplishment of program objectives.

However, the most significant change in relation to the constitution consists in designating deputy ministers as the individuals having to give an account – in their own name and not in that of their department – of their management before the appropriate parliamentary committees. In Quebec, this obligation was introduced in 1993 by *An Act respecting the Reduction of personnel in public bodies and the accountability of deputy ministers and chief executive officers of public bodies* (1993, c. 35). At the federal level, in 2006, following the filing of the report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program and Advertising Activities (Gomery Commission), the newly elected Conservative government included in the *Federal Accountability Act* (c. 9) a provision designating the deputy minister as the accounting officer for his or her organization within the framework of ministerial responsibility and accountability.

The notion of accountability brings into play a series of problems so thorny and sensitive that no definitive, rational solution can be imagined for them. To begin with, a distinction is to be made between the responsibility for policy and decision-making, normally the province of elected representatives, and the responsibility for management, normally the province of public servants. Reports and legislation offer lists of subjects for which deputy ministers are or should be held accountable before legislators, including not only the accuracy of accounts, the legality of expenditures and the conformity of expenditures with Parliament's appropriations objectives, but also the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of programs, not to mention human resource management. Although such fine distinctions no doubt have their merits, they also demonstrate overlap with the responsibilities of ministers; in response to this problem, Canadian and British legislation prescribes various mechanisms for arbitrating conflicts between deputy ministers and ministers. However, the experience of arm's length agencies has shown that it is impossible to create a watertight separation between policy and administration.

A second problem concerns the distinction between internal and external accountability. In the context of governance, external accountability concerns testimony by senior public servants before the legislature or, ultimately, before the public. Contemporary forms of partnerships and shared responsibilities both dilute the accountability of senior public servants before legislatures and extend it outward towards various stakeholders (Savoie 2004). At the same time, however, deputy ministers are chosen by the prime minister or premier and are answerable to him or her, as well as to their own minister and such central agencies as the government secretariat (Privy Council Office), the Treasury Board and the Public Service Commission. During a survey conducted among former federal deputy ministers, Osbaldeston (1988, pp. 5-6) noted that:

“According to [their] definition, deputy ministers are accountable only to those individuals and groups with whom they have a direct authority relationship based on legislation or convention... [If] deputy ministers were subject to instructions and sanctions directly from parliamentary committees, they would inevitably be less accountable to ministers and the government. If deputy ministers thought that they were accountable to clients independent of the minister, their actions could undermine the responsibilities of the democratically elected government.”

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Thus some confusion surrounds the accounts that deputy ministers and other senior public servants must give before a parliamentary committee. As the latter does not entertain a relationship of authority over the former, it is also unable to reward good performance or sanction poor performance. At the very most, a committee can damage the reputation of top-level officials in a forum in which these individuals do not have the right to speak, the right to an attorney, the right to question other witnesses or the right of appeal (Sutherland 1991). In its capacity as an information and deliberation body established by a legislative assembly on a partisan basis, a parliamentary committee has neither the time nor the organization required to manage senior public servants (Gow, 1995). Where full-blown investigations are concerned, an independent commission is better equipped to respect human rights. What is more, for many years now, J.-P. Brodeur (1999, p. 159) has deplored the fact that accountability mechanisms are too often geared toward finding the guilty parties as opposed to identifying solutions to any systemic failings that come to light.

The requirement of greater accountability on the part of senior public servants before the legislature grew out of the observation that ministers could no longer be held responsible for everything that happened in their department. This observation prompted legislators to become more demanding toward administrative power-holders; at the same time, however, several ministers wished to transfer the entire onus of mistakes and failures to public servants. External accountability is no doubt necessary, but it also produces its share of adverse effects. The upper echelon of departments has thus had to assume more of a political role, entering a territory traditionally occupied by ministers. In her 2005 annual report, the Auditor General of Canada noted that federal departments had not yet learned how to report on their difficulties and disappointments, not just their achievements. Her criticisms were directed at the defensive reflex of senior public servants, along with their very limited tolerance for error. However, considering the treatment accorded to mistakes and failures in our deliberative assemblies, it is not hard to understand such behaviour.

In the end, the problem of accountability in public administration stems from the desire to see the public service demonstrate a capacity for administrative rationality, innovation and stewardship, whereas it is compelled to operate in an environment in which political rationality predominates.

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