

# **GONE TODAY, HERE TOMORROW**

**Howard A. Doughty**

**Teaches Canadian Government and Public Administration in the  
Public Safety and Police Studies program at  
Seneca College in King City, Ontario Canada.**

**He can be reached at [howard.doughty@senecac.on.ca](mailto:howard.doughty@senecac.on.ca).**

**or [howard\\_doughty@post.com](mailto:howard_doughty@post.com)**

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The title of this paper has been purloined from a research report submitted in the very early 1970s to the Committee on Government Productivity (COGP), an instrument of the Province of Ontario, Canada. I cannot comment on its contents, since the paper went missing from my file cabinet; only the folder and the title remain. I can, however, say that it is a little less gloomy than the other name I was considering, a phrase from a much older anthropological narrative: “Nothing learned, and everything forgotten!”\*

The COGP contribution was written in a time of international tension. The conflict in Vietnam was spreading (secretly and illegally) into Cambodia. A US-supported terrorist named Pol Pot was readying his “killing fields.” In Canada, the invocation of the War Measures Act upset (not for the first time) the legacy of the *Magna Carta*. And, of course, there was much talk about sex, drugs and rock’n’roll which caused people over thirty to worry (overmuch, I thought at the time) about the imminent collapse of the manners and morals of modern times. There were, in short, at least superficially analogous parallels to events and trends today.

If Iraq, Osama bin Laden, national identity cards and “gangster rap” are slipped into the appropriate slots, a casual observer could be forgiven for thinking that nothing much has changed. One exception to the pattern, however, would be what some governments are thinking about innovation. Thirty years and more ago, the province of Ontario was governed, as it is again now (February, 2003), by the Conservative Party. In those days, however, official and academic thought about innovation was remarkably different than at the beginning of the new millennium. Today, with neoliberal ideology experiencing some criticism and displaying some weaknesses but still firmly implanted in the minds of the governing elite, most formal discussion of innovation centres on redesigning governance, achieving economies and efficiencies, privatizing where possible, and paying obeisance to the deities of the market.

### ***The Hegemony of Neoliberalism***

No longer much interested in “free” or “competitive” enterprise, major capitalist organizations relentlessly and rapaciously (if a little more prudently than in the past two decades) embrace mergers and acquisitions. They seem to believe that the number of players must be reduced to keep the global game competitive. They also believe that national sovereignty, with its annoying tendency to control working conditions, environment and social policy, is an inconvenience best minimized if it cannot be altogether eliminated. Accordingly, interlocking directorships, outright

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\* Arthur Wichmann, a Dutch explorer completed a massive three-volume account of the exploration of New Guinea in 1912. Toward the end, he grew disillusioned as he realized that successive explorers committed the same stupidities again and again: unwarranted pride in overstated accomplishments, refusal to acknowledge disastrous oversights, ignoring the experience of previous explorers, consequent repetition of previous errors, hence a long history of unnecessary sufferings and deaths. Looking back on this history, Wichmann predicted that future explorers would continue to repeat the same errors.” The sentence quoted above was the last in Volume 3. See Diamond, J. 1992. *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*. New York: HarperPerennial: 366.

integration and combination of whole industries and related industries are trumpeted as triumphs of corporate rationality; contrarily, government attempts to maintain standards of living, provide essential services, and protect a fragile and much assaulted ecology are denounced as expensive impositions on personal freedom. Meanwhile, if the ever-changing conditions of the market fate small entrepreneurs, to say nothing of consumer interests and an occasional owl to extinction, the Fraser Institute, The Conference Board, the American Enterprise Institute and the dozens of right-wing “think tanks” around the world are unlikely to shed many tears.

Either because of ideological isomorphism or just because they do not seem to see any realistic alternatives, senior government innovators have parroted the policies and practices of their private sector counterparts. New public management, together with all the attendant administrative argot of visioning, outsourcing, re-engineering, downsizing and rightsizing dominates, as government takes on not only the methods but also the mutterings of the marketers. So, citizens become clients or, worse, customers. Vested interests become stakeholders. Public administration becomes service delivery. And focus groups will no doubt resolve any problems of “optics” either at or near “the end of the day.”

