

Book Review

Donald F. Kettl

The Transformation of Governance: Public administration for the twenty-first century
America. Paperback: Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002,

Reviewed by Stuart Conger

Kettl defines the twenty-first century key management problem as one where no agency has the sole responsibility or leverage to solve it. Government's response to a problem (such as the SARS crisis in Toronto) must involve teamwork between agencies representing different jurisdictions, nongovernmental agencies and companies. Problems of importance seldom fall neatly in the purview of a single government department or agency. Authority from an elected government, to a minister to a department to branches may have been adequate to handle problems of the past, but with the dispersion of authority and responsibility to many organizations in recent times, and the refusal of some problems to create themselves to fit the jurisdictions establishes a need to review traditional methods of governance. The problem for public administrators is that "they can do their job by the book but not get their job done".

"Policy-makers tend to think of government management as a matter of framing decisions, delegating responsibility to administrators and holding government administrators accountable for results." This hierarchical approach no longer fits the distributed governance model that is actually in effect.

Reinventing government has been an important issue from New Zealand to the United Kingdom. The British government created citizen's charters which sought to guarantee citizens a certain level of service. New Zealand, the author reports, was widely seen as the most aggressive in its reforms: the Minister signed a contract with the executive who had great flexibility in managing the programs as long as they produced the desired results. The NZ approach to public administration focussed on "Management rather than social values; on efficiency rather than equity; on mid-level managers rather than elites; on generic approaches rather than tactics tailored to specific public issues; on organizations rather than processes and institutions" The approaches used in these countries accepted the idea that there should be sharp demarcation between policy-making and execution.

The bulk of the book describes four trains of American political thought about government (Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison and Wilson) and how each has produced competing theories of the structure and practice of governance and their impact on public administration in the USA. Canadian politicians have not been as articulate on these matters and have not had the same impact on Canadian public administration. While the philosophical issues may not be directly of concern to non-American readers, many of the problems facing public administration in the USA are quite universal in many democracies. For example, the "fuzzy boundary" problem has not been resolved by any of the theories, and current governments are faced by problems that overlap jurisdictions and extend beyond mandates. The author examines in particular the following six fuzzies: policy making versus policy execution; public versus private nonprofit sectors; layers within the bureaucracy; layers between management and labour; connections between bureaucracies; and, connections with citizens.

Governments find themselves with several complex interwoven problems: new demands from citizens, but also demand for lower taxes; increasingly complex programs but also pressure to reduce the size of the bureaucracy; and struggle to cope with the unexpected side effects in the effort to build more adequate management strategies. Kettl asserts that New Zealand and the United Kingdom prepared white papers to chart a revolution in governance but the United States has worried less about preparing a master plan as about solving problems as they arise. As governance becomes increasingly distributed to NGOs how can government hold them accountable when the public hold the government accountable? The author concludes his review with ten principles for the building of the new public service that is required:

1. Hierarchy and authority cannot and will not be replaced, but they must be fitted better to the transformation of governance.
2. Complex networks have been layered on top of hierarchical organizations, and they must be managed differently.
3. Public managers need to rely more on interpersonal and interorganizational processes as complements to - and sometimes as substitutes for - authority.
4. Information is the most basic and necessary component for the transformation of governance.
5. Performance management can provide a valuable tool for spanning fuzzy boundaries.
6. Transparency is the foundation for trust and confidence in government operations.
7. Government needs to invest in human capital so that the skills of its workers match the jobs they must perform.
8. The transformation of governance requires new strategies and tactics for popular participation in public administration.
9. Civic responsibility has become the job of government's nongovernmental partners.
10. Americans need to devise new constitutional strategies for the management of conflict.

A further important issue for the author is that American political science has had to struggle to be relevant to actual public administration and he laments the failure of political science to be an experimental science providing valid and reliable information.