

# Rethinking Public Administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Today's Research and Tomorrow's Agenda

By Rumki Basu

## **New Perspectives**

As a young discipline whose history can be traced back to 1887, public administration has always drawn upon established and older disciplines like political science, law, economics, history, psychology and sociology. In more recent decades its identity has been further problematised by association with such subjects as management, and business studies. As a practical activity, it has often been caught in a political crossfire – of having to work with competing ideologies and changing political regimes. These cleavages, as they bear upon public administration, have found expression in two areas of study – the role and character of the state; and the nature of public bureaucracies.

We will begin with a discussion about some of the wider issues concerning the role of the state, with particular reference to public administration. What follows is an examination of the character of bureaucracy, the nature of administration and the idea of the public servant as they evolved or were “constructed” in the 20th century under different political regimes. This will include some of the engaging and perennial debates about the direction in which the subject should proceed to grow. It will be argued that, while there is a vocational dimension, public administration, must, if it is to enjoy any disciplinary relevance today, re-establish its roots in the social sciences.

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The boundaries between state and non-state institutions are more loosely drawn and their relationships are more complex than ever before. Over the last two decades this trend has gathered momentum, featuring governance through markets, through communities and through associations. Another important debate revolves around the supposed “hollowing” out of the state due to its diminished capacity to govern. The 20th century state underwent many transitions (from the laissez faire to the totalitarian) with various shades in between; but in every political system administrative capacity was the crucial variable in the performance of governments. Political will could transform administrative performances and public sector outcomes. The state is a source of empowerment for the citizen, for example in upholding human rights administering welfare or in dispensing other entitlements.

If we look at the new perspectives in administrative studies we will notice 3 universal concerns::

- Administrative coordination
- Administrative effectiveness
- Administrative accountability

We should attempt to locate the centrality of these issues even today in different public administrative contexts in both the developed and the developing world. A keen diagnostic sense of the new twists that fresh problems present in every generation is

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the key to recognizing the critical linkages between the past, present and the future. To give an example, understanding administrative effectiveness today must include the interconnectedness of the public, the private and the voluntary sectors and must incorporate new ways of making complex bureaucratic organizations more responsive to citizen needs.

## **Politics/ Administration Dichotomy – The Standard Narrative Revisited**

The politics-administration dichotomy is conventionally acknowledged as one of the most important and enduring theoretical constructs in public administration. Woodrow Wilson, who is universally acknowledged as the founder of the discipline of Public Administration, argued that administration is a “field of business” and lies far removed from the strife torn world of politics. Administrative questions, according to him are not “political” questions. Although politics sets the last mandate for administration, administrators should be apolitical and neutral in performing their tasks. Scholars in the field of public administration have since been debating whether Wilson vacillates between the two poles of thought regarding the “separability” and “inseparability” of administration from politics. Wilson's essay does not offer a blue print for a proper understanding of the politico-administrative relationship but it does point towards critical and interesting research realms for future scholars to explore. The real importance of the politics

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administration dichotomy has to do with its normative implications. In other words, the proposed principle is that elected officials have the legal right to make policy decisions, and it is the duty of career civil servants to carry out those policies in good faith.

The politics – administration dichotomy has since its inception, been a contested area of public administration. Democratic governments accord higher status to the elected politicians, whereas, in terms of the canons of democracy, the bureaucracy must be subject to the control of the ruling political party. The dilemma today is that the complexities of contemporary governmental operations increasingly permit and even require administrators to become involved in making “political” decisions, specially in the regulation of the private sector. The fact is that in reality there is no clear line of distinction between “administration” and “politics”, especially at higher levels of public governance. Administrators in the discharge of their administrative functions, have to exercise “discretion” and make “value” choices.

In this rapidly changing modern world the important question to ask is, how far this distinction should continue to be treated as sacrosanct today when the governance reality is the continuing “interlocking” of politics and administration. Is complementarity a necessity? It is important to appreciate the role of public administration in the “old” governance model as a basis for

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understanding the relationship between public administrators and a wider array of actors in the “new” governance patterns today.

Reconciling the tensions between creating adequate administrative capacity and ensuring that it is under firm democratic control exercised the minds of many scholars concerned with defining and understanding public administration in its formative years. At one end is the argument that “discretion” ought to be evaluated in the light of the need for autonomy efficiency and competence – in brief, the need for scientific and professional management. At the other end is the claim that discretion ought to be contextualized in terms of the need for subordination, democratic accountability and responsiveness, in short, democratic control. The chapter revisits the standard narrative with new suggestions.

