

## Accountability for Learning

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### Introduction

Auditor General Sheila Fraser noted recently that, "Canadians are demanding greater accountability from government." In what may seem a paradox, she goes on to suggest that the way to meet the challenge is to reduce the number of rules constraining government, rather than increase it. Why?

In her view, accountability should focus less on compliance with rules and more on achieving results and learning. If the red tape is reduced, governments will be freer to experiment and innovate. Too many rules can prevent learning. Rules should be few, clear, consistently applied and meaningful. The real challenge is to make government accountable for learning.<sup>1</sup> What would that involve?

### The Compliance Model of Accountability

Accountability constrains and motivates behaviour. Some see a competition within the private sector as such a force. A vendor cannot control her competition. To succeed, she must respond to it, say, through better prices or service. In this view, competition ensures a kind of accountability. Government regulation is a second source of accountability. It creates rules that must be obeyed.

Although government does not face the same sort of competition as the private sector, there is a parallel. Democracy is *adversarial*. In addition, governments too must follow rules, ranging from those in the Constitution to those for asking a question in Parliament. The combination of an adversarial climate and strict rules of behaviour are essential to our practices of accountability. Nevertheless, they have become entangled in a view of accountability that is too narrow and now needs to be corrected — the so-called "compliance model."

Consider this familiar scenario. A reporter, auditor or opposition member uncovers a problem. Inside and outside the House of Commons, the minister faces tough questions about who is to blame. Opposition members or reporters press the minister to admit that some rule has been broken on his watch. Such an admission would be followed by blame, so the minister resists. Depending on the rule, the penalty can range from a reprimand to removal from office.

<sup>1</sup> This is the second of three articles aimed at provoking debate on accountability. The first one considered the growing commitment to accountability for results ([http://www.crossing-boundaries.ca/?section=reports\\_main](http://www.crossing-boundaries.ca/?section=reports_main)). This article picks up where that one left off, focusing on accountability for learning. The third and final one will address the complex issue of "shared accountability."

This so-called "compliance" model is well suited to administrative processes, such as tendering or financial transactions. The rules define the process by which such transactions can occur. They protect against negligence, incompetence and corruption. The adversarial structure ensures that someone is well positioned to question government on the matter.

As a model for accountability, however, compliance is inadequate. Many of the most important aspects of government business go beyond the following of rules. Rather, they have to do with the choices that governments make. For example, a government's respect for rules of process tells us nothing about its effectiveness at making policy.

If we want governments to be accountable for *what* they do—the quality of the decision they make—rather than just *how* they do it, we must focus on the progress they make toward their goals. The compliance model can be very misleading here. It encourages us to take the same kind of black-and-white view of performance that we take of rules: either the rule was observed or it was not. By contrast, achieving goals is often a matter of degree. How should Parliament hold government to account for such decisions?

### Accountability for Learning

Let's roll back our scenario. In accountability for results and learning, the fact that a goal has not been achieved does not automatically mean that someone should be blamed. The issue is not just whether rules were followed, but also how effectively the risks were managed.

For example, suppose that unforeseen events have prevented a new program from achieving its targets. Once the minister realizes this, he reports it to the appropriate committee. The committee members respond by questioning him on:

- why were the events unforeseen—what has changed that has changed his view of things;
- what the minister could have done to anticipate them;
- what the department has learned from the experience and how the learning will be applied.

In this situation, there may be no need to assign blame or look for a broken rule. The minister may have taken every reasonable

precaution. Moreover, if blame is to be assigned it may be because nothing was learned from the experience, not because the government failed to meet its targets. In short, on this model, the assignment of blame turns on a fair assessment of the minister's ability to answer a different set of questions.

Such a scenario may seem idealistic, but it points the way beyond traditional accountability. It underlines that, although compliance with rules is essential to good government, so are judgement and learning. It also underlines that holding government to account for them is about more than following rules. It is about managing risk.

To see why accountability for learning is so important now and how it might work, we must take a brief look at the changing environment, the cultural barriers to learning, and the challenges around getting the public policy community to support it. Each will be briefly considered.

## The Changing Environment of Government

Citizens are becoming more demanding of their governments. They want fair treatment, more and higher quality services, easier access to them with fewer delays, and value for their tax dollars. They want to be consulted on key policy and delivery issues. In addition, fiscal restraint, increased scrutiny of government, globalization, the introduction of new technologies, the need for governments to work together in partnerships, and a clearer focus on getting results—all are pressuring governments to change the way they do business. Traditional accountability can be a barrier to progress.

