Book Review

David Siegel and Ken Rasmussen, eds.
Professionalism and Public Service: Essays in Honour of Ken Kernaghan
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

The career of Ken Kernaghan and his influence on the study of Canadian public administration has already been recognized in this journal (Michael Duggett, "In Recognition of Ken Kernaghan," 14[1], 2009), and elsewhere. Among many awards, Dr. Kernaghan, Professor Emeritus at Brock University, has been honoured by the Institute of Public Administration in Canada's Vanier Gold Medal for his distinguished contribution to the field of public administration in 1996, his election to the Royal Society of Canada in 1998, his receipt of the Pierre DeCelles/IPAC Award for excellence in teaching in 2003 and his appointment to the Order of Canada in 2008. I shall therefore forego the task of praising this icon of Canadian scholarship and focus on the book, for no remarks of appreciation from this corner would add appreciably to his well-deserved reputation.

Instead, I shall focus on the book. Collections of essays in honour of public intellectuals normally follow one of three paths:

- they can describe, analyze, explain the importance and occasionally politely criticize the work of the person they are honouring;
- they can summarize the honouree's *oeuvre*, and show how their own work has been influenced and advanced by the thought of the person being celebrated;
- they can make an adventuresome attempt to extend the ideas of the recipient of the tribute to related, tangential or even remote subjects; or,
- they can take up topics that have interested their person of interest in the past and explore them from fresh perspectives, running the risk of leaving the putative focus of their attention somewhat behind in the academic or professional dust.

That said, as Mitchell M. Harris has recently observed, "the *festschrift* is a dying enterprise. Increasingly, trade presses are following university presses in setting strict policies against them." The objection to the form (apart, perhaps, for worry about want of sales by other than those who are already familiar with the recipient of the honour and who already admire the individual's accomplishments) tends to follow three themes:

1. the essays are too frequently merely "self-gratifying";
2. they tend to be too indebted to the "critical methodologies" of the scholar whom they seek to praise (i.e., they're boring);
3. they very often lack "cohesion and unity" and an evenly high standard of scholarship themselves;

4. mostly, however, they are criticized for a failure to "speak a direct critical narrative," though what else might be expected eludes me: they are exercises in reverent celebration, not a "celebrity roast."

Siegel and Rasmussen seem to have eluded most of the standard criticisms. The contributors to *Professionalism and Public Service* are not excessively self-indulgent; they are respectful but not entirely beholden to the work of Ken Kernaghan. Coherent themes emerge in their work and the editorial organization of the collection and the contributions themselves display an appropriately high and uniform standard of scholarship. If there is a lack of "direct critical narrative," it is explained by the fact that this is a self-consciously "commemorative" volume. Attack dogs may be unleashed at some future date.

Professionalism and Public Service is suitably organized into four parts which consider the evolution of public service institutions, describe important elements of public administration, analyze emerging issues in public service delivery and review important theoretical and methodological problems in the field.

In the first part, Peter Aucoin, Paul G. Thomas and David A. Good do commendable jobs of setting the stage. Recent innovations and modifications of the traditional view of the public sector ("new public management and new public governance"), the elusive issue of "accountability" and what may be understood as the persistent perils of politicization are all well treated. I was, however, especially interested in Michael Duggett's discussion of Ken Kernaghan's tenure as editor of the *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. From 1990 to 2005, Kernaghan guided this important professional journal through the tempestuous waters of the neoliberal assault on the traditional public service. In theory and practice the public sector was scrutinized, criticized and urged to revolutionize itself in order to achieve the standards of a private sector business model. Though Canada never quite stooped to the Reaganesque cliché that government was the enemy of the people, federal and provincial governments combined to slash budgets, cut programs, downsize and outsource "human resources" (formerly known as personnel or employees). It was and remains a harsh world.

In this harsh world, "fair and balanced," the slogan deployed by FOX News has become a comedic punch line more than a normative expectation of socially responsible institutions from broadcast journalism to public administration. So it is that a careful overview of how well Ken Kernaghan negotiated the voyage through a tidal wave of neoclassical economics applied to public service that had been transformed in the 1980s from a mere technique to "a universal public administration panacea that … almost ceased to be political" in a way that kept discussion and debate open was an achievement in itself.

