Developing Capacity: The reasonable conversation of representative democratic politics

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Abstract: In the calls for greater participation, ‘whole of government’ approaches; partnerships and collaboration, prevalent in current discussions around building trust in government, lies a challenge to the elite model of democratic politics. In this paper I want to reflect on the barriers and opportunities to developing a conversation between governments and citizens in the context of representative democratic structures and traditional models of the role of citizens and public servants in that conversation. The paper will draw on practical examples developed in the context of an Australian Research Council funded project in Queensland, Australia, but the lessons learnt around developing capacity for engagement have much wider application, for both mature and developing democracies. What this paper attempts to show is how the initially rhetorical commitments to enhancing citizen engagement and building, or rebuilding, trust, can be given substance within the institutional framework of a representative democracy.

Governments have committed to community engagement for a number of reasons. These include overt political reasons, such as the need for electoral success or the need to placate interest groups, as well as commitments to greater efficiency and in response to community interests. At the most simple level, bureaucrats engage because they need to know and communities engage because they want to be heard. How can these efforts lead to genuine and sustainable conversations between citizens and government? In this paper I reflect on the barriers and opportunities to developing a conversation between governments and citizens in the context of representative democratic structures and traditional models of the role of citizens and public servants in that conversation.
This paper considers a political and an administrative innovation in the Australian state of Queensland as potential mechanisms for enhanced community engagement and trust building at the regional level. The ‘enhancement’ occurs in their potential to develop genuine governance conversations between government and community. In using the analogy of a ‘conversation’ to describe what is often a multi-faceted and certainly multi-vocal exchange between government and citizens, I am drawing out the kinds of rules that underpin a successful conversation. These would include the capacities to listen and to articulate a point of view, empathy and a willingness to resolve conflict and the equality of participants – no one is shouting! An allied challenge to this particular conversational space is the way in which government structures impede these conversational rules.

The Ministerial Regional Community Forum (MRCF) has been in operation for some seven years. It was the initiative of the Hon. Terry Mackenroth, the then Minister for Communication and Information, Local Government and Planning and his Department. Its genesis was intensely political\(^1\), a direct response to a close election result where the Labor government only held power through the support of an Independent, and to the high voter support in the regions of the populist One Nation Party in the 1998 election. The politics was clear. What constituted ‘the regions’ matched closely the areas of high One Nation support. The perception was that One Nation had capitalised on a failure of governments to respond to the changed economic environment in the regions and to a growing level of fear and uncertainty about the future in those electorates.

The Forum goals are simple. They aim to explore what the State Government can do in the regions. The process began in February 1999 with a series of regional conferences. These generated considerable public support. The conferences produced many issues that were forwarded to the relevant Departments for comment. (Only the vague, unspecific, or racist requests were culled.) Responses were published at the February 2000 Forum. From the conference process, ongoing membership of the Ministerial Regional Community Forum was selected. A novel selection process was used. Conference attendees were asked to identify five ‘undisputed’ community leaders. These leaders were then asked to nominate representatives across eleven ‘sectors’. From this group, representatives were then selected, taking into account geographic location to ensure wide representation. The process was chosen to avoid calls of political bias and to achieve broad community support.

The stated aim of the Forums is to ‘provide regional communities with the mechanism to identify priority issues, needs and strategies and present them directly to State Government Ministers.’ Each forum is attended by Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries who meet with regional representatives. The forum process provides a range of opportunities for forum members to raise regional issues or make comment on behalf of the region and present proposals designed to address priority regional needs. In turn, Cabinet Ministers can use the forum to ask members for a regional perspective on government policies, programs and initiatives. The ministerial

\(^1\) A comment at the time from one of the public servants involved in the process was that “the initiative will be a success if the government gets re elected"
representation is provided on a rotation basis, with each Minister attending two MRCF meetings before moving on to a new region.

