Letting the cat out of Gow’s bag

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Iain Gow (2007) did not like the characterization of his model of Canadian public administration that is presented in R. Hubbard and G. Paquet’s recent book – Gomery’s Blinders and Canadian Federalism (Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press) (2007). In particular, he did not like being called Dr. Pangloss, or being branded as a defender of strong state-centric governance by the federal state.

The reader has now had an opportunity to read Gow’s clarification of his position in this issue of www.optimumonline.ca. He has synthesized the broad features of his model of Canadian public administration (as he has “found it in the literature”, to use his words), reproclaimed that it is effective and should remain intact, and defended it against the emergent alternative model that Hubbard and Paquet’s book claims to be more desirable.

Why does Gow regard his own model as satisfactory?

Because the Westminster model (of which it is an image d’Epinal) is neat and tidy (hierarchical, accountable, transparent, oversight-heavy); because, in it, elected officials are purported to be in charge; because the state plays a transcendent role in defining the public interest (equality, equity). Moreover, he regards the way the system has been operating in Canada as an echo of a vibrant tradition of moderation and pragmatism, with a strong tolerance for ambiguity.

He finds fault with those who argue for less state-centricity, more decentralization, more subsidiarity, more participation, more partnerships and more consensus-seeking, because all those elements have a downside: they make things more complicated, and as a matter of consequence are seen as dangerous for they might not work.

Gow therefore compares an idealized and idyllic Westminster model with an emergent messy model in the making. Gow lionizes the Westminster model, and is in denial vis-à-vis its real-life dysfunctions. He denounces the strategic state alternative as preachy and advocacy-based, while he claims that his model is nothing of the sort.

I do not intend to debate the realism and the accuracy of the Gow model. The moderately informed reader (familiar with the chronicles of Canadian public life in the newspapers) will, as Gow suggests, have to make his/her own mind up about these matters.

What is more interesting is the set of assumptions on which Gow bases his argumentation, both to defend his own model and to attack the proposed alternative model. This is where he lets the cat out of the bag.
Questionable assumptions

First, Gow suggests that Hubbard and Paquet are naïve in “romanticizing” the citizen, hints that civil society is n-times more likely to defend indefensible causes than good ones, questions the idea that anything consensual about major decisions can emerge in our fractured society, and concludes that mass collaboration and self-organization cannot work.

Second, Gow proposes that the state is the sole legitimate vehicle to elicit what the public interest really means, that the public service in toto staunchly serves as guardian of core values (equality and equity), and that the state apparatus in place is the only instrument on which to rely to protect the fundamental requirements of Canadian democracy. So state centricity is seen by him as mandatory.

Third, Gow suggests that there are many reasons to believe that decentralization, partnerships (P3s), subsidiarity, etc. will not work as well as the old hierarchical system, that these arrangements will fail to provide the requisite accountability, transparency, and equity that are regarded as essential, that in any case “the state assumes the greater part of the risk in these arrangements”, and that pressures to recentralize is bound to prevail.

Fourth, Gow therefore aligns himself explicitly with the phalanx of ‘progressive’ ideologues who say that any reduction in the size of the state can only mean an impoverishment of governance (Rouillard et al 2006 – Foreword by J.I. Gow), and builds his argument unabashedly in favor of state centricity on this foundation – not so much because of its greater effectiveness, efficiency, and economy (although he hints at these dimensions at times) but mainly and recurrently because of the egalitarian guarantee it provides.

Questioned assumptions

This needs to be challenged.

(1) The assumption of the incompetence of the citizen is not new. It has served from time immemorial to legitimize the overtaking of governing by the so-called better informed elites. This was at the core of the debate between Walter Lippmann (1922) and John Dewey (1927), and the debates have continued until today (Critical Review 2006).

For Lippmann, the average citizen is like a deaf spectator sitting in the back row of a sporting event: he does not know what is going on, why it is happening, and lives in a world he does not understand and is unable to direct. For Dewey, the basis of democracy is not the competence of the citizen, but conversation: the citizen need not have more than ‘vital habits’ – the ability to follow an argument, grasp the point of view of another, expand the boundaries of understanding, debate the alternative purposes that might be pursued.
Gow would appear to lean toward the Lippmann view of the world and to interpret the body politic as a group of individuals under the domination of a single power, while Hubbard and Paquet lean toward the Dewey side and interpret the body politic as a group of persons sharing a common set of habits and customs (Tussman 1960: 4-5). Gow would appear to be pessimistic about the citizen playing any governing role while Hubbard and Paquet talk about open-source governing that would involve the citizenry as a pivotal component of governance.