To me, Part II was the most refreshing section of the book. J. I. Gow's handling of the inherently controversial matter of ethics in an environment in which change, whether or not we can or should "believe in" it, is certainly witnessed in all domains of social life. For the public sector, unsettled public ideologies, alternating displays of citizen apathy and outrage, transforming and transformative morals and "values" play out against a background of permanent crisis—whether economic or ecological. In such an apparent maelström of anxiety, discontent and genuinely lethal global problems, what are we to do? Gow approaches this complex topic with the skill of a

political grammarian and offers an analysis that goes some way to help us properly define and, therefore, acquire the conceptual apparatus to guide us through, if not yet out of the mess. Following Gow, Evert Lundquist elaborates the application of practical ethics in the public sector. Maintaining the nautical metaphor, he shows plainly how an understanding of Kernaghan's contributions allows us to follow "in Kernaghan's wake" to survive "the choppier seas of commitment in public administration. Then Jacques Bourgault and Esther Parent add a fitting chapter on Ken Kernaghan's thoughtful work on "professionalism, pride and recognition." Speaking personally, such a theme would normally put me in a stupor. Along with "best practices," these terms compete with phrases such as "with all due respect" to announce some sort of rhetorical slight-of-hand. Nonetheless, a measured and properly pensive and unexpectedly appealing account followed—one in which my preternaturally cynical perspective was taken a little by surprise. Quite suddenly, words and thoughts that might seem ever-so-slightly out-of-fashion (not to say, banal) acquired a fresh resonance.

Part III concerns "service delivery" and an array of innovations that have partly redefined the "interface" between government and citizens. Sandford Borins and David Brown investigate the role of electronic communications technology as a means of measuring public satisfaction with the distribution of public goods; Jennifer Bernardi contributes a case study of the Niagara Casinos Partnership; and Brian Marson presents a review of "citizen-centred service" in the Canadian public sector. He concludes by applauding Ken Kernaghan for his vital role as an "academic research partner" in the development of Canada's "remarkable achievement" of being judged "number one in the world in citizen-centred service delivery." Here, at last, is the spot where a "direct critical narrative" might have come in handy. What is called "citizen-centred" governance is more about the monitoring and management of public needs than about the promotion of public engagement or, in the more fashionable phrase, "public empowerment." A critique of the entire view of the public sector as the efficient distributor of public goods to a "customer" or a "client" base is deserving of sustained interrogation. At least a mention of the "democratic deficit" in the development of a Wal-Mart polity might have been in order.

No academic production, it seems, is complete without a call for further research, or its functional equivalent. In this case, the subject matter of Ken Kernaghan's career and the professional lives of those who have enjoyed and benefited from his verbal commentaries and published works are the same. Siegel and Rasmussen bring together three contributions that provide a fitting conclusion to the subject matter and useful materials for their audience to ponder: public administration specialists discussing what public administration specialists do. Not only was the practice of public administration altered by neoliberal triumphalism, but, as Patrice Dutil and Michael McConkey point out, a major intellectual centre of the profession, the Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC) was, as they say, "impacted" as well. IPAC's "structural" debts and deficits were a concern. An "aggressive new marketing strategy, with an emphasis on products and customers" was introduced. Entrepreneurship in IPAC as elsewhere was the organizational strategy *du jour*. The transformation of IPAC from a combination of a "learned society," a "professional association" and a "think tank with charity status" into an independent, service-delivering, headquarters-driven and board-accountable Non-Governmental Organization makes for fascinating, if somewhat discomfiting reading. On the "road to NGO" between 1985 and 1995, after a peak in 1990, IPAC actually lost members. As well, government grant support declined slightly. But, total revenue roughly tripled from less than $750,000 to almost $2,500,000. IPAC was certainly a commercial success!

Finances secured, Barbara Wake Carroll addresses the always thorny topic of "theory versus practice." Having delved into this particular briar patch more than once, I empathize with anyone seeking to reconcile the ethereal eggheads and gritty hands-on problem solvers who, as John Maynard Keynes so eloquently reminded us in his classic *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), are themselves the slaves of some defunct academic scribbler. The alleged dichotomy between theory and practice, like other enduring disputes ("mind-body", "nature-nurture," and so on) may or may not be resolvable, but they can certainly be tiresome in inept hands. Carroll is not inept, and the result is a concise and illuminating exercise not only in dissecting the issue, but in analyzing public administration journals and highlighting Ken Kernaghan's helpful contribution to the ongoing dialogue.

Finally, Carolyn Jones presents a methodological argument in support of "case studies" in the domain of public administration. She endorses them and believes them to be of immense practical value. She describes both the quantity and the quality of IPAC case studies available for purchase between 1977 and 2004. Sales were modest in the early 1980s, peaked in the middle 1990s, dropped sharply to a low in 2000, unsteadily rose again but seemed to decline once more as her data dissolve at the right-hand end of the y-axis. More than taking inventory, of course, Jones is also interested in making a case for the methodological worth of case studies themselves. I may be revealing more than I should about my own bias, but I tend to the opinion that, if the study of public administration aspires to the status of a science, then reliance on the case study is evidence that it has a very long way to go. As bug collecting is to biology, or biography is to history, so case studies are to the administrative and political sciences. Entertaining, insightful and excellent as illustrations of some important hypothesis or theory, they remain essentially anecdotal evidence and unreliable if anything approximating a scientific conclusion is to be drawn. That said, Jones does as well as most, and I enjoyed her discussion.

In sum, this is a worthy volume and a respectable tribute to a man whose commitment to the theory *and* practice of public administration has rarely been equaled in this and most other countries. Mr. Kernaghan and the editors alike may sleep well upon their results.

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