This initiative has been joined by a shift to encourage collaboration among managers and officers in state government regional offices. The aim has been to strengthen regional coordination through the creation of Regional Managers’ Coordination Networks (RMCN). The stated aim of the network is to assist agencies to achieve their outcomes ‘through better regional engagement and coordination’. Primarily comprised of regional managers of Queensland Government departments and agencies, the networks also include and are open to representatives from other spheres of government, and non-government organisations.

According to the government website, these Regional Managers’ Coordination Networks aim to:

- achieve economic, social and environmental benefits for Queensland regions through coordinating priority, cross-agency initiatives at the regional level
- ensure that services align with government priorities and community needs by supporting collaboration across state government agencies and with local government, business and communities.

There is a further expectation that these networks will “work closely with Forum Members in providing advice and identifying local solutions and, where possible, in resolving issues and implementing solutions at the local level.” *(see http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/community/regional/index.html)*

The particular political environment that led to the formation of the MRCF has changed dramatically. The Labor government now enjoys a health majority. Nonetheless, along with the Community Cabinet process, (Bishop and Chalmers 1999, Bishop 2004) the Forum has remained a feature of an administration that has emphasised its consultative character. The more recent development of RMCN can be read as an indication of a genuine desire on the part of the government to meet its obligations to the regions.

A feature of both of these initiatives is to increase engagement between the community and government. Initially aimed squarely at rebuilding trust in a government on a ‘knife edge’, the forums were a response to charges of ‘elitism’ and ‘dissociation’ from the ‘real people’ made by populists, these governance mechanisms have since evolved and become a feature of the regional political and administrative landscape.

While the term ‘engagement’ has recently re-energised thinking about a number of governance techniques previously labelled ‘community consultation’, in many instances what is being talked about is the same thing. The ‘engagement’ policy brief
from the OECD (2001) specifically outlines a familiar continuum, or series of techniques, ranging from one-way information to two-way communication to full partnership and identifies that spectrum as ‘community engagement’. Nonetheless, the term community engagement has borne considerable aspirational hope that governments who adopt this terminology are somehow developing more sincere forms of citizen participation in government – in some instances that their advocacy heralds ‘strong democracy’ or ‘genuine participation’. Nonetheless, these techniques are expected to pay considerable dividends in terms of better policy, governance and, significantly for the participatory enthusiasts, ‘representative democracy’.

Strengthening relations with citizens is a sound investment in better policy-making and a core element of good governance. It allows government to tap new sources of policy-relevant ideas, information and resources when making decisions. Equally important, it contributes to building public trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity. Such efforts help strengthen representative democracy, in which parliaments play a central role. (OECD 2001)

Most engagement (or consultation practices) carried out by governments has these instrumental goals. The consultative or engaged government of the early 21 century in the UK, Australia, the US or Canada has much more to do with building the credibility of elected representatives and the outcomes of the public sector reform process than they do with of the adoption of Carole Pateman’s, (1970) Benjamin Barber’s (1984) or even Sherry Arnstein’s (1969) demands from the late sixties (Bishop and Davis 2002). When governments do consult it is still often as a result of the adoption of market techniques where ‘citizens’ are subsumed into ‘customers’ and ‘stakeholders’ (Bishop 2000, Cooper 2000). Simply put, there has been no revolution of democracy. What we see in ‘engagement’ is the application of a series of government lead techniques, usually for clear political motives.

This paper is not critical of the failure of these techniques to deliver a more participatory democracy. Rather I look at engagement mechanisms as techniques that can be utilized specifically at the regional level to build a reasonable conversation between government and community and also to consider how some of these techniques may stumble on conventions of representation and a resistant bureaucracy. Language is significant here. Noted above is the shift from ‘consultation’ to ‘engagement’ as a mechanism for driving reform or re focussing attention. Here, adding to the word ‘engagement’, are other terms that drive discussions regarding coordination of the massive enterprise of government. Terms such as: ‘joined-up’; ‘seamless’; ‘horizontalism’; even the term ‘whole-of-government’ itself. Each term attempts to evoke an idea of how government could be made more directly responsive

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2 This document was very influential in the formulation of the Community Engagement policy that underpinned the formation of the Community Engagement Division of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (since relocated to the Department of Communities).