I would venture to say that Gow’s prospective pessimism appears to be countered by the growing evidence of successful mass collaboration that has been accumulated: it would not appear to require anything like omnicompetence, and has proved most effective (Sunstein 2006; Tapscott and Williams 2006).

(2) The Hegelian notion of the omnicompetent state defended by Gow depicts the state in a way that is exactly the obverse of the way in which he describes the citizenry. The state is purported to play a transcendent role and to be the agent of transfiguration of society. The text exudes a quasi-doctrinaire belief that it is a necessary elevation, since only politics, through the process of conflicts among parties and collective adversaries, can lead to a meaningful taking-into-account of the common good.

For those holding that view, the state is the centre of the public sphere, and the privileged locus of the conflicts between power groups. And since the body politic is squarely reduced to the power game, consequently any relativization of the role of the state can only be regarded as a deplorable erosion of the ‘political’ (in the unduly narrow sense in which Gow uses it), even though the state is said, by persons of the same credo, to have generated a “primat de la représentation des acteurs sur la résolution des problèmes qu’ils posent” (Gauchet 1998:123).

This elevation of the state to such a transcendent status translates into a required state centricity because it is the source of the articulation of the public interest and the common good. In the process both politicians and bureaucrats are promoted to a level of holiness that commensurates with their sacred status.

Gow, having thus demoted the citizen to the status of a spectator and elevated the state and its functionaries to a transcendental the status, is trapped in a position where he has to register his malaise at any initiative that tilts governing authority toward the citizen, and away from the state, or dilutes the dominium of the state in any way.

(3) Less state-centricity, more decentralization, more subsidiarity, more participation, more partnerships, or more consensus-seeking, constitute for Gow different forms of weakening of the state, and, because of it, are dangerous. They all threaten the coherence of a system that acquires and maintains its coherence through the state.

It is true that all those initiatives to empower the citizen, and to return to him the burden of governing, generate problems of coordination. But these are simple management
problems. And managerial inconvenience cannot seriously be regarded as a determining or persuasive argument in favor of hyper-centralization and uniformity.

This leads Gow to perform some exorcisms.

For instance, subsidiarity is a basic principle of organizational architecture. It suggests that the decision-making should be delegated as much as possible to the most local level where the problem can be satisfactorily resolved. According to this principle, one should not delegate to a higher level of government anything that can be handled effectively by a lower order of government. One would hardly recognize this complex principle of social architecture in Gow’s definition in his original paper, where he defines subsidiarity as something “which seems to mean ‘look after yourself’“.

In the same manner, in dealing with public-private partnerships (P3s), it is merrily assumed that the state has automatically and irretrievably to shoulder the greater part of the risk when this is strictly a matter to be negotiated with other parties – a matter that can be taken care of by due diligence in negotiation.

(4) While there are some references to effectiveness, efficiency and economy in the discussion of the state-centric model, the main reference point is to core values that focus mainly on equality and equity.

This is problematic. Plural societies (and Canada is one) are societies that explicitly recognize that individuals and groups are motivated by different values, and that they can legitimately have different value systems. To pursue their different objectives, they require positive freedom: capacity and opportunity to actively and effectively pursue these values, and the elimination of the constraints or unfreedoms that prevent them from doing so. Moreover, plural societies deny that there is any constantly overriding value (Kekes 1993: 19).

So as Joseph Heath (2003) has argued, shared values are a myth in Canada.

In a deeply diverse and pluralistic society, it is impossible to identify what the shared values are because individuals and groups have very different notions of good life. The best one can hope for – especially in a turbulent world where means and ends of individuals and groups are continually redefined as the result of evolving circumstances – is agreement on some principles that are likely to preserve the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis these different notions of the good.

This confusion between values and principles (and the consequent excesses that this confusion has generated) is most flagrant in the case of the notion of ‘equality’ which has become interpreted (wrongly and most unhelpfully) as meaning that each person or group must be treated identically. The basic principle of equality calls only for the state to be neutral vis-à-vis different preferences, and to be neutral vis-à-vis the different projects of individuals and groups. It does not in any way require that uniformity be enforced (Heath 2003: 28).
Egalitarianism is a basic philosophy that states that “all human beings should be treated with equal consideration unless there are good reasons against it.” (Kekes 2003:1). Given the extraordinary variety of human conditions and the differences in talents, capacities and projects, it is difficult to understand why this cautious presumption has come to be interpreted as an imperative for identical treatment, and for arrangements making rights and resources more equal to be considered as a foundational pre-condition and imperative for progress.

