



# Rethink, reframe and reinvent: serving in the twenty-first century

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## Abstract

In 2006 I had the honour of giving the Fifth Braibant Lecture for the International Institute of Administrative Sciences. That discussion identified a need to rethink public administration. In reality, this is only a small part of the rethinking needed to prepare government and society for the challenges of the twenty-first century. There is a need to rethink the architecture and functioning of the social, economic and political state; for instance, to critically examine the assumption that innovation, productivity, employment and income growth work synergistically together. A clear-eyed diagnostic of the benefits of global trade and the costs of local dislocation is long overdue if government is to mitigate its impact for the most vulnerable in society and alleviate public fears about the future. There is also a need to articulate in contemporary terms what conditions contribute to the governance of open, pluralistic and democratic societies. Responding to challenging emerging trends will require reconciling in new ways individual interests with ambitious collective aspirations, rediscovering the irreplaceable contribution of the state and articulating a concept of that state adapted to serving in the twenty-first century. This is neither an overbearing nor a minimalist state but one with sufficient confidence in its role to serve the collective interest. This article is an invitation to rethink the modern state, reframe our expectations for a well-performing society and economy, and reinvent in contemporary terms what it means to be part of a modern, liberal, pluralistic and democratic society.

## Keywords

administration and democracy, citizen participation, public administration, public enterprise

## Introduction

Serving in the twenty-first century may not be more difficult in absolute terms than before; it is different. As a result, new ways of thinking and governing are needed to

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face the challenges that stem from living in an increasingly global, interdependent, hyperconnected and disorderly world where the life support for a soon to be nine billion people (United Nations, 2017) depends on a fragile biosphere. We are witnessing the breakdown of several beliefs about what has worked in the past and the end of assumptions supporting key public policies. This is a time for a profound rethinking about what it may mean to govern a modern democratic society in the future.

In 2006 I had the honour of giving the Fifth Braibant Lecture for the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (Bourgon, 2007). That discussion identified a need for a new 'unifying theory for public administration' and sketched its initial building blocks. Subsequent work developed in an international collaboration with practitioners and academics focused on fulfilling this mandate and developing a conceptual framework to expand the range of options open to government and bring coherence to public sector problem solving and decision-making (Bourgon, 2011). While the Braibant lecture called for a rethinking of public administration, in reality this is only a small part of the rethinking needed to prepare government and society for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

There is a need to rethink the architecture and functioning of the social, economic and political state (Follett, 1998); for instance, to critically examine the functioning of a market economy and the underlying assumption that innovation, productivity, growth, employment and income growth work synergistically together. The evidence of the last 20 years points in the opposite direction. There is a need and an opportunity to reconceptualize the mix of policy instruments to encourage distributed growth and shared prosperity. A clear-eyed diagnostic of the overall benefits of global trade and of the local dislocation that the process entails is long overdue. This is needed to conceptualize measures to improve the absorptive capacity of communities and mitigate the impact for the most vulnerable in society. It is also needed to alleviate public fears about the future and the capacity of government to guide society.

There is a need to articulate in contemporary terms what conditions contribute to building modern societies and the governance of open, pluralistic and democratic societies. Challenging trends are emerging that will affect future models of governance. The role of politics in building democratic societies is changing. Responding to these challenges will require reconciling in new ways the promotion of individual interests with the pursuit of ambitious collective aspirations, to rediscover the irreplaceable contribution of the state to a well-performing society and economy and articulate a concept of that state adapted to serving in the twenty-first century. This is neither an overbearing nor a minimalist state but one with sufficient confidence in its role to use the levers of the state to serve the collective interest.

In the public realm, there are increasing signs of concern about the current state of affairs. Public dissatisfaction and declining respect for public institutions is changing the political landscape and the political discourse. It is generating circumstances that can be used to roll back hard-earned rights and liberties. Public dissatisfaction can sometimes lead to progress; it can be channelled to

bring about needed change given existing institutional capacity, a reservoir of civic will for collective action and skilful political stewardship. However, fear and anxiety are rarely a source of progress. The same circumstances may unleash a disastrous sequence of events when enabling conditions are lacking. Rising tensions were most notable during the Brexit referendum in the UK and in the 2016 US presidential campaign. Similar phenomena are present in several other countries.