3 I have noted in conversation with a number of bureaucrats in the Queensland administration that there is a real belief that this change of term has heralded a significant qualitative change.
to the community. They are often juxtaposed to words such as ‘silo’; ‘hierarchy’; ‘bureaucracy’ and so on.

In a recent speech to the Institute of Public Administration Australia, Dr Peter Shergold, secretary of the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, saw this as a demand from citizens, saying: “Australian’s rightly demand the delivery of government programmes and services in a seamless way.” (Shergold 2004:5). He further pointed out that

A whole-of-government perspective does not just depend upon the development of policy in a ‘joined-up’ way or the delivery of policy in a ‘seamless’ manner. More importantly, it depends upon the integration of the two. Operational issues matter, the development of policy and the planning of its delivery are two sides of the same coin. Both are the currency of political decision-making. (Shergold 2004:8)

This ‘demand’, to the extent that it actually comes from the community, is more of an unstated expectation, and an expectation built on a lack of knowledge of, or interest in inter and intra governmental power sharing arrangements or agency turf disputes.

‘The community’ in negotiations between community and government can have a range of characteristics. A recent panel discussion at Harvard University brought this home. The topic was the 9/11 Commission, an inquiry reluctantly agreed to by the Bush administration following ‘community pressure’ from a group known as The Families of the Victims of 9/11. The representative from the victims group reported that the group was never more than fifteen families and by the time the report came down there were only two people in that group to read and comment on the report on behalf of the victims. Nonetheless, Commissioner Slade Gorton, a former US Senator on the panel noted that this group had been the most effective lobby group he had ever encountered in a long career in Washington. The group worked because it saw its goal as working through all levels of government, of understanding the system and recognising where pressure could be best applied. In this instance ‘the community’ was informed, and prepared to become more informed, to the extent that they became savvy players within the politics of the administration. 4 This ‘elite community’ becomes well adapted to negotiating with the multiple layers of government. It may even derive strategic benefit from it. Community activists, over time, become relatively adept at picking their way through the ‘small p’ politics of government agencies. (If one department won’t help maybe another will, if one level of government is unresponsive try another and so on.)

There are other ‘communities’. The political push to reengage (in response to ‘populist’ criticism) with disaffected citizens, or more importantly, voters, leads governments to attempt to engage a broader community, not just sectional interests. These groups know little of the political system, little of the institutions of government, of federalism. These people already see government as a seamless entity. To this community, whose capacity to ‘engage’ is limited, the term whole-of-

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4 Carie Lemack, the spokesperson for the group is currently undertaking an MPA at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard. (For a video of the forum see: http://www.iop.harvard.edu/events_forum_archive.html)
government is almost tautological. Citizens are not interested in which portfolio has relevant authority, interagency rivalries, or even, in a three-tiered federal system, what level of government has responsibility.\(^5\) Their input into engagement arrives as a problem for government, not as a discrete problem for specific agencies. For them government is the government and it is there to solve problems, deliver services and, more often than not, be the object of blame for a range of current economic or social maladies. My point is, to this ‘community’ the push for a ‘whole-of-government’ approach is an issue entirely within government. Any ‘demand’, therefore, is coming, not from the community, but from governments and is being made of bureaucracies to get them to be responsive to political direction.

That these issues play out at a local or regional level is important. Place, identity and interests are all vital components for encouraging citizen engagement. The ‘region’ may be the largest unit within a modern complex state where issues have enough local significance to potentially attract broad community participation. The region also brings the different agencies of government into closer relationship with communities and with each other. Work in the regions also exposes central decisions to the test of implementation. It is usually at the regional level that decisions will need to be taken to shape the implementation of policy or the delivery of services to meet the needs of local communities.