An exclusive focus on compliance reflects an earlier era when public service tasks were simpler, often repetitive, and the chief threat was abuse of power. Today, public servants are becoming knowledge workers. To do their jobs well, they must exercise

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**Over the last decade, governments in OECD countries have been experimenting with "new tools," ranging from Internet technologies to community partnerships. They could greatly improve government and democracy. But it is increasingly clear that these tools change how modern governments work, what they do and how they make decisions. Learning to use them well will require experimentation and careful analysis from the public service. It will require informed debate, strong leadership and good decision-making from politicians. This series is dedicated to exploring the issues from both points of view.**

## Centre for Collaborative Government

**The Centre for Collaborative Government is a Canadian public interest research organization. Its mission is to promote more effective management of the interdependence between government departments, levels of government or government and the private or third sectors. The Centre advances public dialogue and research on public management and governance through a Canada-wide network of associates. The centre for Collaborative Government is a division of Kaufman, Thomas & Associates, Inc.**

judgment and rely on "soft" skills, such as collaboration and teamwork, to deal with complex situations in innovative ways. The chief concern today is that they will not respond quickly enough to new circumstances or that they will fail to learn from past mistakes. The new interest in accountability for learning reflects the changing environment.

This does not mean that learning is an excuse for bad planning or mismanagement. Although error is a normal part of learning, governments should not expect the public to tolerate all errors. Accountability for learning assumes that the risks taken were reasonable ones. In addition, governments should provide clear evidence that lessons have been learned from an error and that steps have been taken to apply the lessons learned. Some differences between the traditional approach to accountability and an approach based on learning are highlighted below.

Traditional accountability emphasizes compliance with the rules of process	New approach to accountability emphasises the need for flexibility, innovation and learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accountability for stewardship of resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accountability for learning and stewardship</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate compliance with detailed rules</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate the achievement of results while complying with rules</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rules-based decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principles-based decisions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rules and regulations guide behaviour to increase efficiency in simple, repetitive situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Innovation and effective risk management are needed to adjust to complex situations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measure activities and inputs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measure outputs and outcomes (results)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intimidate people into compliance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inspire people into achievement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reach a target, and continue to achieve it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New targets continue to be set, raising the bar</li> </ul>

## Three Cultural Barriers to Learning

Sometimes a practice that is intended to achieve one thing has unexpected consequences. Over the years, at least three "cultural" barriers to learning have emerged as unintended results of an over-reliance on traditional accountability. They include a highly adversarial climate, a risk-averse public service and the myth of government perfection.

### An Adversarial Climate

We said above that the adversarial nature of our democracy was

essential. Nevertheless, this aspect now appears to be out of balance. The exclusive focus on compliance with rules has produced a very low tolerance for error and an aversion to discussing success. For example, in most governments, the role of the opposition now focuses largely on demonstrating government incompetence. On this approach, there is no point in dwelling on what goes right or on the lessons that government has learned. Holding government to account is about finding fault and laying blame.

In similar vein, the media views its role as reporting on government wrongdoing, waste, and mismanagement. Not surprisingly, for its part, government is disinclined to provide more information than is required or to report candidly on problems. The result is a highly adversarial—and often secretive—climate in which constructive debate and learning are all but impossible.

### **A Risk-Averse Public Service**

The intense adversarial climate at the political level creates a dilemma for the public service. On the one hand, officials are expected to innovate. On the other, they are not allowed to make mistakes. Because new approaches involve risk, they are viewed with suspicion. The result is a preoccupation with avoiding error that can stifle even the most determined efforts to promote change and innovation. The simplest documents often go through numerous levels of clearance, sometimes taking weeks before they see the light of day. Program changes take even longer. The result is a public service that is plodding and unimaginative.

### **The Myth of Government Perfection**

At his acceptance speech, Prime Minister-elect John Diefenbaker recognized that neither he nor his government would be perfect. "I will make mistakes," he admitted, "but I hope it will be said of me, 'He wasn't always right; sometimes he was on the wrong side; but never on the side of wrong'."

That's easier to say, of course, before taking office. In practice, it is difficult for politicians to admit to being wrong—to a failing in their department, or to the ineffectiveness of a program they championed. It is about more than pride. There is a real fear that such an admission may result in a crippling attack from the opposition or media. Senior public servants are equally reluctant to admit errors for fear of the fallout it may cause for their ministers.

Of course, few if any ministers or officials really believe that they do not make mistakes. They only talk this way because of the high cost of admitting errors. The practice has led to some bizarre spectacles. For example, some five years ago a senior public servant used a government expense account to pay for a \$750 lunch in Paris—and then brazenly maintained that it was a reasonable business expense.

