

Foreword

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Accountability has always been central to the practice of public administration in any democratic system. As the principal mechanisms through which the people control their leaders, the field of public administration has rightly focused considerable attention on the concept of accountability.

In many OECD nations, the term accountability has grown to an iconic status, with a symbolic imagery that permits this chameleon-like term to be attached to a wide range of causes and agendas.¹ Rising expectations for public provisions of services have been accompanied by growing pressures for accountability on the part of the proliferating list of stakeholders and participants in the policymaking process. Public organizations are condemned to live in a world where the stakes associated with public programs have grown, but where there is little agreement among the many players on goals, expectations or standards.

The rather straightforward, simple world of early public administration has been replaced by a world where public leaders and administrators must attempt to meet conflicting accountability expectations. Indeed, modern treatments consider accountability to be a multi-faceted concept, encompassing separate and often competing accountabilities to internal and external stakeholders. One classic treatment suggests that most government agencies are simultaneously beholden to four systems of accountability: (1) bureaucratic, (2) legal, (3) professional and (4) political. It goes without saying that each of these perspectives can and does conflict, leaving public managers with the difficult job of balancing these differing obligations.² Most public organizations are, in effect, agents for multiple principals both within and outside their boundaries. Some have gone so far to suggest that most public organizations suffer from Multiple Accountabilities Disorder!³

Most advanced nations have responded to accountability imperatives by articulating institutional reforms focused on the performance and results of government operations and programs. Performance measurement and policy analysis have become mainstreamed into management

and budgeting over the past several decades. Many policy advocates and analytic organizations outside of government work tirelessly to transmit analysis and information to policymakers, either putting new issues on the table or providing oversight and insight on existing programs or operations.

However, it is the transformation of audit institutions that has been most notable. National audit offices have expanded their remit beyond traditional financial and compliance auditing to focus on performance auditing and assessments. Performance auditing has become a central feature of most advanced nations' national audit offices, and this has often been replicated, in the United States, in inspectors' general offices located inside agencies. Indeed, some offices have been pushed into ever more expansive policy roles, becoming authenticators of new problems pushing their way onto policy agendas and adjudicators of budget forecasts in addition to their traditional program review responsibilities.

I witnessed these trends from my position at the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), where I served for many years as a managing director responsible for GAO's federal budgeting work. An audit agency that began in the 1920s, with the responsibility of reviewing all financial transactions by federal agencies with thousands of financial auditors, it has become a much smaller agency with a multi-disciplinary workforce devoted to performance and program assessments. The inspectors general in federal agencies, as well as state and local auditors, have followed as political leaders and restive publics place more demanding and complex tasks on government than ever before. Federal auditors are now asked by the Congress and the President to go beyond even post-performance audits to become more proactive in working with managers to mitigate and prevent potential waste and fraud when programs are started.

As they have expanded their roles to performance, auditors have succeeded in achieving major influence in forming the policy agenda and in formulating public policy as well. In the United States, GAO input was critical in bringing about reforms in policy areas ranging from healthcare reimbursement formulas, grant allocations, and reforms of federal deposit and pension insurance programs. In one prominent case in Canada, the Auditor General's reports on the Martin government's pattern of influence peddling was widely viewed as the most important event triggering the government's downfall.

However, auditors achieve their influence in highly contestable systems, rife with competing values. Far from hegemonic influence, these systems appear to veer from accountability deficits to accountability excesses, depending on such variables as the strength of accountability offices and

the receptivity of the broader political system. Auditors often have sufficient credibility to make powerful claims on the agenda, often prompting government officials to modify their agendas to address the issues raised in reports. In some parliamentary systems, the auditor general is provided with formal opportunities to testify before oversight committees chaired by the minority party. But other actors are competing for influence as well, including established interest groups and bureaucratic agencies, who can prove to be formidable contestants in protecting their programs and claims.

We know surprisingly little about what conditions aid or hinder the influence of audit offices in the policy process. One obvious one is the orientation and capacity of the audit office itself. Specific features of accountability institutions themselves limit their role in policymaking. For example, traditionally, many audit agencies have not engaged in policy advocacy. They have been closed organizations concerned with their independence and reluctant to work with others. They have not, therefore, looked to form coalitions. Such closed organizations have kept their draft reports to themselves for fear of leaks and have privileged access to information that they cannot share. And they generally chose not to speak publicly on issues or to get involved with others. Many auditing organizations rotate their staff when they become too familiar with the programs they are reviewing, which preserves independence, but often at the expense of expertise. This institutional insulation and isolation has the price of diminishing the roles such institutions can play in the issue networks that are responsible for policy development and change in most systems.⁴

Those audit institutions that are more fully engaged with policymakers face institutional risks of their own. Most of the work done by the GAO is at the request of members of Congress from both parties. The agency must delicately steer between responding to these legitimate information needs to set their research agenda while sustaining their independence in developing findings and reports. The broader engagement of these institutions with media, universities and other actors also can sustain their reputations which can promote support and limit interference. However, the involvement of accountability professions in reviewing program results and effectiveness carries obvious political risks for audit institutions – many have charters that limit their coverage of these issues and constrain them from making recommendations on policy and program design issues.