Some ideas are too narrow to embrace the current reality, too inward looking to extract meaning from emerging trends and too tentative to steer society through an unprecedented process of change. The need for a different way of thinking is great, but it remains an open question whether modern democratic societies will have the wherewithal to reinvent in a timely way their approach to governing.

Ideas and principles matter. The way one thinks has a direct impact on the solutions that will be found and the results that will be achieved. This article does not propose an answer; it simply adds a voice to others who argue there is a growing need for important conversations. This article is an invitation to *rethink* the modern state, *reframe* our expectations for a well-performing society and economy, and *reinvent* in contemporary terms what it means to be part of a modern, liberal, pluralistic and democratic society. The rethinking needed is profound. Building a democratic society is a collective enterprise.

## Rethinking economic theories

Economics and politics are never far apart. One expectation of governments is that their actions will contribute to improving the well-being of society and the quality of life of their citizens. The evidence about the need to reinvent economics has been abundant for a long time but overwhelming since the 2008 financial crisis (Stiglitz, 2015, 2016). With all the advances in economics, why do governments do so poorly at managing the economy? Why did no one see the financial crisis coming? Why was so little done to prevent it and mitigate the impact for the most vulnerable in society?

The financial crisis exposed fundamental weaknesses in the functioning of the global financial system. Many countries undertook financial liberalization in the 1970s and 1980s and there has since been a marked increase in the frequency of banking crises (Reinhart and Rogoff, 2008). The financial crisis revealed the weaknesses of prevailing concepts and resistance to the change necessary to prevent similar problems from reoccurring. When the defence of ideas resists mounting evidence about their deficiencies, they become ideological and stop being useful in shaping public policy.

Repeated policy failures signal that all is not well with the underlying assumptions that have guided economic policy decisions. Policy failures are failures of concepts. Repeated failures using a similar approach in a diversity of countries are not indicative of implementation difficulties; they reveal that the conceptual framework needs to be rethought. In such circumstances, repeating the same approach is irresponsible and is not challenging basic assumptions despite mounting evidence

that it is ideological. As mentioned by Stiglitz, ‘the world has paid a high price for this devotion to the religion of market fundamentalism’ (Stiglitz, 2016). Several economic assumptions have been discredited in practice.

### *Inequality and democracy*

One of the striking features of the past four decades is that, even when growth has been strong, the majority of households have not seen commensurate increases in their real incomes (OECD, 2015). During the period from 1985 to 2013, the Gini coefficient measuring income inequality increased in 17 OECD countries and wealth inequality grew even more (Jacobs and Mazzucato, 2016). In the last decade, income inequality grew even in traditionally more egalitarian countries such as Germany, Sweden and Denmark (OECD, 2011).

The conventional view was that technological advances work alongside wage increases; this has not been the case in practice (OECD, 2011). Recently, median wages have stopped matching productivity gains. The reality is that a small fraction of people capture an increasing portion of the benefits of growth. People worry that the economy does not work for them. In the past three decades, wages have grown much less than productivity. This fact is difficult to reconcile with the claims of marginal productivity theory.

Today we know that economic growth is not a ‘rising tide that lifts all boats’. It does not inevitably bring increasing wealth and higher standards of living for all, and the benefits of growth unevenly distributed do not necessarily ‘trickle down’ to the rest of the population. The trend toward greater equality of incomes, which characterized the post-war period, has been reversed and inequality has been rising. Past theories need rethinking.

For many years, people were told to work hard, get the right skills and play by the rules to move ahead and achieve middle-class status. Quoting Thomas Freidman (2013), ‘this is just not true anymore’. Inequality has several economic, social and political implications. It weakens demand and therefore kills jobs. It weakens the fabric of society in ways that must be considered in the redesign of redistributive policies. Rising inequalities have serious implications for the well-being of future generations and for democracy.

The theory of democratic equality among citizens is under pressure. Some voting systems give more weight to the vote of some citizens than others. This is frequently the case in first-past-the-post systems that give greater weight to rural constituencies than urban ones. These difficulties can be overcome. There are more serious challenges.

The principle of democratic equality is also being challenged by court decisions that give corporate citizens the same ‘inalienable’ rights as individual citizens. De facto, this means that money plays a more significant role in the financing of electoral campaigns and the capacity of individuals to run for office. This gives more capacity to the wealthiest to influence the political agenda and enhances the capacity of corporate citizens to influence the electoral process.