Every government has had ministers or officials whose willingness to deny the obvious has dismayed the public. Some survived, some did not. The real casualty, however, is the climate of trust and openness that is needed to establish accountability for learning. To some, it now looks like an idealistic dream.

Nevertheless, such scepticism should be resisted. The public has shown repeatedly that it knows the difference between legitimate errors and incompetence. There are more than a few cases where public officials have been frank about errors, only to find the public quite understanding. Indeed, the public tends to welcome such candour. As a result, more than one commentator has concluded that, on this point, they are far ahead of the politicians.

## **Encouraging a Shift to Accountability for Learning**

As we enter the Information Age and the knowledge-based economy grows, transforming the culture of government should be viewed as an imperative. If government is to experiment and innovate in the 21st century, it must be able to admit and deal expeditiously with problems. All parts of the public policy community have a role to play in this. They should work together to establish a public culture that is more appreciative of success, and less reflexive about blame.

For example, almost every Canadian knows about the "billion-dollar boondoggle" at Human Resources Development Canada. But how much do they know about the government Internet project that won international awards, while making a significant contribution to education?<sup>2</sup> Some people argue that the media should be reporting on more successes. Are they right?

It is useful to note the contrast in how the media covers business and government. For example, journalists who write in the business sections of a newspaper know that business leaders are as eager to learn about successes as failures. They rely on such information as a key source of "best practices" and "lessons learned" to help inform their own thinking. As a result, business papers do not question the value of reporting on successes.

The same kind of coverage is far less frequent in reports on government. Why? Some say that the media has no special responsibility to report on government's successes but only on its failures. Is this so?

This thinking is rooted in the traditional view of accountability. It assumes that holding government to account is about assigning blame for wrongdoing. The point of this article is to underline the limits of that approach. Certainly, the media should maintain its investigative vigilance, but if the capacity to learn is critical to good governance, shouldn't we begin to view public policy debate around successes to be every bit as important as the failures? Learning and blame result from different approaches. We need both.

### **Some Practical Steps to Change Accountability**

Increasing the capacity for risk management may be one of the most pressing challenges government faces, as it moves into the 21st century. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is the adversarial climate. It feeds the aversion to risk in the public service. At the

<sup>2</sup> SchoolNet has connected hundreds of thousands of Canadian classrooms to the Internet, and developed a vast online educational resource for teachers and students. See the website at [www.schoolnet.ca](http://www.schoolnet.ca).

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same time, the myth of perfection contributes to unrealistically high standards that can make public debate over risk assessment difficult.

Better risk management requires greater transparency, more openness, better use of results information, and informed discussion of the complex causal relationships that affect government action. A number of practical steps can be taken to help bring about such changes:

- Ministers should become more vigilant about reporting on results and more open about the difficulties they face in achieving them. Ministers should say up front what their goals are and their levels of risk tolerance in achieving them. They should set the tone by insisting on rigorous risk analyses from their departments, explaining the risk framework to the public, and reporting honestly on program performance.
- MPs in committees should take the time to drill down into departmental reports and focus more directly on questions about what has been learned and how risks will be managed in the future.
- Auditors and journalists could report on what is going right as well as what is going wrong, in order to help identify patterns and conditions of success.
- Better consultation and communication with citizens is needed. First, it would help them understand the risks government faces, the decisions it makes, and the reasoning behind the goals and targets it sets. At the same time, it would improve government's understanding of citizens' levels of risk tolerance. Recent studies show that government's appreciation of public risk is often unreliable.
- Public servants take their cues from the leaders in Parliament. Ministers must both set the example and provide public service managers with the environment they need to do their job well. If they obfuscate and deny, so will public servants. If Ministers accept responsibility, so will public servants.
- Members of the opposition, while not surrendering their duty to hold government to account, might sometimes discharge that duty by asking, "What have you learned?"

As the Auditor-General states: "accountability must be able to tolerate mistakes or adverse results, provided that any risk taken can be shown to have been reasonable and the management of the risk to have been sound."

## **Conclusion**

Strengthening accountability to include learning provides critical support for other reforms designed to make government more efficient, effective and responsive, particularly as it shifts towards results-based management. It would also contribute to improving the quality of public debate in question period, election campaigns, and media coverage.

Getting there will require strong leadership. Politicians, the media, and the public service each have a role to play. We have identified some of the challenges they face, and have suggested some practical steps to meet the challenges. Despite the challenges, we hope that we have also made a case that the goal is achievable.

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