Such a philosophy allows one principle (equality) to take precedence over all others, at the expense of all others, and ordains indiscriminate compassion for any person claiming to be at a real or imagined disadvantage, on the basis of an optimistic faith that every human being is by nature equally worthy, and that evil is ascribable to bad political arrangements generating non-uniformity of treatment. As a result, it is argued by egalitarians that the search for absolute equality should guide our design of social architecture and political arrangements.

Practical reasoning usually escapes from such absolutism, and generates in situ reasonable responses, even if problems have not been completely theorized. Trade-offs between different principles are arrived at pragmatically. This is how utopian egalitarianism gets tamed in the real world into some form of equability — a principle that calls for a sustained effort to eliminate unacceptable or especially troublesome inequalities.

One observes no such caution on the part of Gow. Shared core values are assumed to exist, and, at the end of the day, it is considerations of equality that trump the argument in favor of state centricity. If egalitarianism stricto sensu is the guiding principle, massive redistribution is the rule, and, in order to be able to so redistribute, the ‘goods’ are to be channeled to the center first.

State centricity, centralization, and the dominium of the central government flow naturally from these assumptions. However, Gow feels uncomfortable when one allows the argument to unfold as we have just done. Even though he loathes subsidiarity, he seems uneasy with the conclusion that he is irremediably forced to draw from this anti-subsidiarity stance – conclusions leading to ‘federal’ state centricity.

This inference is one about which Gow is extraordinarily sensitive. He calls it a ‘distortion’ of his position, and forcefully underlines the point very early in his paper in this issue. Yet he never returns to this point in the rest of the note. This is quite understandable: the whole logic of his argument leads in this direction.

This explains, in part, why the Gow model has had a glorious reception in the bureaucratic circles in Ottawa, at least in the 2004-05 period. It provided the logical foundations for the political philosophy that inspired the Liberal Party regime between 1993 and 2005.
Since 2006, the bulk of the Ottawa bureaucracy has remained deeply anchored in the state-centric view of the world that underpins the Gow model, but even some of the stalwarts of the Liberal Party regime have begun to change their tune, (Bourgon 2007) and are now envisaging that the weight of evidence is such that the argument for a less state-centric and a more decentralized governance has to be acknowledged and given appropriate attention. It is not sufficient for Iain Gow to suggest that it is simply a ‘mode’.

**Conclusion**

Academic debates are both an exercise in critical thinking and an art form. When it is conducted between individuals who have the greatest amount of personal respect for each other, it may become treacherous if, unwittingly, one or the other of the discussants is led to make one or many points in such a way as to draw blood.

It was never my intention or Ruth Hubbard’s to misrepresent the Gow model, or to malign its architect. In our book, we have tried to present and gauge the model and its circumstances as fairly as possible. The very rationale for this further exchange is to ensure that as much clarification as possible of the basis for the disagreement is exposed, and that none of the unintended slight remains.

In his reaction to the Hubbard/Paquet criticisms, Iain Gow has clarified a number of points but he has also clearly re-affirmed a number of positions with an arsenal of support from eminent members of the public administration academic establishment.

In the process, Gow has acted at times in a paradoxical way.

While nitpicking about words, he has himself played games with words he does not like – as we have shown above. He has declared himself wounded by a comparison with Dr Pangloss, but he has not hesitated to associate his opponents with Têtes-à-Claques: replying to irony by sarcasm! But, on the other hand, he has also chosen, in a self-deprecation and humorous way, to identify with Eyeore – a social promotion from the Dr Pangloss status from his point of view!

As an unrepentant experimentalist and social learner, I would hope that Gow is led to do a Mark II of his model, but I do not think that our exchange will lead him to do so. Gow has already taken his emotional distance from his model – about which he already has stated that he “found it in the literature”. Why would he want to improve this foundling?

It is not that Iain Gow is stubborn. Eyeore is not stubborn. His kind has a reputation for stubbornness, but it is due, according to Wikipedia, to some misinterpretation of their highly-developed sense of self-preservation. It is extremely difficult to force or frighten Eyeore into doing anything he sees as contrary to his own self-interest. Specialists in public administration are unlikely to allow the state to be deprived of its rust-proof core character without a fierce fight: what would Hamlet be without the Prince of Denmark!
References


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