If, as I have argued, decisions to engage, how to engage and what to expect from engagement are ultimately political decisions, how might engagement techniques be utilised to develop governance capacity through engagement? While skilled activists remain a part of the landscape, a conscious effort needs to be made to engage the broader community in a manner congruent with their expectations of government. The MRCF seeks to make a direct political connection between the heart of representative democratic decision-making – the Cabinet – and the regions. Community engagement techniques adopted by the bureaucracy at the regional level, given the advantages of proximity to the people they serve and to the development of the RMCN, should apply the outsider’s single view of government to the multi-agency bureaucracy. This source of community information may be one way of shifting internal organisational cultures to consider the work of government as a single destination.

There are, however, organisational barriers to this approach. Despite considerable public sector reform, public managers still report within agencies and to a hierarchical structure. The active interagency ‘collaborator’ may well receive little acknowledgment of his or her efforts if they are not seen to directly benefit their agency goals. The developing coordination mechanisms at the regional level, such as the RMCN, should concentrate their efforts on the way in which agencies relate to communities so that community information is both received and processed as ‘whole-of-government’ information. Building community capacity should not be code for creating the capacity to meet with government on its multi

\(^5\) Much of the work of a diligent electorate secretary at any level government is to redirect requests to their correct level of government. (The response of ‘not my problem’ offers little kudos to the representative).
agency terms but rather encouraging the articulation of community’s expectation of a coordinated government response.

The MRCF faces a different potential problem but one that is instructive of the structural problem in the relationship between ministerial authority and bureaucracy. The tradition of Cabinet solidarity, where ministers are bound to support the decision of Cabinet is the strongest political instrument of ensuring whole-of-government policy. It is the point where the government position is developed and agreed. Another ministerial convention is that Ministers should not speak on matters outside their portfolio. While there is an effort to align topics to portfolio responsibility, the rotation of ministers in the MRCF means that Ministers will be speaking outside their portfolio in some instances. At an early forum in Ipswich the two ministers present, Hon. David Hamill and Hon. Dean Wells, actually commented on this point in a rather bemused manner. While this has not yet been an issue (there have been no controversies reported) it shows how a new engagement technique can cut across conventions of representative government and in, this case, one related to the traditional protocols of how whole-of-government positions are established and maintained.

The first problem is far more significant than the second in terms of the likely impact on improving engagement strategies. The MRCF works well. It works best as an engagement mechanism when completing communication loops: “At the last meeting this course of action was determined and this is what we have done.” From observation, even when the news is bad, there is a sense of respect for being treated honestly and explanations being given. In the bureaucracy the RMCN endorses the espoused benefits of collaboration but there has been little work done in actually quantifying the benefits. Accordingly, successful careers are more often built by placing agency goals ahead of collaboration. In short, there is little direct incentive to build the kinds of community relationships outlined above. From a career perspective engaging with an ‘elite community’ would still deliver a greater dividend.

Both problems are significant in that they highlight that administering government has multiple objectives. While there is a need to present the government position it is also true that there are good reasons for specialisation – efficient use of people with expertise in a particular area – but if this is not integrated with the broader governmental picture, agencies with different areas and skill sets may well routinely and systematically work against one another. The benefits of specialisation, both bureaucratic and ministerial, need to be brought in to line with government priorities. In a conventional Westminster system, this is done in Cabinet. My argument here is that appropriate community engagement strategies might also be used to develop a capacity on the community side of the conversation that becomes a ‘bottom up’ coordination strategy.

To attempt to bring some clarity to the emerging complex environment and to relate it to democratic outcomes, Chris Skelcher, following work by Hooge and Marks, makes the following distinction between two types of governance.
Table 1: Typology of Governance Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type I</th>
<th>Type II</th>
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<tr>
<td>Multi-purpose policy domains</td>
<td>Single-purpose policy domains</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutually exclusive spatial domains</td>
<td>Territorially overlapping spatial domains</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited number of jurisdictional tiers</td>
<td>Many jurisdictional tiers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively permanent jurisdictional system</td>
<td>Flexible and changing jurisdictional system</td>
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Source: Skelcher 2005, p. 94