## **New Public Management, Public Value and the New Public Service**

In the history of public administration, the subject has faced two intellectual thrusts from time to time – the empirical and the normative. The former emphasized on efforts to make the subject an applied science and a body of teachable knowledge. The normative thrust pulled it in the direction of social sciences and citizen centricity with democratic values at its core.

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Administration for “whom”, “what” and “how” became the central concerns of theory.

Contemporary public administration with an overemphasis on “market” and a relative de-emphasis of the state in the matter of production and supply of public goods and services has been described as “governance without government”. Within public administration, the most important reform movement since the 1980's has been the New Public Management (NPM). It symbolizes the transfer of market principles and management techniques from the private into the public sector symbiotic with and based on a neo-liberal understanding of state and the economy. It is popularly denoted by concepts such as flat hierarchies, customer orientation, contracting out and market based governance. The public manager is the main driver of change and there is an increasing focus on public accountability. NPM has been a driving force for reform globally and has tipped the balance between control and autonomy in favour of autonomy features. However some of the structural changes required under NPM was both politically and administratively difficult, so the development has been from simple integration (old public administration) through complex, fragmented and unbalanced complexity to integrated and more balanced complexity concerning political control and autonomy. NPM challenges the Weberian hierarchical model, in as much as it accentuates results, but seems to be careless about how they are

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to be achieved. NPM follows the managerial way of doing things, and that means it puts process above hierarchy. At the same time, the Weberian principles have shown unusual resilience. Predictability, accountability and legality derive from elements that form a part of the democratic governance paradigm. A range of weaknesses have emerged following almost two decades of experimentation with the idea of managerialist public administration. A new discourse of public management has emerged, which draws heavily on the work of Mark Moore. It signals a shift away from strong ideological positions of market, versus state provision. This is reflective of a growing recognition that public services have inherent social values which may not be adequately addressed by the economic efficiency calculus of markets. Moore asserts that the task of a public sector manager is to create “public value”.

As contrasted with NPM, a salient feature of the public value paradigm is its emphasis on “collective preferences” which distinguish it from the “individualist” focus of the NPM. Public value creation relies on the politically mediated expression of collectively determined preferences which stand for what the citizen determines as “valuable”. However a clear definition of “public value” remains somewhat elusive and many are concerned at the way Moore has sought to carve out an autonomous space for the public manager flouting the known

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canons of the politico-administrative equations required in a parliamentary system of governance.

Against this background, Robert and Janet Denhardt suggest a new role of governance today in the operation of governance processes. The government's central role in establishing the overall legal and political rules in society protecting economic interests and standing guarantee to the maintenance of the basic democratic processes and upholding public interests is re-emphasized. Government's role is visualized in terms of brokering interests among citizens and other groups so as to create shared values. Robert and Janet Denhardt claimed that the New Public Service (NPS) should be called a movement built on work in democratic citizenship, community and civil society, organizational humanism and discourse theory. The NPS seems overly concerned with the role and behaviour of the civil servant in administration. The primary role of the civil servant is conceived not in terms of controlling and steering society but in terms of helping the citizens to articulate and meet their shared interests. The civil servant is being exhorted to imbibe the canons of a new democratic administration. The NPS marks a bold attempt not only to counter the contemporary managerialist trend in NPM thinking but also to offer an important and viable alternative to both the traditional and the currently dominant managerialist models.



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Public administration theory in its over a hundred year history, has been building on ground realities and real life administrative situations. Theory without the ability to predict and understand the questions that most need answering, is not worth doing, theory relevant to 21st century age and times will be inevitably lively and relevant. The key to theoretical advances in the discipline of public administration is to keep one foot in the social sciences and the other in the ground realities and administrative practices of the age.

## **The Public and its Policies**

Policy formulation and execution is the main task of the executive arm of the government. Public policies are those which are developed by governmental bodies and officials, though non-governmental actors and agencies may also exert direct or indirect pressure or influence in the policy making process. Public policy is based on “law” and “authoritative” sanctions. However policy making is mostly a matter of “persuasion” and no policy can be successful unless policy makers carry people with them. That is commonly experienced in liberal democracies but even in authoritarian political systems where there are limits to coercive power. Not only is the practice of public policy implementation largely a matter of persuasion but “policy sciences” itself is a loosely organized body of precepts and approaches rather than a tightly integrated body of systematic knowledge, more art and craft than genuine “science”. Policy

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studies is distinguished by an action orientation. They are organized around questions of what we as a political community should do, rather than questions of what it should be. Policies are debated in many diverse institutional settings. Each operates according to a different set of rules, with a different agenda, and on different timelines, each responds to different set of pressures and urgencies, each has its own norms, language and professional ethos. Place, site and moment often obstruct the “persuasive” practice of the vocation of policy studies. Besides powerful structural and institutional forces pull policy makers in a particular direction which are often revealed in accounts of networked governance.

