
Comments of Professor Mary Ellen Guy's "Civic Nutrition, Citizen Empowerment and Civil Communities"

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Abstract

The authors generally agree with Mary Ellen Guy's assessment of the challenges facing public administration in the next century, but offer an alternative perspective on the future of the discipline. America will succeed because of its diversity, not in spite of it. Less national government intervention and more substantial subnational activity will characterize the future of public administration. Government's role in the next century is not so much to insure equity, as it is to promote civil and individual responsibility and tolerance of differing values. Further, government generally will be less responsible for the socioeconomic and quality of life standards desired by the populace. Public administrators will be required to adapt to this new reality.

Professor Guy is a skilled surgeon who deftly defines the core of the problems facing public administration today and brings them to the forefront for our examination. We agree on the problems, but Professor Guy admittedly is much more optimistic about public administrations' ability to change the nature of societal values than we are. Professor Guy suggests ways to change existing societal values. That, she contends, is the future of public administration.

While not disagreeing with Professor Guy's view of the future of public administration in such an environment, we propose an alternative construction. This view is based on the idea that the environment, as seen by Professor Guy, is reflective of worldwide phenomena, of which this country is part. The United States is a large country possessing diverse

values. Other countries such as the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Nigeria, are now operating under societal and governmental stress because rather than foster diversity they attempted to impose a common set of values on diverse populations with dissimilar values.

This country has survived in part because it has fostered diversity in values and government (federalism). Promoting a common set of values in the present environment may be a recipe for national disaster. Therefore, we suggest that rather than trying to change societal values, public administration should learn to live with them, for these values are a worldwide phenomenon that will change as society evolves. Public administration will have to learn to cope, or, as Lindholm (1959: 79-88) says, "muddle through."

Societal Diversity

Public administration in the future will be characterized by less government and less control. Less government will be manifested via attrition in personnel and reduction in revenues. After all, most state and local government revenues have been increasing faster than personal income—and that fact has not gone unnoticed by state and local taxpayers. Increased growth and reliance on nonprofit and/or specialized organizations that will wrestle away decisional power from state and local government agencies will evidence less control. These organizations will operate specifically to meet the demands of a wide array of distinct groups with frequently incompatible values (Lowi, 1979: 250).

For various reasons, reliance on government--federal, state, and local—is waning. Whether civic nutrition and a sense of community can recapture and foster the public's belief in the redemptive power of government remains to be seen. More convincing is the increasing reliance on empowerment movements designed to address public demands that government is either unwilling or unable to process.

Professor Guy correctly asserts that in a capitalistic economic system that ultimately rewards those who produce more than those who do not, government must play an active role to better the lives of all its residents. Public administrators act as gatekeepers much like primary care physicians act as a point of entry for certain types of health care systems.

Thus, Professor Guy suggests, public administrators must try to build consensus to implement systemic equity, policies that do not allow some groups to benefit at the expense of others.

Unfortunately, society today leans more toward dissensus than consensus. With the geometric and meteoric increase in the number of different organizations, each possessing different values and different amounts of political and economic power, society lacks cohesion. Consensus, if it ever existed, exists no longer.

Not only are there an ever-increasing number of organizations espousing differing values, but they also are intensifying in power. The rapidly expanding number of powerful organizations with often clashing values is creating a decentralized society. Consequently, democracy is flourishing and being implemented in more detail than ever before—populist in orientation. The irony, however, is that these organizations are becoming more oligarchical.

The difficulty faced by government, and therefore public administrators, is that these organizations trade what they want most for what they want at the moment. And, this leads to a lack of trust in both government and public administration. Another difficulty encountered when trying to change societal values is that government is seen as boring, irrelevant, and intrusive. To paraphrase political humorist P.J. O'Rourke (1992:6), government is boring and irrelevant because politicians intentionally lie to put us to sleep so we will not notice what they are doing.

These attitudes lead to fragmented policies, which are difficult to implement. Societal problems, with their concomitant values, are addressed in a piecemeal fashion—dominated by a few powerful organizations not always acting in the "public interest." For example, large property owners through their lobbying efforts often coax legislatures to implement piecemeal property tax policies that directly and negatively affect residential property owners. These property owners may have no recourse except to propose a constitutional amendment. It should not be surprising, then, that an amendment may negatively impact on public schools that receive a large proportion of their funding from property tax revenues.