It was not always so. At the time when the COGP was trying to sort out how government would respond to the “challenges” of the time, academics and activists were establishing high standards according to which governments would be judged. In the inaugural issue of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Christian Bay took on the topic of the philosophical principles underlying the legitimacy of government and the limits of that legitimacy. Employing a naturalistic paradigm, he attempted to locate the justification for government within the parameters of human nature and the obligation to serve human needs. All types of government, Bay wrote, must be understood as a “coercive apparatus” that can claim the loyalty of its citizens only insofar as it demonstrates its capacity to “to meet human needs better than other forms of government.”<sup>1</sup>

This comes straight out of Thomas Hobbes. The author of *Leviathan* and the man unhappily and unfairly charged with being the patriarch of modern authoritarianism truly averred that the main purpose of the state is to guarantee the survival of its subjects. But Bay, not without reason, adds a corollary. “The one basic value,” he says, “is a commitment to the sanctity of every human life, physical and personal; not only to its sheer preservation but to its freedom, within empirically necessary and ascertainable limits, to grow and develop according to inner propensities and potentialities.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***The COGP in Thought and Action***

In pursuit of this goal, the COGP commissioned a number of essays which would, I think, be unthinkable in the current political context. On the surface, the aims of the project were unremarkable. Its overall objective was “to improve the management of the Ontario government.” It sought “increased efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness.” It investigated a number of microtopics (e.g., apex study, utilization of human resources, ADP management, real property management, central services, purchasing and supply, financial management, and so on). It also considered studies of departmental structures and of boards, agencies and commissions. It was interested in organizational and program reviews and it was keen to apply

PPBS (which was then all the rage) to anything that moved or gave evidence of once having moved.\*

Where the COGP was uncommonly honest in its acknowledgement that government policy was “becoming more intrusive and imperative,” and that governments would “increasingly be regulating more and more aspects of an individual’s life,”<sup>3</sup> it also displayed a laudable propensity to contemplate substantial innovation in its recognition of the idea that the effectiveness and responsiveness of government was intimately connected to the participation of the citizenry. Specifically, it explored the notion that government should take steps toward “increasing the effectiveness of the citizens’ relationship with the management process” by “encouraging citizenship participation in the decision-making process.” In doing so, the COGP also gave an approving nod to “the Provincial Secretary” for establishing “a new community affairs branch to encourage the formation of citizens’ groups and the setting up of conferences between elected representatives and citizens.”<sup>4</sup>

Ostensibly inspired by American “progressives” from consumer advocate Ralph Nader to management theorist Warren Bennis, the COGP applauded those who sought to build more employee and public participation into corporate decision-making. These changes, it was believed, not only ameliorated organizational tensions and improved product quality, but also avoided ultimate social turmoil. Whether interpreted as meaningful involvement or cynical co-optation, the pertinent effect was improved corporate performance with a minimum of overt conflict. Democracy (or something near it) was said to be at work. As well, there were practical political advantages. The COGP noted that there had been “a substantial increase in the number of ‘citizen groups’ formed in all parts of the cities. These groups often contained well-informed professional people, and are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their approach to government. Often,” it continued, “they coalesce forming larger groups.”<sup>5</sup> Again, whether the COGP regarded this apparent growth in demand for greater access to and transparency of government as intimidating, or whether they saw the problem as the need to develop a pragmatic, proactive response to a restless electorate, the fact remains that the response was to attempt to open up rather than to shut down lines of communication between officials and citizens. In the public sphere, therefore, the pertinent effects of government initiatives would be:

- to enhance the personal growth of citizens;
- to reach better decisions;
- to ensure effective implementation;
- to give more political power to groups who have traditionally not played major roles in the political process.<sup>6</sup>

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\* Planning-Programming-Budgeting-System provided an overall management philosophy and a specific management process for policy development and implementation. Associated with business leaders such as Robert A. MacNamara of Ford Motor Company, it translated the vagaries of routine decision-making into a rational and quantified management scheme. Used equally in industry and in the military, it lost credibility when MacNamara attempted to apply its impersonal accounting procedures to Vietnam. According to Aaron Wildavsky, the fad soon became unfashionable; he declared: “PPBS has failed everywhere and at all times.” Wildavsky, A. (1974). *The Politics of the Budgetary Process*, 2nd ed. Boston: Little Brown: 205. So disastrous was the myth of rational decision making in the absence of consideration of extant cultural traditions and potent ideological choices that, as Henry Mintzberg shrewdly observed, “planning proved to be an impediment to effective strategic thinking and action.” Mintzberg, H. (1994) *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning: Reconceiving Roles for Planning, Plans, Planners*. New York: Free Press: 94.