Notwithstanding the greater centrality of auditors in public management, public managers and policymakers often have little connection or dialogue with these independent officials who are the institutional champions of accountability. Managers on the front lines of program performance often have no familiarity with audit standards, materiality criteria

or any of the other tools that are so central to the job of the performance auditor. The vaunted independence that is so essential to the credibility of auditors also has served to wall off these accountability officials from their managerial counterparts in the agencies of government.

Several years ago at an international meeting, I succeeded in bringing together the senior budget directors of several major OECD nations with the heads of the national audit offices of those nations. What was remarkable was how little they knew about each other; indeed one budget director remarked that he came to the meeting to finally get a chance to get to know how this strange and mysterious institution, which had become so important to governance in his and other nations, did its work.

The separation between managers and auditors in the world of practice has its parallel in the academic community. While accountability concepts have been a foundation of public administration over the years, there has been precious little focus on audit institutions. For instance, the *Public Administration Review*, among the premier journals on the field in the United States and the world, has only one article with audit institutions in its title in the past ten years, and only six articles with some coverage of those institutions.⁵ One would have to go to accounting and auditing journals to find research on the role and management of audit institutions in public administration.

This book is a much welcome tonic for public administration. It is one of the few books that explicitly focus on how audit institutions carry out their performance auditing responsibilities. While auditors will likely read it, the authors have geared the book to a broader readership, including public managers who are often the subject of performance audits.

It is also notable that the book has contributions from both practitioners as well as academics who cover audit institutions. This is increasingly rare but extraordinarily valuable. Many of the authors are, in fact, ‘pracademics’ who have one foot in public office and one in academia teaching or doing research. The giants who founded our field of public administration in the United States – Woodrow Wilson, Luther Gulick, Charles Merriam – were themselves all pracademics who enriched their theory with illustrious service in government, and vice versa.⁶ Readers will benefit from the authors’ mix of first hand experience and reflective scholarship – both essential for a deep and rich understanding of developments in our field.

The chapters in the book are notable for their coverage of important issues. There are chapters covering issues ranging from organizational strategy, audit tools and methods, and standards. These chapters offer a view into the operations of audits that many public managers know precious little about.

The chapters on the impacts of performance audits are very revealing.

They help us gain a better understanding about the roles that performance audits play in the broader policy process. Auditors themselves need more sophisticated analysis of how they achieve the impacts on policymaking and this book will provide a rich source to help them learn about the intended and unintended effects of their work. The comparative focus of the book is also a contribution, with chapters including material on audit bodies in Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, among others.

My hope is that this book will help trigger an expanded dialogue between auditors, public managers and students of public administration. While audit reports rightly criticize the stovepiping of government agencies and programs, our own field has erected its own professional stovepipes that have inhibited networking and valuable collaborations across the differing disciplines that are engaged in public management. Constructive engagement can promote the objectives of both managers and auditors without jeopardizing the independence that is so essential to the credibility of audit institutions. As a firm believer in the important role of ideas in public policy, I have faith that books like this one can help to bring about greater integration of theory and practice of public administration in the future.

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NOTES

1. Melvin J. Dubnick and Jonathan B. Justice (2004), 'Accounting for Accountability', paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September.
2. Barbara S. Romzek and Melvin J. Dubnick (1987), 'Accountability in the Public Sector: Lessons from the Challenger Tragedy', in *Public Administration Review* 47 (May/June).
3. Thomas Schillemans and Mark Bovens (2008), 'The Challenge of Multiple Accountability: An Empirical Analysis', paper prepared for Kettering Symposium on Public Accountability, Dayton, Ohio, May 22–4.
4. Rob Schwartz and Paul L. Posner (2008), 'Accountability Institutions and Information in the Policy Process', paper prepared for Kettering Symposium on Public Accountability, Dayton, Ohio, May 22–4.
5. Search by the author in Blackwell Synergy index of *Public Administration Review*, 2000–10.
6. Paul L. Posner (2009), 'The Pracademic: An Agenda For Re-engaging Practitioners and Academics', *Journal of Public Budgeting and Finance* 29:1 (March).