

**Submission to Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Strengthening Government and Accountability in Victoria**

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Preamble

This inquiry is a valuable and timely measure to arrest the increasing cynicism and disengagement of the populace (and I use this term to mean that democracy is about more than voting) about political processes.

The most frequent measures recommended for assuring accountability are requirements for Ministers to explain themselves, reviews of performance, and the threat of severe consequences if they or their departments do not adequately acquit themselves in these regards.

Therefore my submission asks the Committee to consider a concept rather than a substantive matter of reform. It is devoted to opening up the question in what I hope will be useful ways rather than providing answers, although some modest ones might be forthcoming.

The problem

A concern of mine is that the notion of “accountability or ‘responsibility is most often operationalised as a series of sanctions or negative consequences.

It is governed primarily by institutional restrictions or legislative/regulatory constraints.

Behind this is an assumption that the political transgressions of corruption, conflicts of interest, failures to act when action is needed and self-serving filibustering, spin and “porkies” are problems of moral turpitude on the part of the Parliamentarian, or regulatory failure on the part of Parliament or both.

“Moral turpitude” has as its base the idea that all people are “naturally” bad, and given half a chance will act badly unless restrained. This picture of human nature has very deep roots and can be found in literature from the Old Testament, where a furious God works to keep a childlike flock in line, to George Lakoff’s influential little book on politics and metaphor, “Don’t think of an Elephant” (2004) in which he describes a ‘stern Father’ regime, that also has as its object the keeping in line of “children” who are morally irresponsible and inclined to badness.

“Regulatory Failure” is also built on a similar notion – that error and dishonesty are some how hallmarks of “human nature” and that parliament must therefore act as the “stern father” and set up rules and sanctions to bring the flock into line.

Both the idea that moral turpitude is the natural condition of human kind, and the idea that regulatory action is required to manage it, lead to the consequence that the process of changing behaviour is by constraining action and inspecting it frequently and not expecting too much in the way of internal motivation.

If the assumption is that people are ‘naturally’ bad, then the corollary is that they cannot be trusted to manage themselves.

An exploration of common philosophical approaches which utilise this form of thinking in modern politics can be found in Lebow (2005 – citation details and link below)

‘Accountability’ has at its heart the notion of some person or people outside the system or processes, inspecting it in some form. “Measurement”, “review” “goal setting” and meeting the goals, “performance appraisal”, and so on are all designed to render practices and performance visible for inspection. (see also Lebow 2005)

However I would argue that the “framing” of the problem of how to ensure good actions and behaviour is very important. If it is framed in these negative terms the ‘answers’ will also be in these terms.

The point of highlighting these hidden assumptions above is to show how once conceived in a particular way the consequences and actions that flow from the original idea stay within its logic. (Diverse writers have addressed the issue of how framing alters understanding. See Weick 1996; Gare (1996); Flyvbjerg 2001; Law, 2004.)

The alternative

Fortunately, alternatives can be found to the regulatory /moral framework by considering the problem in other ways - as psychological, educational, social, or all three.

A psychological approach for instance understands people to be multiply motivated and relatively complex. It assumes there is more than one key to changing behaviour. It asks questions like

- “How do people tick?
- What sorts of different people are there and how to they typically respond?
- How do people approach change?
- What sorts of activities and thinking motivate people?

An educational approach makes the assumption that people are essentially plastic in their knowledge, beliefs and behaviour and seeks to mould them in desired directions.

Using this framework, questions arise such as

- What sorts of activities change behaviours and attitudes?
- When are the best and most successful interventions made?
- How do people show they have understood and learned?

An approach I am, for the sake of this argument, dubbing “social’ gives rise to such questions as

- How do interactions with others make a difference to behaviour?
- What sort of “cultural” expectations and informal sanctions are acting on people?

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- What sort of meaning do people impute to their dealings with others
- How do the two sets of expectations and meanings; those of the “actor” and those of the social milieu that the actor is in; operate together?

This approach to considering what ways are available to think about changing behaviours and “cultures” therefore opens up possibilities for more types of action to curb excesses than can be considered by taking a purely regulatory or sanction based approach.

Actions

The question then of how to canvass the options is quite a large one. I will not attempt to cover all the options here, as I think opening up the question for consideration is probably the most useful thing a short submission like this can do.

However, a very brief consideration of some options is to implement changes that are:

1. Structural
 2. Educational
 3. Cultural
 4. Reward based
1. Structural approaches to creating positive incentives for “good” behaviour might include
 1. Considering what disincentives there are in a parliamentary setting or in politics for behaving in a trustworthy and honest manner, and acting to enhance transparency and accountability.
 2. Creating a positive organisational climate through leadership and changes to organisational structure and culture. Reshaping institutions so that “rewards” for bad behaviour (like access to power) are removed or reduced, and institutions themselves not only do not impede, but facilitate behaving with integrity. There has been a recent upsurge of interest in this area of research from such organisations as the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan.
<http://www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/Center-for-POS/>
 2. Educational assistance could include
 - Induction covering personal and political ethics, clarity of proper process, and social and political responsibility
 - Ongoing professional development on the same issues.
 - Considering informal educational opportunities, like mentoring.
 3. Cultural reorientation could include
 - Creating a climate where co-operation is as possible and as valued as combative adversariality.

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- Reshaping the goals away from ‘winning’ to “best method of problem solving” – which should include canvassing issues as widely as possible – across political opponents and within the general population using the principles of deliberative democracy
- Encouraging group valuing of attributes of ‘character’ (some of the “old” ones like duty, honesty, dedication to public good etc) not simply relying on external constraints. Integrity is also valued and treated not as a liability but favourably.
- Being available for media, interest groups and lobbyists in ways that encourage open public debate.
- Constructing sets of characteristics of good parliamentary and political behaviour (see Anderson & Dovey 2003)

4. Rewards.

These need to be treated with some caution as they have the capacity for distorting the process they are designed to assist, as do most ways of measuring success. However this may be less of a problem if “rewards” are built around celebrating people or groups who are effective in maintaining personal and parliamentary integrity.

Conclusion

I would suggest that the ideas here be taken in concert with those proposed by the Australian Society for the Study of Parliament Working Group’s discussion paper entitled ‘Renewing Accountable Government’.

Clearly this submission is insufficient to suggest the sorts of answers upon which action can be directly taken, however if in the search for improvements, this framework of thinking is adopted, the choices of strategies will be considerably broadened, to the benefit of both Parliament and the State. Further more in taking the initiative to implement some of this thinking, Victorian Parliament may then place itself at the forefront of innovative Parliaments.

Bibliography

Anderson, Bruce and Lynne Dovey ‘2003. *Whither Accountability?* Working Paper 18. NZ State Services Commission, September 2003. ISBN 0-478-24435-5. <http://www.ssc.govt.nz/display/document.asp?NavID=117&DocID=3553> (Discusses alternative methods of accountability for Parliament. One of a very few papers which do)

CENTER FOR POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP *The Essence of Positive Organizational Scholarship: Unlocking the Generative Capabilities in Human Communities*

<http://www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/PDF/POS%20Essence.pdf>

(and see also the work of Martin Seligman)