Increasing income and wealth inequality compounds these problems. The question is: what can or should be done to preserve democratic equality? At what point does a democratic society become a democracy only in name? At what point does rising inequality of influence undermine the capacity of a governing system to remain democratic? Rising inequalities are not unavoidable but they require rethinking the principles governing the economic sphere and the interface between the social, political and civic spheres (Merkel, 2014).

Colin Crouch (2004) has described post-democracy as a society where the forms of democracy continue, including the rule of law, but where civil society is too weak to challenge corporate interests in influencing government. What does it mean to be a democracy, if citizens have no say over the issues they care about most? This is the case when people have no say over the way their economic union is run (Stiglitz, 2016), or over trade agreements that affect their livelihood. Having a say is not the same as having a vote. This is not an argument in favour of direct democracy or blunt instruments like referendums, but a recognition of the need for meaningful involvement of citizens to build the capacity for collective action.

### *Reframing the conversation about globalization*

Globalization and supporting economic and trade agreements give rise to serious questions about how to preserve the capacity of governments to generate the public goods that their citizens value. The key concern is that these agreements will ultimately serve corporate interests, the collective interest or both.

At the macro level, the beneficial results generated by opening markets and the positive impact of some international agreements are demonstrable. The problem is that people do not live their life at this macro level, but in their community. What matters to them is the local level, the firms that provide them with employment opportunities and their capacity to make a living and ensure the well-being of their children.

In several cases, the benefits of economic and trade agreements have been exaggerated and the impact on specific sectors and communities underestimated. People feel that they have been misled about the transition costs and the need for adjustments. The difficulties of the coal or agriculture sectors in the USA, automotive or meat industries in Europe and dairy or energy sectors in Canada are only too real for people losing their source of livelihood. Macroeconomic indicators do not pay the bills or put food on the table.

Economic and trade agreements are extremely complex and difficult to explain to the public. That said, a democratic society cannot be built by arguing that a matter is too complex to be discussed publicly, or by encouraging ignorance or distorting facts.

There is no denying that the dislocation brought about by the combined effect of globalization and the digital revolution has been significant for some sectors. Disruptive changes have outpaced the absorptive capacity of society in some

regions and sectors. Acknowledging the need for adjustments is not a sign of weakness but a necessary step for gaining public support to provide the assistance needed by fellow citizens in periods of rapid transformation. It is also needed to sustain public confidence in the capacity of government to steer society through a period of rapid change.

The rhetoric that economic globalization is always beneficial and ultimately serves all people's interests needs to be reframed to display a greater sensitivity to the need for adjustment and the capacity of society to adapt.

This raises important questions about how to reap the benefit of an open and global economy while preserving the institutional and civic capacity to build a society of people's choosing. Economic globalization is unlikely to succeed if it outpaces the absorptive capacity of society and without collective solidarity for those living through a rapid period of transformation.

Ideas and beliefs matter for political and societal projects. It is not enough to have faith in markets. A successful economy requires an understanding of the limitations of markets and what is required to make them work. It is not enough to have faith in the state for building a well-performing society. An understanding of the unique contribution of state, market and citizens themselves is needed to reinvent the interrelationships that will best serve society in the future.

## **Rethinking democratic principles**

Rethinking implies that the way one thinks and frames an issue transforms the approach that will be taken, the actions that will be needed and the results that will be achieved. The way we think of democracy transforms what it means to make it work and defines the potential for acting collectively and for collective problem solving.

For some, democracy is a contest among interest groups mediated by formal rules among elites or a pluralist system (Dahl, 2005). For others, democracy is a deliberation process (Fung and Wright, 2011). While important dimensions, they both miss that democracy is not limited to authorizing a government to act, but it is 'acting with it and beyond it' (Briggs, 2008). From this perspective, democracy is the task of changing the state of the world. It is a collective effort that engages the shared responsibility of government, citizens and all agents in society (Bourgon, 2011). The collective capacity for problem solving makes democracy work. Democracy is more than the capacity to deliberate or to set directions for government. Democracy is about changing the state of the world through collective action.

Xavier de Souza Briggs (2008) reminds us that collective action does not mean a consensual or conflict-free approach to problem solving but rather the capacity to agree enough to make progress in some areas, while disagreeing in others. Mediating conflicting views is an important civic capacity.

A democratic society provides citizens with a sense of belonging but more importantly, it is recognized by the capacity of citizens to act collectively.