The discipline of public administration heralded its own beginning with the famous distinction between “policy” and “administration”. Policy makers aspire to “make policy” in a general rule setting way, envisioning administrators applying those general rules to particular cases in a minimally discretionary fashion. One aspect of this is the aspiration, or rather illusion of total central control. All the great management tools of the last century were marshaled in support of that project: linear programming, operations research, cost benefit analysis, management by objectives etc. It was soon discovered over the next hundred years that there is never any single, stable central authority that can be in complete control. It is a hard fact of political life that the notional “center” is always occupied

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by many competing authorities. Every bureaucrat whether on the street or in some branch office knows the difference between “planning” and “implementation”. However abandoning “planning” will not solve problems. Creating “managed markets” in the established capitalist democracies or “marketizing” economies of socialist countries don't always lead to desired outcomes. Fully “rational” policy making can never be achieved. At best, we “satisfice” – set some standard of what is “good enough” and connect ourselves with reaching that goal.

Politics and policy are both at the end of the day about “who gets what, when, how?” The story of policy is in part a story about constraints and also a story about change. Policies get made in response to problems. Policies change for all sorts of reasons. The problems change, the environments change, technologies change, alliances change, staff change and interests change as well.

Policy may be viewed either as a dependent or an independent variable, the attention is placed on the political and environmental factors that help determine the content of policy. For example, how do the distribution of power among pressure groups and governmental agencies affect the policy outcome, or how do urbanization and national income help shape the content of policy? If public policy is viewed as an independent variable, the focus shifts to the impact of policy on the political system and the environment. Then the question arises as to what effect

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policy has on social welfare? How does it influence future policy choices or mobilize support for the political system?

Secondly, factual knowledge about the policy making process and its outcome are a prerequisite for prescribing on and dealing with societal problems normatively. Many public administration theorists believe that the study of public policy should be directed towards ensuring that governments adopt appropriate policies to attain certain desirable social goals. They reject the notion that policy analysts should strive to be “value free” contending that public administration cannot remain politically neutral or silent on vital contemporary social, economic or political problems. They want to improve the quality of public policy in ways they deem desirable, notwithstanding the fact that substantial disagreement may exist in society over what constitutes “desirable” or the “appropriate” goals of policy. The chapter will examine all these problematic issues and their implications on policy choices in states.

## **Democracy, The State and the Citizen**

The ‘democracy concern’ in public administration takes cognizance of the fact that the roots of public administration lie in the primacy of “public interest” and the placing of the bureaucratic apparatus under the control of democratically elected leaders. Many procedural requirements as “open information”, “accountability” and “public participation” are

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deliberately added to the policy making and implementation process, all under the scrutiny of a fairly independent media. Second, democratization introduces mechanisms that serve as checks and balances in the ruling political regime in order to ensure the horizontal accountability of administrative organs. This includes certain basic mechanisms of accountability such as legislative committees, parliamentary debate, public hearings, ministerial control, ombudsman and media publicity. The contemporary NPM induced changes in governance (towards efficiency outcomes, competition, autonomy and customer orientation) – have had critical implications for democracy and the citizen.

Democracy has come to mean governmental accountability in terms of delivering goods and services, addressing public needs and demands maintaining neutrality and representation, ascertaining citizen entitlements and guaranteeing equality and justice. Thus under the current mode of governance the standards of public accountability have become instrumental in nature, specially in terms of an overemphasis on procedural economic criteria (e.g. efficiency and productivity) rather than substantive public concerns (e.g. equality and representation). With post NPM developments in theory, like the concept of New Public Service there is renewed focus on the people and the citizen in the role of “engaged” governance.

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In a democracy, citizen administration nexus is axiomatic. In reality, governments have become “big”, creating a hiatus between citizens and administration. These developments have not been healthy for a democracy. Citizens have been losing faith in government which cuts at the very root of “democratic legitimacy”. Against this there is now a renewed call for public participation in governance. The public are being asked to play an important role in public policy making, implementing and evaluation of public services.

The “governance” paradigm opens up opportunities for citizen and civil society groups to partner with government and co-produce many of the public services. Public administration scholars and practitioners must engage the public in governance, move their research and teaching agendas in a direction that supports these new governance processes to address the fundamental imperatives of democracy. Various modes of engaged governance, e-governance, citizen's charters, public service guarantee acts, Right to Information are all citizen empowering as never before. There have been attempts to empower citizens through access to information technologies and better accountability for service delivery.