### ***Frederick Thayer on Participation***

With such an agenda in mind, the COGP then sought out informed opinion from acknowledged experts. Frederick C. Thayer of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, for example, contributed a thoughtful paper on “Participation and Liberal Democratic Government.”

Thayer’s essay began with the often ignored truism that genuine innovation must be based on solid political theory which is or can be translated (operationalized) into concrete actions. We are, he explained, “beginning to realize there is no practice without theory, and theory has no meaning in the absence of practice.”<sup>7</sup> Wholly within the empirical tradition, Thayer explained that “a new theory of democracy is emerging, one which defines ‘participation’ as the central right of all citizens,” and that mere voting “in *any* form, does *not* meet any meaningful definition of *participation*.”<sup>8</sup> The implications of this new theory, he continued, included the politicization of domains of life that had previously been seen as apolitical: thus “all activities in all organizations will be seen as political in nature ... [and that] the fundamental unit of organizational activity ... will be a collegial, non-hierarchical, face-to-face problem-solving group large enough to include the perspectives and expertise necessary to deal with the problem at hand, but small enough to assure each participant that his or her contribution is substantial, meaningful, and indispensable to the process.”<sup>9</sup>

Thayer’s achievement, not unique but notable in its context, was not to add yet another tract to the pile of paper promoting “power to the people,” but to operationalize normative concepts such as citizen participation and (drawing on the work of Rensis Likert) provide practical models whereby everything from Cabinet committees to departmental budgetary processes to local community service delivery could be reformed in a manner that would diffuse formal authority without compromising efficiency or surrendering effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

It is unsurprising that Thayer’s recommendations were not implemented and that they are now largely forgotten. It is surprising that they were even invited, submitted and read. That was then.

### ***Lloyd Axworthy on Communications***

Another notable submission came from Professor Lloyd Axworthy, then of the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg and later a prominent politician and, among other things, Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the days before the Internet, Axworthy took on the task of assessing the potential of new information technology to enhance citizen participation in decision-making.<sup>11</sup> Dealing with telephone, broadcasting, broadband cable, satellite, computer and print technologies was, even then, a formidable task. Axworthy and his associates summarized the state of the communications arts and sciences most compellingly, noting that “although computers provide a valuable service, they also carry enormous threats.” Citing “the FBI/Army subversives file known as ‘rap file,’ ” he openly worried about matters such as invasion of privacy, citizen records becoming saleable commodities, and the collection and dissemination of information by the authorities for political purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Urging that the rapidly advancing technology be guided by “public interest” policies and standards, Axworthy went on to encourage the stimulation of increased public involvement in government. In retrospect, his ideas seem almost quaint. Some of them, such as community television, remain undeveloped. Others, such as the world wide web and e-mail were not yet

known and have become, in a time of anti-globalization and anti-war activism, tools for activists that were not imagined in 1990, much less 1970. Most important among his reflections, however, are not those related to technology but to power. The virtual anarchy of the Internet, the relentless commercialization of broadcasting and the increasing of corporate concentration in the print media all attest to the utter failure of government to restrain the material and ideological control of communications by major private corporations. What is more, the privateers of the public airwaves—those who would sell off public radio and television—are noisily insisting that government has no business in the business of communications. In 1971, Axworthy advised the Government of Ontario that “if there are not basic guidelines established, certain regulations set, and actions taken in the immediate future to make the Public Communications System a first priority then the technology will have its use dictated purely by market considerations and many of the opportunities it affords, thereby lost.”<sup>13</sup> He was quite correct.

