Book Review

Ruth Hubbard & Gilles Paquet.
The Black Hole of Public Administration.
Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Tom Brzustowski

The Black Hole of Public Administration is an important book. It deals with the current imperfect state of the Canadian Public Service, and offers a plausible explanation for much of what ails it. The authors have been studying these issues for a decade, as a practitioner and an academic, respectively, and this book brings their ideas together and offers a far-reaching original framework for understanding what is happening. "Our intent," they say, "[is] to draw attention to important governance challenges unmet as well as to some provisional diagnoses about the sources of the present difficulties." But *The Black Hole* goes beyond diagnosis; it also offers some sharp criticisms, and suggests ways of improving things. The book is rich in content, displaying the authors' exhaustive knowledge of the public service, and their familiarity with relevant thinking in the social sciences. It is illuminating, but not an easy read. The preface is excellent in introducing the key ideas, but the bulk of the book is long (nearly 500 pages), sometimes repetitive, and in places difficult to understand. Nevertheless, it held my interest to the very end since it deals with situations that I have encountered in my own working life.

It is a challenge to write a review of such a long and complex book, and make it short and simple. Therefore, I tried only to introduce the key ideas in the book and give the readers of the review enough of a taste of it to decide whether to read the whole thing, as I have done. In doing this, I had to omit much more than I could discuss, and I hope that I have not short-changed the authors by my selections.

To begin, any ambiguity in the catchy title is dispelled at first sight of the cover design. The black hole in question is obviously the cosmological one—nothing to do with Calcutta. It is an accretion of so much mass that, just by being so massive, it pulls in anything that gets close enough and never lets anything out. In some ways, this may be an apt metaphor for the Canadian federal public service, but it isn't clear that it's directly related to the issues that are the focus of the book. And recommendations on how to "plug the black hole"—impossible in cosmology and no longer relevant for Calcutta—mix the metaphor even more.

Anyway, in the view of Hubbard and Paquet, there is a problem in the Canadian federal public service and it begins with an outdated perception of the public service largely by itself, a myth maintained by "the tribe of aficionados (academics and practitioners *en postes*) of traditional public administration: this tribe has remained unabashedly uncritical and has propagandized a fictional vision of an efficient and effective arrangement." This arrangement dates back to the middle third of the twentieth century, and has persisted because "[the] phenomenal dynamic conservatism of the public administration tribe has been successful in stunting any genuine renaissance."

The Westminster model in which power flows from the citizens to Parliament, from Parliament to government, and then from government to the non-partisan public service dominates thinking within

the Canadian federal public service, even as reality is moving on. The two-way links between the adjacent groups in that chain can be thought of as moral contracts between them; violations of these contracts, or end runs around groups are perceived as disloyalty. Against that background, many lessons on governance recently learned in scholarship and experimentation in other sectors and other places have gone unheeded—Jane Jacobs is fingered as having contributed to this. The result is that learning and experimentation in the Canadian federal public service have lagged, innovation has dwindled, and performance has suffered.

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The key ideas are these: the government is caught in having to function effectively, as "turbulent and hostile environments" force the balance of its processes to shift away from what the authors call big G and towards more of what they call little g. This is a shift away from big-G "Government", state-centric and centralized, ruling top-down in coercive fashion, with permanence of organization, firm lines of authority and accountability, established procedures, etc. It is a shift toward "little-g open-source governance", where the ability to get things done—and hence power—resides at the grass roots, where various groups come together to do things and break apart when they're done, where lines of authority from above are inadequate, irrelevant, or inappropriate, and where openness and co-operation are essential. Little-g is a state of affairs quotably described by the cry "Nobody's in charge!" even though civil servants take comfort in continuing to believe that someone still must be. The authors suggest that under these evolving circumstances, the Westminster model, with its implied values and entrenched traditions, is becoming an historical fiction that hinders progress.

Beyond that shift from G to g, there is a second shifting balance within G. This involves G_1 and G_2, where G_1 are government processes that emphasize predictability and reliability, and G_2 are processes of experimentation and innovation. In brief notation, if $G = G_1 + G_2$, then current circumstances require G_1 to decrease and G_2 to increase. So the public service must cope simultaneously with a double shift: from G to g, and from G_1 to G_2 within G.

These ideas are not all new to *The Black Hole*. They have been introduced and developed to varying degrees by the authors over the last five years (Paquet 2005, Hubbard and Paquet 2007, Paquet 2009, and Hubbard and Paquet 2010a). Now in *The Black Hole* (Hubbard and Paquet 2010b) they develop them more fully and tie them together.

