

# HAVE WE FORGOTTEN WHAT ACCOUNTABILITY MEANS?

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Aston Hall Psychiatric Hospital in Derbyshire, Grenfell Tower in Kensington, Mid-Staffordshire, Hillsborough, Rotherham social care, even calls to impeach Trump. What all these have in common is widespread demands for somebody, some organisation, or some system to be held to account for something.

These are also all calls for retrospective accountability. They result from failure to put into place adequate mechanisms for holding people to account either in advance or contemporaneously.

As Marcus Shephard from the Institute for Government implied in the May/June edition of this journal accountability is a funny thing, a bit of a chimera. We all tend to agree that it is important, and yet, what exactly we mean by accountability is much harder to define.

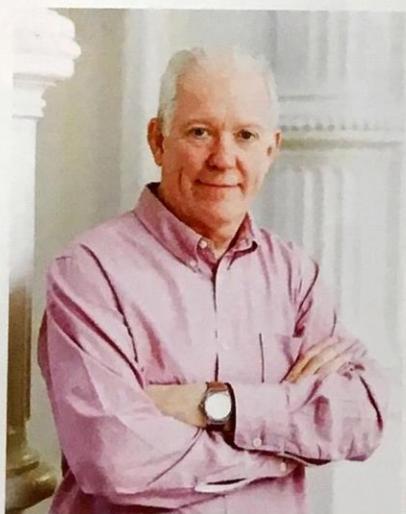
Historically, accountability arose out of the need to provide an account to someone with a legitimate interest formalised through the practice of bookkeeping. However, accountability has developed a wider political and cultural significance beyond these financial origins and, these days can legitimately be considered a cultural phenomenon.

There is, also general agreement that public service accountability should be distinctive because public services are services funded by public money, delivered to and for the public; thus, the highest standards are often expected.

Democracy is often heralded as a vital component of accountability. Central and local government have a direct democratic interface; for others, the lack of this interface is sometimes considered as a problem – a ‘democratic deficit’. Control of expenditure and the political will to prioritise services are essential. But public service accountability requires more than a democratic interface and control of expenditure. Elections every three or five years are too crude an instrument to hold public services to account.

Sometimes the public sector is referred to as if it were a single, homogenous block, often when compared with the private sector. It may be that more divergence exists within the public sector than between the public and private sectors. Yet, some processes and characteristics are little different. What constitutes effective leadership; good management; evaluation of performance or sound financial expenditure, may have a high degree of similarity between organizations, services, or sectors. The public sector, however, is distinctive in many ways. But, far too often, the private sector operating model is promulgated as the ideal.

This is the ethos behind a set of ideas, originally from the USA, that came to be known as New Public Management: that users are customers and the imposition of modern competitive business practices is the best way to encourage improvement in public service delivery. This approach to public services found favour under



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Margaret Thatcher's administrations and is increasingly influential in today's government. Put simply: the market will deliver improvements in both services and accountability.

This ethos is overly simplistic. If you are unhappy with your local supermarket, there are several others that would be happy to accept your custom. You may not even have to travel far to find an alternative. Indeed, you do not have to limit yourself to one supermarket – you can do your shopping in as many as you choose, either in physical shops or online. And if something isn't right, a complaint will usually secure you a replacement, refund, or in some cases, compensation for the inconvenience or disruption. This ethos leads people to see accountability as equivalent to satisfaction with a transaction.

Whilst some excellent private sector services have delivered innovations and improvements in transactional public services, the vast majority of public services are not like supermarket shopping or a restaurant meal. Simplistic accountability mechanisms that treat private and public sectors as being the same do both a disservice. Carillion and the G4S stewardship of probation show

private sector practices as anything but accountable.

Our book re-examines the concepts and foundations of public service accountability and provides an examination of four public service areas, where local delivery is the norm; local government, health and social care, the police, and fire and rescue services. Three of these public service sectors were actually less able to understand and demonstrate public assurance and value for money in 2015 than they were in 2010. They were less accountable to the public. The risks to achieving value for money had risen at the same time, as public services were having to weather significant budget cuts and increased service pressures.

They were less accountable because the systems and parameters to hold them to account were undermined by government action and government inaction.

What do governments do, when time and again they are assailed by calls for greater accountability resulting from the types of incidents in our opening chapter?

They try to manage the debate, narrow the focus and limit the impact – particularly when they know or suspect that they, as

government, are ultimately responsible for the system under which these incidents have flourished and that they have been less than vigilant if not irresponsibly ignoring the same issues or problems. Recent governments in the UK have been playing mealy-mouthed lip service to accountability.

We therefore suggest an evaluative model to help public services better understand the different approaches to developing the more complex systems of accountability needed today. These need to take account of accountability to individuals, organisations and governments as well as to communities. We need to examine the mechanisms for setting up accountability frameworks in the future, as well as more traditional forms of evaluating historical performance.

Our book shows how accountability for delivering local public services has been significantly reduced when it should have been strengthened. We do not claim to know all the answers – we just know that it is high time to rekindle the debate.

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