Dissensus has become institutionalized. As a result, society can never look backward. The tremendous growth in information and

communication technologies will lead to further dissensus—not consensus. The Internet and 24-hour news and talk television and radio stations encourage differences rather than similarities.

Consequently, consumer-driven government is not diminishing, as Professor Guy suggests, so much as it is changing focus. It is true that consumer-driven government is no longer seen as an "instrument for achieving community purposes and for securing security and equity." It has become a way for organizations to control government for the purpose of addressing their demands and needs—not government's, expanding on Lowi's thesis in *The End of Liberalism*.

When government will not, or cannot, meet their demands and needs, organizations either force government to do so or reduce government and empower themselves. Government's role, consequently, is not so much to insure equity as it is to process demands and needs.

Empowerment

Reemphasizing the importance of local government, as discussed by Professor Guy, is a step in the right direction. When guided correctly, the public still believes in the redemptive power of government, though in a limited fashion. But, people contend that government has not been working for them lately. Increasingly, people tend to think that many, if not most, government policies do not have any purpose other than to meet the demands of a particular clientele group, normally at the expense of others.

Empowerment movements rise up not only from distrust in government, but also from the public's belief that political parties—historically the arbiter of societal demands—are not relevant. Parties and their candidates do not espouse and promote currently popular ideas. To get elected, ideas have degenerated into slogans. If an idea cannot be put on a bumper sticker, forget it. The result is that candidates' political lives become more engrossing than are issues.

This belief, in fact, has led to a widespread acceptance of empowerment movements—a "if you can't beat them, join them" mentality. Historically, empowerment movements have centered on organizations lacking political and/or economic power. Today, that focus has changed from focusing on recipients to centering on policies. For

instance, empowerment movements are developing to address perceived discrepancies in tax and education policies (e.g., elimination or reduction of property and income taxes and implementation of charter schools and educational vouchers). These empowerment movements have similar, if not identical, objectives—moving decisions away from elected officials and public administrators to newly developed structures. Simply put, the empowerment movement's fulcrum is public demands, and maybe needs, that are not being met by the "old" decisionmaking apparatus.

Understandable, And Growth Friendly

Public administration should promote public policies that are fair, understandable, and growth friendly. Policies, in other words, need to be grounded in societal preferences. It is reasonable to assume that policies should be based on such preferences; because governments are not "some organic or unitary being that acts independently of its citizens but rather as a means through which private citizens make decisions collectively (*Buchanan and Flowers, 1987: 8*). In practice, policies often seem to have a life of their own; possessing a capacity to make decisions independent of its citizenry. Nevertheless, states must consider societal preferences in order to continue to maintain legitimacy.

Currently, many societal organizations do not think that politicians are listening to them. For instance, a recent CNN TIME poll shows that a majority of Americans want campaign finance legislation. By a margin of 55 percent to 35 percent respondents said they wanted campaign finance legislation passed this year. And, despite President Clinton's attempt to portray Republicans as obstacles to reform, Americans trust the GOP more on this issue. Forty-seven percent of those surveyed had more confidence that the Republican would better handle campaign finance, while 29 percent felt that the Democrats would better handle campaign finance (*allpolitics.com/1997/09/29/poll*). This poll is but one example of government not meeting the wishes of a large number of organizations. There is hope, however. Polls also suggest that state and local governments are starting to seriously consider and implement the public's view of fairness.

The public wants policies that are understandable and comprehensible. They want policies that do not favor one group of individuals over another. A Rube Goldberg-type policy contraption upon

which many policies are built is no longer acceptable to most people. The citizenry wants the number of parts that can be manipulated by persons who can take advantage of the contraption to be eliminated or reduced. Clearly, most state and local policies reinforce the public's perception that some groups benefit more from government largesse than do others.

The public prefers policies that will stimulate economic growth. Many, if not most, citizens believe that none of the challenges confronting state governments today--crime, education, poverty, welfare, and racial tensions--can be addressed adequately without strong statewide economic growth. Then, too, while the unemployment rate is reasonably low at the current time, polls present a picture of Americans worried about the future and fear their children will be the first generation to have a lower standard of living than their parents will. Public policies, consequently, must also foster economic growth in order to furnish people with economic opportunities.