Type I, or ‘traditional’ governance is still the predominant mode within national polities. Type II or ‘emergent’, is ‘likely to flourish specifically where there is a need for a tailored governmental body to address an issue that is not susceptible to policy action by a Type I organization, in the international arena and where there are particular functional policy problems.’ Further, Type II governance bodies have been developed in new cross-cutting policy area such as “sustainability, community safety, and neighbourhood revitalization” (2005:94). Increasingly governments are attempting to deliver services in a way that reflects these broader cross-cutting policy agendas. Thus Main Roads departments no longer just build roads, but ‘connect citizens’ and do so in a manner that considers a much broader range of social and environmental consequences. These new policy formulations have also led to the emergence of ‘whole of government’ strategy, on the governmental side (Shergold 2004) and extensive consultation with communities, (Bishop and Davis 2002) both drivers for a more reasonable governance conversation. As Skelcher says:

The emergent governance of the public realm presents challenging yet exciting possibilities for institutional design. The challenge is to enable subtle but effective processes for collective action that also recognize the integrity of jurisdictions and maintain the principle of segmental authority (subsidiarity) whether this is expressed in terms of spatial or policy boundary conditions, or both. The challenge is accentuated by the changes in societies that reflect the emergence of polities around established beliefs and locales (2005:106).

It is significant to reflect on why ‘emergent’ governance comes into being and the consequent need for institutional redesign. It emerges because traditional modes lack capacity because policy problems that governments are now choosing to address and that citizens are now demanding governments address, are framed in ways that do not neatly fit into traditional spatial and institutional considerations. Traditional understandings of ‘legitimacy’ and ‘accountability’ – developed along with notions of responsible government; of cabinet; of the functional separation of departments – are more readily understood and implemented in their traditional forms but now need considerable reinterpretation and reformulation in the light of emerging areas of policy interest and governance modes. It is also important to see that the challenge emergent (Type II) governance poses for institutional design also represents a challenge for those who inhabit these institutions and are charged with making them work. In fact leadership techniques within the new institutions need to be just as...
subtle if they are to be effective.

On a traditional account leadership is a quality expected of the head of an organization. The expectation is that the singular ‘leader’ has a group who they lead and, in a hierarchical system, they acquire that power through their perceived capacities and retain it in terms of the quality of their leadership. Like the classical military leader, they ‘lead from the front’. In the traditional legitimating accounts of responsible government and bureaucracy the public official sits within a fixed a hierarchy, may be very powerful and influential but is never the titular leader. Even the CEO is subject to ministerial authority. Therefore, the expressions of leadership by the public officials have to gain authority through something other than the mere fact of being ‘in charge.’ The public official also has a very complex relationship with those they lead. As already noted, not only can they not lead from the head, but those who are to be led are always in some sense their superior – ministers through departmental hierarchy and citizens who can be said to ultimately hold them to account through the notion of responsible government. While the term ‘public manager’ is now more frequently applied in many ways ‘public servant’ remains apt.

It is only in the differentiated polity, or network society, (Rhodes 1997) that the notion of public sector leadership can gain any real purchase, outside of any immediate organisational hierarchy that the public official might find them selves the nominal ‘head’. The diffusion created in the differentiated polity means that leadership relationships are not tied to status or hierarchy but to relevance, knowledge coherence, but also power, politics and even popularity. While the subsequent policy discourse can, as Torgerson, says inaugurate new forms of democratic practice (2003:138) it can also lead to more malign outcomes.

If, as Ian Shapiro argues, our allegiance to democracy relies on it being ‘the best available system for managing power relations among people who disagree about the nature of the common good , among many other things , but who nonetheless are bound to live together’ (2003:146). We also arrive at a suitably ‘thin’ theory of the common good that allows for both democratic interplay and an assessment of the democratic merits of networked government and service delivery, not by a simple numerical calculus – how many belong to a network – but by how effectively they diffuse power.