We have focused largely on democratic institutions in recent years, but far less on the understanding of basic state capacity, the absence of which often undermines democracy. Do democracies comparatively work better to ensure improved public

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delivery systems in the long run? Do public powers in democracies necessarily match human welfare and better service delivery outcomes? Is democratic governance good for economic prosperity translated into concrete citizen entitlements?

The challenge for democracies is therefore not simply to strengthen downward electoral accountability so that vote seeking politicians have an incentive to pay attention to citizen needs. It is in this context, therefore that we need to understand why public governance systems need to be endowed with the performance skills and capacity, technical knowhow and capital to enable elected leadership to deliver things most citizens want—food, education, basic healthcare, civic services, and sustainable livelihoods. Recognizing the need for both democracy and good governance, the challenge for the world's democracies is to reinvent their public service delivery systems so that citizens are ensured of a minimal level of human security.

## **Ethics and Accountability in governance**

In the interest of 'publicness' of public administration, ethical concerns occupy centre stage. Besides bureaucratic and political corruption and declining standards of public life, obsessive private sector concerns (e.g. profit, efficiency and cost cutting) may also lead to alarming ethical deficits in contemporary governance. It raises questions about the costs of misconduct on the part of those who have been entrusted with safeguarding the

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public interest, public property and public funds. There is a worldwide movement to restore the trust and integrity of public institutions and public officials, to safeguard democracy and promote better governance.

Good governance is an ethical concept, at the centre of which lies, – how can we make society better or worse for citizens? Society needs to promote and support a new philosophy to minimize divisiveness among groups and guard against the perilous tendencies of social fragmentation. Power as “service” has to be promoted relentlessly amidst social change to build citizen confidence. In our age government administrators are wrestling with old as well as new problems. The interconnections among the public, private and non-profit sector are unprecedented. Equally intractable are the challenges of globalization. Faced with these tough challenges the solutions they are finding offer valuable clues for the future of public administration research. The state is still considered to be the main facilitator to solve collective problems such as globalization, technological change, shifting demographics and environmental threats. Despite legitimacy issues, the role and need for representative democracy has not suffered major erosion. The same holds for the role and perception of the civil service and the traditional Weberian elements. Then what are the new ethical elements? e.g. there has been a shift from an internal orientation towards bureaucratic rules to an external orientation towards



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meeting citizen wishes and entitlements. New devices have been introduced to improve the role of representative democracy, and public accountability. In the management of governmental resources, modernization of laws, downsizing, tax reduction and privatization programmes have been designed to achieve efficiencies (new ethics). More emphasis on results and performance is being stressed e.g. in a shift in the balance from ex-ante to ex-post controls, although the former have certainly not been completely abandoned. Some of these changes are more concerned with "citizen centric" ethics than with initiating private sector practices. Quite often the "old" methods of steering (legal rules and hierarchy) are being weakened before the "new" managerial functions (economic incentivisation based). NPM does not function better in countries with serious democratic deficits like poor work ethics and corruption. The current discipline of Public Administration accords importance to the values of equity, justice, humanism, human rights, gender equality and compassion. "Good governance", initiated by the World Bank in 1992, laid stress inter alia on the ethical and moral conduct of administrators while the New Public Management movement is more concerned with administrative effectiveness. The New Public Service focuses on administrative ethics in its broader manifestation. Both the movements are destined to co-exist. It is a truism that the crux of administrative morality is ethical decision making. Fairness and objectivity are integral components of administrative justice.

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How is the administrative ethics of the 21st century likely to be different from the 20th century? There is an increasing convergence of ethical concerns at the global level. Globalization of the economic order has already paved the way for the globalization of governance issues. The signing of the Millennium Development Goals at the UN by 189 countries at the dawn of the 21st century and the Sustainable Development Goals later is an indication that there now exists a global consensus on what should be a Minimum Agenda of Good Governance. A new 'ethical' contract has now been signed by UN and member states which signifies a new way of looking at the state and the citizen. With the gradual dissolving of huge chasms among nations in the realms of goals of governance, the ethical concerns are likely to transcend state boundaries. These reflect the "classical" ethical concerns of the discipline like efficiency, responsibility, accountability and integrity along with the crucial values of equity, justice, openness, compassion, human rights and dignity. This chapter will explore the new ethical concerns of our age with the witnessing of a "new citizenship" committed to bringing about a "new administrative morality."