As with Thayer, the point to be taken is not that Axworthy’s recommendations were not implemented; what is important is that they were considered at all. But, that was then, and this is undeniably now. And for now, much energy and creativity is being expended in the quest to have government stop governing, to turn over to massive financial and commercial institutions the responsibility for running the economy, and (if George W. Bush’s “faith-based” initiatives are any guide) to turn over care for the poor to churches, as alms replace competent administration of social policy. Whether announcing the opening of a private MRI clinic (as happened today in my town) or planning to have the jails given over to private security firms, the onus is apparently on government to justify itself. Just as my workplace recently told me that I was now personally responsible for my “employability” (i.e., everything possible would be done to eliminate allegedly antiquated concepts of seniority and the alleged unaffordability of “guaranteeing employees a job for life), so government is being tested to see if the services it provides are things that private firms could do (not necessarily cheaper and certainly not better, but could just somehow do). This “bottom line” approach certainly does not seem to have much to do with Thomas Hobbes’ view of government. In addition to assuring survival, Hobbes saw government rising to the level of providing a commodious and equitable life for citizens as well. A health care system designed to maximize the private profits of health care providers does not seem compatible with such a principle. And private corporations are notoriously thin-skinned about being told what to do by their customers.

So, when considering innovation, it might be prudent to begin by asking the daunting question: “Innovation for what?” It is a matter of first principles, and upon those duly constructed and carefully operationalized principles the entire venture of public sector innovation must be built. Christian Bay had an idea. The welfare of the individual and of the body politic were compatible, indeed symbiotic. The question is, therefore: what is the procedural basis for decision-making concerning individual and social health? The answer to that question does not come ready-made. It must be sought and revealed by meticulous inquiry and open debate. False prophets need to be exposed. Vested interests whose wishes may given privileged attention must be disclosed. And, above all, the creative engagement of the citizens must be openly solicited and adequately included in the policy-making process. As the old saws go: democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others”; and, “the only cure for democracy is more democracy.” These bromides bear consideration. Tired yet true, they demand a response. It is required of us that, as we think about innovation, we pay strong attention to the theory that underlies it, for in

the absence of a considered reflection on what kind of governance we want, specific modifications of existing practices will be fruitless, if not toxic.

In the early 1970s, the Conservative government of Ontario opened up the issue of democracy for discussion. It did not follow through. In the early years of this century another Conservative government has demonstrated that it prefers a more remote and centralized form of authority, and has rebuffed-sometimes with the use of the exclusive legitimate violence of the state-the sort of citizen participation that its predecessors sought, however mildly and ineffectually, to court. In the earlier days, governments were confronted with a kind of yeasty rebelliousness from environmentalists, feminists, trade unionists, students and others who wanted to win the right to participate in the decisions that affected their lives. A sense of crisis pervaded the political atmosphere and some read it as the Chinese render the word-a juxtaposing of the two characters, “danger” and “opportunity.”

It is arguable that we are experiencing a similar set of circumstances. Public anxiety is high, public faith in leadership is low, and the sign worn by a woman at a recent anti-war demonstration in Toronto-“Middle-aged, taxpaying homeowner against the war”-may be telling. For public servants, politicians and the people at large, a serious inquiry into the best ways to facilitate citizen participation in governance where it now feels frustrated and to enliven citizens where they are now alienated, apathetic and anomic, would be tonic. A public demonstration of the uses and intrinsic rewards of becoming part of a healthy polity could have salutary effects in more ways that we can number. If government interest in public participation is effectively gone today, it would serve us well to see it return more effectively tomorrow.

#### **About the Author:**

**Howard A. Doughty** teaches Political Science and Public Administration at Seneca College in King City, Ontario, Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Bay, C. 1968. “Needs, Wants and Political Legitimacy”. *The Canadian Journal of Political Science*. 1(1): 241.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Bay’s appeal is to Part II, Chapter 17, of the *Leviathan* wherein Hobbes stresses not only the importance of self-preservation but of leading a “more contented” life as well.

<sup>3</sup> Central Staff, COGP. 1970. “A Proposed Strategy for the C.O.G.P.”. Toronto: Committee on Government Productivity, Government of Ontario. 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Central Staff, COGP. 1971. “The Future of Citizen Involvement at the Provincial Level: A Proposal for a Section in the C.O.G.P. Final Report”. Toronto: Committee on Government Productivity, Government of Ontario: 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 14.

<sup>7</sup> Thayer, F. (1971). “Participation and Liberal Democratic Theory”. Toronto: Committee on Government Productivity, Government of Ontario: 1

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: 38-39.

<sup>11</sup> Axworthy, L., Cassidy, J., O’Hara, J., and Badertscher, J. (1971). “A Public Communication System: A study of the use of the new communications technology by government to enhance citizen participation and increase program effectiveness” Toronto: Committee on Government Productivity, Government of Ontario.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 50-51.