Shapiro claims that it is the possibility of diminishing – if not eradicating – domination that is often what draws people to democracy. (2003:146) For the public manager it becomes crucial that they both realise their position vis a vis the power of the state and the power present in civil society and continue to negotiate that interface in a manner that ensures the bridging between the two. There is a crucial insight here. The breadth of the network alone is not a measure of its democratic quality – small networks that work efficiently in the community’s interest and that do not reproduce dominant power relationships may be far more democratic than large populist movements in support of policies and practices that oppress or marginalise some community members.

Robert Putnam’s seminal study of social capital in the United States maps the decline of informal social networks, (2000) a social form that Putnam argues, based on this
and previous studies (1993), is essential to the health of democracy. Leaving aside the many criticisms that Putnam’s claims about the relationship between group membership and democracy have attracted, (Goldberg 1996; Sabetti 1996) his thinking has been very influential on governments. Indeed on his speaking tour of Australia in 2001 he was billed as ‘the most influential academic in the world today’. His influence can now be seen, for example, in that the Australian Bureau of Statistics now reports a social capital index (www.abs.gov.au). Thus part of the role of the public management leader in building a governance conversation, could be seen as replacing or revivifying the more organic and spontaneous networks shown to be in decline, or rather freefall, in civil society. Paradoxically, almost by definition governments cannot directly build social capital. In fact government activity often has negative impacts on social capital. The urban decay and subsequent loss of communities in large cities in the US, and elsewhere, in the 1960s, for example, was the direct result of ill considered freeway development. In the same way that development applications are now subject to environmental impact statements, so should impacts on social capital be considered. As the Putnam study makes clear, it is important that social capital is developed by ‘social’ networks, not bureaucratic impost. The solution to the decline in the number of picnics can not be government initiated picnics!

While some government initiated networks have the appearance of building or creating social capital it is significant that many are a function of funding arrangements. If, for example, a portion of the public housing budget is distributed to community-based housing co-operatives, such organisations will emerge. If funding to improve land care in rural communities is distributed to ‘the community’, again community bodies will be created to meet that requirement. In effect you have government created, non-government organisations. These will be, following Putnam, more effective if they are built on already existing social capital rich networks but they can also emerge, like mushrooms after rain, in response to the funding stimulus, only to wither once fiscal capital dries up.

One aspect of these relationships that is consistent with Robert Putman’s typology of social capital creation is the distinction he makes between bridging and bonding social capital. Where “some forms of social capital are…inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities, and homogenous groups…Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (2000: 22). This distinction can have significant social and democratic effects. Bonding social capital, according to Putnam, is “good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity” (2000:22). If, however, the solidarity generated is not ‘mobilized’ the ‘capital’ developed in bonding group does not develop social (as in society wide) capital at all. The ‘capital’ remains in its ‘enclave’ and is only beneficial to the social subset of group membership. This is not necessarily malevolent; it may as Putnam says “provide crucial social and psychological support for less fortunate members of the community” (2000:22). It also has the potential to be malevolent and Putnam (2000:350-366) and others have written on this problem of social capital. The ‘Hell’s Angels problem’ (Rothstein 2004) can be applied to groups as diverse as the Mafia and exclusive religious charities where church membership or adherence to certain moral codes are prerequisites to receiving benefits. In such examples, the problem is that strong bonding links between group members work against the broader society. Such networks always run the risk of generating as much social
enmity as social capital. On the other hand bridging social capital networks are “outward looking and encompass people across the diverse social cleavages”. As such they “generate broader identities and reciprocity” (Putnam 2000:22-23) and it is this feature of social capital formation also provides insights for how and in what directions networks should be led by public managers. In some instances, as seen above, a network might ensure the dominance of a particular view and become a closed system creating a very strong bonding network. Far from reaching out in democratic ‘inclusion’, they exclude and keep tight dominant positions. A bridging network on the other hand can be a vehicle for bringing in the excluded, diversify the policy mix, enhancing policy learning and so on. Putnam, in his more popular Bowling Alone, uses two household products as analogies: superglue for bonding and WD40 for bridging (2000:23). Of course all networks and conversations require some level of glue to hold them together but the ‘lubricant’ is crucial for the outcome to be democratic, in the sense of diffusing power and managing domination.