## **Governing development in the developing world: Comparative Research Studies**

During the last 50 years, many developing countries experienced societal transformation and profound changes in their socio-economic and political systems through the processes of what

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came to be known as “development administration.” Most developmental policies in these countries have eventually come to be translated into action through the bureaucracy at all levels of their formulation, implementation and evaluation. In some cases the bureaucracy proved an asset and pillar of strength to the post-colonial governments struggling with different models of nation building and economic growth. At other times, the bureaucracies became a hindrance to change and development alienating themselves from both progressive governments and the aspirations of the public “Governing” development in the developing world spawned study and research on diverse and inter-related subjects as: (a) comparative public administration (b) studies on bureaucracy in regime transformations (c) changing politico-administrative relationships (d) studies on development administration. Each of these dimensions have received a fair share of understanding and interpretation of the ground realities. Formulation of new paradigms for further study and research, not only in individual national settings but also in cross national contexts was encouraged.

In the 1960s Fred Riggs had attempted to provide an “ecological paradigm” as a linkage between comparative and development administration. His concept of transitional societies as depicting the features of a prismatic society was characteristic of the milieu of developing countries. A few years later, Ferrel Heady offered another general basis of comparative administration by relating

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administrative systems to independent controlling factors in terms of the political characteristics of the regimes. An ongoing issue in the sub-fields of comparative public administration and development administration has been to try to strike a balance between the two competing tendencies of “universalism” versus “parochialism”. Thus the urge to generalize by making comparisons that are as inclusive as possible and by searching for administrative knowledge that transcends national or regional boundaries is inspired by the desire to search for a “science” of administration. Advocates of the parochial model believe that administrative structures and procedures developed domestically should be given higher values and priority over those derived from outside. The assumption is that administrative characteristics vary from one national or cultural setting to another, making borrowing risky and unnecessary.

A brief analysis of some research projects using historical, case study and empirical comparative methodology illustrates in a capsule form the kind of directions and models used and the successes achieved by scholars in interpreting and understanding administrative reality in developing countries. However the body of knowledge that emerges from these research experiences is that these are hardly able to sustain and may not be conducive to the development of administrative theory. However these researches enable comparative studies of public administration in order to develop a set of hypotheses for testing

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some of the broader aspects of administrative phenomena in particular set-ups. Much of this type of work is likely to lead to studies of bureaucratic behaviour and comparative public policy. However knowledge about administrative realities in developing societies has largely remained sparse and sporadic. For one thing, the element of ethnocentrism that generally crept in such researches have tended to make these findings parochial, localized and of limited application.

Three fourths of the world today has self-professed democratic regimes with different models of development (mix of the public and the private). Governing development in the developing world is the biggest challenge for Public Administration. Theories have to inform practice. The subject has to remain relevant to the needs of the ground realities of member states. The chapter emphasizes on the need for reviving comparative research studies as the only authentic way to “build theories” in Public Administration.

## **Challenges and dilemmas of Public Administration in the 21st century**

Governments in every country today – both in developed and the developing, are facing increasing challenges from changing domestic situations and rapid changes in global politics. Governments need to handle poverty, unemployment, disease and environmental degradation at home while readjusting their

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policies to the global economy Managing the public sector is also a challenge for policy makers, service delivery managers and civil servants since citizens are no longer ready to remain passive “consumers” of Government services. Over the 20th century, the role of the state in economic and social spheres has changed: from the march of the ‘administrative’ state to the conception of a ‘minimalist’ one in the 1980s, a new understanding of the respective spheres of the state and the market needs to be debated in the public domain before deciding on what should be the role of the state today.

Public Administration as a growing discipline has reasons for both optimism and anxiety. The optimists in its 100 year evolution, sense enough potential for the gradual evolution of a robust discipline. The pessimists believe its theoretical development remains stunted, its distinct identity continually threatened. Amidst this tenure of uncertainty the only way forward is to creatively look at social changes and usher in new theories as explanatory tools for explaining the administrative phenomena in the years to come.

Administration is changing and will change with transitions and transformation in world societies, economy and politics. Complex organizations will need to be administered; states require to be governed democratically and with more accountability to the public. Democracies need good governance and new understandings will need to be forged between the state and the

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citizen. New “autonomies” and new “boundaries” will need to be redefined in changing contexts. “Official” secrets cannot be cited for “official” lapses in this Information Age. Communist totalitarian systems have opened up and become mixed economies, capitalist democracies have brought in more government and public sector, military rulers have given up power to civilian rulers and old “procedural” democracies like India are attempting to become more “substantivist”. The meanings of democracy and development have become more “human development oriented” and therefore “inclusive”, public administration today has become more “public” in its mandate and dealings than ever before.

Therefore I will conclude by saying that “rethinking” Public Administration to meet the challenges of the 21st century is an absolute imperative. Today's research and tomorrow's agenda will be set by the challenges and dilemmas of our age and time and beyond.