Governmental Diversity (Federalism)

As Professor Guy suggests, the future of public administration is predicated on the balance of the federal system. The "laboratories of democracy" theory has been resurrected to provide the nation with a greater degree of competition over power within the federal system. State and local government has emerged to challenge national supremacy, on a somewhat limited scale, with the full support and endorsement of the American people. Equilibrium is the cornerstone of the success of the federal system. Anytime either federal partner tilts the relationship to the point that the other side is ignored, the long-term health of the country is traumatized. Nonetheless, the national government has tallied some impressive victories in the later half of this century. Tom Clancy (1998), the author of several international best sellers, indicated the two remarkable accomplishments of America in the Twentieth Century: (1) the peaceful end of the Cold War and (2) the economic vitality of capitalistic democracy.

Since the Great Depression, the federal government has dominated the decision making process within the federal system. That national domination led to the successful implementation of racial integration policies and a leveling of the "playing field" concerning the ongoing competition between labor and management in the economy. Obviously,

the role played by national decision-makers influenced public administrators.

As Daniel Elazar (1972), Thomas Dye (1997), and others have suggested, federalism is an "ebb and flow" arrangement whereby experimentation can take place at the state and local levels before being implemented on the national level. From 1788 through the early part of this century, the federal system was dominated by very powerful state interests forcing national policy makers into a reactive mode and, ultimately, paving the way for the national government's inability to deal with economic "boom and bust" situations leading to the Great Depression.

The later part of this century, however, has seen a paradigmatic shift in the power structure away from Washington, D.C. to state and local governments, or to the people- represented by powerful interest groups. Today, with an ongoing hiring freeze in force for most federal agencies, employment opportunities for public administrators have now shifted to subnational levels of government.

The resurgence of the Republican Party, not only in Congress, but also in State Legislatures and in the majority of Governor's offices has signaled a significant shift in the public's view of efficacy. There is a decided public skepticism of government in America at all levels, but especially at the national level. This skepticism has given rise to powerful interest groups who appear to dominate the decision-making process nationally. The Republican Party is simply the recipient of that public skepticism in terms of political support for "less government" intervention at all levels. As the Republican Party calls for a return to the grassroots, the American public seems to be saying that maybe more government is not the solution! The economy is on a long-term positive climb not because of government, but because of government's absence.

Empowerment is a reflection of modern democracy—the development of organizations reflecting a public's opinions. If governmental power is co-opted by interest groups that have established a system favorable to their constituents, then the likelihood of those groups entertaining proposals to improve government efficiency and productivity is remote. Centralization or decentralization of government power at either the national or subnational levels of government is not relevant. What is relevant is the role given to public administration in the next century—to reflect the public's demands. Grassroots democracy, such as empower

movements, reflects a public disinterest with national decision-making and more support for policies and policy-makers closer to home. If public administration is going to find support in the next century, it must realize the seriousness of the public attitude that is moving away from national conformity. State and local innovation, creativity, and active participation in the decision-making process may ultimately mean the return of government to policies that reduce conflict and improve effectiveness.

Public administration could view the devolution of governmental power from the national government to subnational authorities as an opportunity to create an inclusive policy making system, rather than simply imposing the national government's will on a less than willing public. Eventually, the public need and demand for *across the board* guidelines, direction, and financial support will increase the power of national decision-makers. The significant long-term difference will be the active participation of state and local governments in the process rather than federal imposition.

Concluding Comment

Government's role—and, therefore, the role of public administration—is not so much to insure equity, as it is to promote civil and individual responsibility and tolerance of differing values. In this we agree with Professor Guy. Public administration, nonetheless, needs to be aware of the fact that societal differences will be the chief obstacle that must be overcome—perhaps, as suggested, by civic nutrition and sense of community.

Public administration of the future also must realize that empowerment is fostered not so much by a government that cares little about its residents, as it is that government is too big and too intrusive. "To twist a phrase" popularized during the 1992 presidential election, *its size, stupid*.

As mentioned by Professor Guy, Dwight Waldo's words should be taken to heart; we "must be flexible, take risks, and not give up." But, public administration needs to be aware that it will address the admonitions expressed in this paper with smaller government and more groups of interested individuals.

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