As Considine points out (2002) the driving force behind the shift in the public sector has been the push for real performance. To the extent that networks have become a ‘fad’ any test of their success has to be based on its capacity to deliver and perform, not only on its mere existence. Its effectiveness, however, can not rest only on whether it ‘gets the job done’. It has to do so in a manner that allows the expression of democratic public values. To achieve this, its effectiveness has to be balanced against its capacity to include all relevant players. If networks become the site of policy capture and result in the systematic exclusion of significant actors – either of ‘stakeholders’ or broader community interest – they work against rather than contribute to democratic governance. As a locus of diffused power in a differentiated polity a network should work in the interests of the community it serves rather than only the sectional interests of its membership. While bonding relationships offer a bedrock of solidarity, especially among oppressed or minority groups, in a democratic polity the wider aim of networks should be to develop connections across society not to solidify in a manner that disconnects them from society.

The kind of leadership capacities required of the contemporary public service manager can be brought together under the term ‘nodal leadership’. Here leadership (or ‘leading from where you are’) is expressed across the horizontal rather than up and down the hierarchical plain. The network itself, built around either common interests or functions, can be seen as a flat plain where people, with different levels of formal and informal authority, operate across the network at the same level. Leading within the network becomes a collective exercise. While the public manager operates across that plane and at that level they need to always be aware of the other dimensions, in particular ‘public’ and ‘service’, of their role. The particular ‘node’ they inhabit intersects with hierarchical leadership structures. While in terms of accountability, this hierarchical structure has the higher formal status this does not mean that they are not also accountable to their network.

Putnam’s earlier Italian study distinguishes between vertical and horizontal networks and sees that the horizontal networks, those “involving the organization of individuals of equal status and resources as generating the kind of social capital for institutional success” (Putnam 1993:173-175). While in public service delivery networks formal authority may differ, the functioning dynamic of the network attempts the same kind
of equality, not through equal power, but shared interest. Network accountability then is expressed as a function of keeping the network meaningfully and democratically connected. It is here that the successful public manager’s ‘navigation’ becomes crucial to both the network and their own careers. To further complicate the process some actors, such as ministers, appear on both the horizontal and vertical plains. The relationships into and out of the public servant’s ‘node’ then may be best expressed as two functions of ‘responsiveness’; responsive to ministerial formal authority, through which traditional democratic accountability is established, but also responsive to the network to ensure the transfer of knowledge and power across the network to achieve desired policy goals. A further distinction to keep in mind is that there is not a direct conduit between the two kinds of accountability because their organisational structures are ultimately incompatible. Ideally they ‘lead’ through becoming capacitors.

The governance conversation is always multi-dimensional. If you are looking at the delivery of public services, for example, they are political in the Laswellian sense of ‘who gets what when and how?’ While Harold Laswell’s definition pointed to an elite theory of politics, service delivery programs and policies developed through a conversation between government and community might devolve, diffuse or fragment power. In some instances, political power rests with the government or the service deliverer, in others, for example in community based and administered housing co-operatives, power is devolved back to the community itself.

The conversation also remains highly political in the sense of negotiating interests and conflict. The dimensions of this sense of the political are not fully covered here, but they include, negotiation between new and old accountability structures, between government and community relationships, distinguishing between bridging and bonding social capital, negotiating intra- and intergovernmental relations in response to a ‘whole of government’ agendas and also, as I have argued here, between competing, legitimating narratives. This multi-dimensional political terrain requires skilled performance, not only in delivering services but in negotiating its politics. Mark Considine calls this “the appropriate exercise of a navigational competence: that is, the proper use of authority to range freely across a multi-relationship terrain in search of the most advantageous path to success” (2002:22). The nautical metaphor is apt but the task is made even harder by there being fewer fixed points to navigate by. ‘Proper authority’, for example, can differ politically depending on the whether that authority is derived from horizontal networks or vertical governmental hierarchies; or whether they derive from the functional and political fragments of the changed and changing policy terrain, all matters for the reasonable conversation of democratic politics.
References


