

Book Review

Guy Peters, and Donald J. Savoie, eds,
Governance in the Twenty-first Century: revitalizing the public service,
Paperback: Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000, 436 pp.

Reviewed by Stuart Conger

I spent 20 years in the federal government in positions ranging from chief of division to director general of a branch - in which much of my work was done in collaboration with provinces and NGOs. During a further six years I was chairman and executive director of an NGO jointly owned by a federal and provincial minister (and which Treasury Board officials feared would be the start of a third level of government), and finally I was the executive director of another NGO which the federal government paid to do its work. In all these 35 years it had never been suggested to me that political science had any message for the organization structures we created, for the networking we did or the policies we formulated. Given this background it is interesting to read this book authored by a dozen professors of political science and one public servant and to ask myself: what information in this book would have shaped my decisions had I been familiar with it?

The dozen chapters that comprise this book were commissioned by the Centre for Management Development, Ottawa, to elucidate issues facing governance in the 21st century.

The chapter by Ignace Snellen (Public Service in an Information Society) contains some surprising points. He stated that HRDC presented a good example of how 5000 people were replaced by "thousands of kiosks and other automated self-service delivery facilities". He appears to laud this but later in his chapter he laments that information technology will result in deskilling street level bureaucrats. He suggested that HRDC's automated delivery services might not be as effective as "Schoolnet" (without definition or explanation). It appears to this reader that Prof. Snellen was not familiar with the HRDC Internet-based services, nor with SchoolNet (an amazing joint effort of the Canadian department of industry, provincial ministries of education, companies, schools and libraries), and furthermore was unaware of the reasons for closing hundreds of HRDC's manned points of delivery. He apparently missed the amalgamation of some HRDC and provincial services which represents an important event in governance. Canada, perhaps more than any other country has utilized information technology to serve its citizens, yet the author ignores these in favour of traditional fears (invasion of privacy, etc.) and ignores Canadian experience. Having been involved in the HRDC development of some information systems, this writer found nothing in this chapter that would inform the development of such systems. This might seem like an unfair comment on an author resident in The Netherlands but, considering that his paper was vetted by the Canadian Centre for Management Development, it is a reasonable observation.

The chapter by Jonathon Boston on "Organizing for Service Delivery: Criteria and Opportunities" is very timely considering the substantial interest and activity in contracting out the delivery of government services. This, and to a lesser extent other chapters, present thorough descriptions and analyses of the mechanisms of contracting out and other forms of delivery.

They do not, however, provide an adequate assessment of the liabilities of contracting out delivery services to community non-profit agencies. It is almost inevitable, that when government does not renew a contract or tries to reduce future contracts, the agency typically becomes political and launches a public campaign to get the government to renew the contract fully. This is a reasonable and proper activity for the NGOs, because they want to keep on serving their clients and protecting the jobs of their employees. Furthermore, local economic development agencies are also willing to join the campaign. It would have been appropriate for the author to address in this issue.

It is a pity that this book does not have an index. In this day and age of computerization it should have been easy for the editors to have had an index prepared, thus enabling the reader to quickly find subtopics that have been covered by each author.

As mentioned in the above review of Kettl's book, he observed the American political science has had to struggle to be relevant to actual public administration. This reviewer would suggest the same concern could be applied to this book.