This requires both the collective will to act and the civic capacity to act. These capabilities are resources that can be deployed to solve collective problems. Civic capabilities are built day by day – they are developed or destroyed by the way societies are governed or the way we live our civil life. This brings to the fore important questions – are we governed in ways that build the collective capacity for problem solving? As citizens, are we acting in ways that build or erode democracy?

Freedom House found that ‘Freedom in the World’ has consistently declined in each of the past 10 years (Fung and Wright, 2011). This is the longest continuous decline in four decades. In 2015, 72 nations recorded a decline in freedoms, while 43 made progress.

The retreat of democracy is not limited to developing countries. Until recently, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia were considered success stories. The expectation was that they would join older democracies of Western Europe as well developed democratic societies. They have since seen serious erosion and a limiting of civic rights. In other parts of the world, the military restored its power as the central actor by dominating civilian governments. This is the case in Thailand, Niger, Honduras and Pakistan (Kurlantzick, 2013).

What should we learn from this? And what are the implications for the evolution of democracy and old ‘democracies’? The argument used to be that countries need to attain a certain level of development to create the conditions for a successful democracy to emerge (Huntington, 1984; Lipset, 1959). The middle class was seen as the primary force behind democratic changes. This is not so obvious anymore.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the lack of economic growth in developing countries began to erode public confidence that democratization would improve living conditions. At the same time, China and other countries have shown that it is possible to combine state authority and market liberalization in different ways. New ways of governing and alternative models are emerging.

The relative weaknesses of some of the most developed Western democracies have raised concerns about the ability of democratic political regimes to govern in times of high uncertainty. Their inability to prevent the financial crisis, the ensuing long and protracted recovery, the rise of demagoguery and less than stellar leaders reaching power is generating misgivings about the superiority of a governance model that is unpredictable. Indeed, Freedom House reports that ‘division and doubts about global leadership among democratic powers around the world, result[ed] in wavering support for democracy beyond their borders’ (Puddington and Roylance, 2016).

Democracy may be the best political system but it would be a mistake to believe that it is predestined to be the dominant system. So, how will the most prosperous democratic countries govern themselves in the future and how will they modernize their democratic societies? How will they preserve the democratic values that contributed to their success while adjusting their governing practices to a changing world? Will ‘old democracies’ be able to reinvent democracy for the knowledge age or will the trend lead instead to less democracy in

practice? These are difficult questions that go to the heart of what it will mean to be a democracy in the future.

### *Civility and democracy*

Joseph Heath (2014) elegantly discussed the difficulty of governing in the ‘Age of Unreason’. His book gives voice to concerns raised by practitioners in many capitals around the world.

In a democracy, what people come to believe, whether it is true or not, has a potentially significant impact on the way policy choices are made and justified publicly. There are serious implications when evidence and facts are of declining relevance to public discourse, and what matters instead is the strength of emotion about a ‘believable’ perception, whether real or unreal. This transforms public discourse from framing issues to encourage a greater public awareness of the benefits and consequences that various policy choices entail, to the creation of a plausible story to gain public support. ‘It used to be that everyone was entitled to their own opinion but not their own facts. But, this is not the case anymore. Perception is everything’ (Colbert, 2006). Myths and untruths are becoming more powerful than facts.

Politicians are discovering that with the use of social media, it is possible to repeat a statement over and over again until it becomes part of public perception whether it is true or not. The same approach was used successfully by the tobacco industry for many years and by other lobby groups whether they were advocating for corporate tax cuts or arguing that there is no scientific evidence for global warming (Otto, 2016).

If democracy is the task of changing the state of the world through collective action and if civic capabilities for democracy are developed or destroyed by the way societies govern themselves and the way we act, then what kind of societies are we building when public discourse becomes disconnected from reality, and when public discourse makes no distinction between knowledge, expert opinion, scientific evidence and personal opinion? And what will happen if opinions and facts are given equal weight in the search for solutions to the problems we face as a society?

The capacity to gather large crowds does not guarantee societal or democratic progress. The rise of the ‘angry hashtag activists’ may be a force for change, but it is not necessarily civic nor civil. It operates as a network where outrage and anger are the currency used to galvanize people (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014). This may give more visibility to a cause but it also makes it more difficult to generate solutions that would serve the interest of the larger community. It leads to a hardening of positions as people with opposing views are portrayed as ‘enemies’. This erodes democracy and alternatively encourages authoritative behaviours since at the end of the day, order must be maintained and someone must make a decision. Can civilized democratic societies exist without civility and respect for the views of others?