The authors' proposed explanations of what is happening in the public service are not theoretical musings. They are supported empirically. Chapter 3, "Forty-Four Forums on Some Twenty-Four Wicked Problems" describes the authors' "safe conversations" arranged by APEX[1] with about a hundred public service executives between Fall 2006 and Fall 2009. My own experience tells me that the topics that were covered are of intense interest to civil servants, but they are generally discussed only in private conversation. Here is the list in full; the titles are very telling: Diversity; Security; Ethics; Disloyalty; Corporate culture; The Gomery world; Public-private partnerships; A new

partitioning of the federal public service (into Super-bureaucrats, Guardians, Professionals and Employees); Intelligent accountability; Intelligent regulation; Intelligent organizational design; Intelligent public service; Rewarding failure and deception; Punishing success; Positive discrimination; Failure to confront; Quantophrenia ("If it cannot be measured, it does not exist", on its own the subject of Chapter 4); Personnel performance review; Speaking truth to power; What role for cities in public governance; The politico-bureaucratic interface; The federal public service as a nexus of moral contracts; From leadership to stewardship; Deputy minister: then, now, and future.

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The detailed substance of these conversations has been distilled into the authors' new insights and proposed explanations. But Hubbard and Paquet also saw some larger features. They suggest that among the senior executive ranks of the federal public service there is "a tamed critical sense and … diffidence about engaging in anything but the machinery of government … [and an] unwilling[ness] to question in public many of the assumptions that they have come to question in private." Some tentative explanations for this state of affairs are suggested, and the authors speculate that things might improve as the next generation of senior civil servants moves into place.

The issue of the senior public servants' loyalty is discussed at length. But loyalty to whom, to what? Aye, there's the rub! Not always to the Minister, apparently, or to the elected government more broadly. More to Parliament, maybe, or "the tribe" (profession?). But perhaps mostly to a higher entity—the nation's good, as they see it. This assumes that the unelected but experienced senior public service believes that it has a better understanding of what the country needs than does the elected but inexperienced government. Given the low voter turn out in recent elections, and the low percentage of the vote garnered by minority governments, there may be some grounds for debate on this point. However, that slope is slippery, and the slide into arrogance is easy.

I had a brush with this assumption myself, witnessing a hard lesson; it wasn't comfortable. I remember some years ago sitting as a very new Deputy Minister at a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy of a provincial government at which some colleagues from another Ministry were proposing a new policy. The presentation began with a clear statement of the problem and what it might become if nothing were done, and then went on to a list of suggestive precedents, supporting polling data, what other jurisdictions were doing, the canonical three options, proposed wording of the policy, a budget plan, a predicted list of possible "unforeseen" consequences, and the inevitable communications strategy. I thought it was a thorough piece of work. Some detailed questions were raised, and the answers were reassuring, always displaying great certainty about cause and effect. I was impressed. But eventually a Minister who had sat quietly until that point, started speaking. This was all nonsense, she said. It's got nothing to do with real people in the real world. The situation on the ground was totally different than what had been assumed. The real need was this, and not that. This kind of intervention had worked, and that kind hadn't. Doing what was proposed could have a perverse effect if people were to interpret the intent differently than had been assumed, etc. etc. The policy initiative died then

and there. I was embarrassed for my colleagues, and for myself too because the proposal had made so much sense to me. My colleagues were red-faced, but I don't know whether that was because they were embarrassed to be caught assuming they knew more than they did, or just angry that their plan had been derailed by a Minister who they thought was wrong.

Hubbard and Paquet are clearly critical of the role of the senior ranks of the federal Public Service in producing the present unsatisfactory situation, but they also suggest what might be done to improve things. They advocate what they call "a two-tracked strategy" of "eliminating the sources of harm … [and] … effecting innovative repairs to promote the good," under labels such as "Scheming Virtuously", "Bricolage", and "Sabotage of Harms", etc. Surprisingly, they omit any reference to the education of future civil servants as a strategic remedy. Are we to assume that the natural evolution of university curricula in political science, economics, sociology, and public administration will meet the changing needs? Or will the academic members of "the tribe" prevent gradual change, and provoke radical innovation that will have to be driven by others? I look forward to the answers in their future publications.

Important book. Not an easy read, but worth the effort.

References:

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Ruth Hubbard and Gilles Paquet. **(**2010b). *The Black Hole of Public Administration*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press—the book reviewed here.

Note:

[1] The Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada.

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