### *Politics and democracy*

Politics may be an instrument for debating alternative futures and making choices in a peaceful way. Politics connects emotion and reason; this is why it is so powerful. Will the politics of ‘the knowledge age’ disregard knowledge? Will politics in the future give greater weight to unleashing and fuelling emotions, and with what consequences?

Much progress was made over a long period of time to improve the transparency and public accountability of government actions and decisions. It should be a concern for all when emerging trends encourage uncompromising and unbending positions. The rise of extremism and populism is a disturbing trend. The world has witnessed this trend before, but at a time when the tools for influencing public opinion were less powerful and the instruments for mass communication were in their infancy.

Politics arise from the simultaneous existence of different groups with different interests and different traditions within a territorial unit under a common rule. ‘It does not matter much how that unit came to be... what does matter is that its social structure... is sufficiently complex and divided to make politics a plausible response to the problem of governing’ (Crick, 1993). Politics is one solution to the problem of order and by no means the only one. Tyranny (the rule of one person) and oligarchy (the rule of a group) are just two obvious alternatives.

The promise of politics is that it is a more workable way of maintaining order. A political system uses politics to maintain order rather than relying primarily on the use of force.

A democratic electoral process does not make a society democratic. It may be used to advance democracy or to give legitimacy to autocratic or oligarchic regimes. This was the case in the election in Germany in 1933, in Russia in 2004 and 2012, in Nicaragua in 2008 and in Turkey in 2015. The strength of democratic society is its openness. This also makes it vulnerable to demagoguery. The electoral process can be usurped to serve an undemocratic purpose.

### **Reinventing the function of modern democratic societies**

Democratic societies are made of many parts. They are governed by the rule of law. They value a separation of functions and powers. They need a well-functioning judicial system. They create and protect civic rights. These systems are designed to overcome individualist and tribal interests. Democratic societies depend on several enabling conditions – public institutions able to govern and get things done, a civic capability to share and build a better future together and, above all, people’s willingness to live life as citizens of a democratic society with all the responsibilities, restraints and civic obligations that this entails. A democracy is a work in progress that never ends.

There comes a time when ideas and practices that have worked reasonably well in the past must give way to a profound realignment of ideas. We live in such a time. This is a time to rethink the role of government in society in light of the

lessons learned over the past 50 years and to reconceptualize public policy issues from a different perspective. The ideas and governance models inherited from the industrial age are insufficient to face the challenges of society in a post-industrial era. Leading public transformations starts by challenging conventional ideas and practices that played a useful role in the past but fail to explain the issues and challenges that people experience today.

Since the early 1980s public sector reforms have occupied a significant place in government agendas around the world. Public sector reforms in the Western world in particular were inward looking and government centric; prioritizing financial efficiency and the modernization of the inner workings of government. Most paid little attention to the fast-changing landscape of the world and how this was transforming the role of government and the expectations of citizens (Milward et al., 2016). New Public Management may provide a useful perspective for issues that require managerial solutions, but does little to help think through the 'big questions' facing those governing in the twenty-first century. Incremental adjustments are unlikely to bring about the desired outcome, as they leave unchallenged the underlying ideas and assumptions inherited from a prior time. These 'big questions' need to be addressed to find new ways to govern peacefully, reduce tensions and uncover solutions to the problems that bedevil societies in the fast-changing landscape of the twenty-first century.

It is time to rethink public administration from a broader perspective, one that sees the dynamic interrelationships between the state, citizens and society as the fundamental element to governing modern societies. There is a pressing need to rediscover the irreplaceable contribution of the state to a well-performing society and economy, and articulate a concept of that state adapted to serving in the twenty-first century. This is neither an overbearing nor a minimalist state but one with sufficient confidence in its role to use the levers of the state to serve the collective interest.

There is a need to *rethink* the role of government and the interrelationship of the public, private and civic spheres of life in society in contemporary terms; to *reframe* public challenges in a manner that is congruent with the emerging reality on the ground rather than theoretical construct inherited from a prior time; to *rediscover* the fundamental principles that make societies governable and *reinvent* the conditions for building a better future together.

In the end, it comes down to articulating in contemporary terms a view about fundamental philosophical questions that have inspired prior generations. What concept of the state and society will guide collective actions? What will give meaning to our belonging to a broader community? What will be the meaning of just society and a good life in this early part of the twenty-first century?

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