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Direct Accountability at the End

In front of a Deliberative Poll of 400 citizens in Manchester in 1994, Tony Blair was asked whether his very accomplished answers were really to be believed. Smiling mischievously, he replied "ask me back afterwards." In our democracy, we have no tradition of calling officials to account on completion of their term. For all our talk of participatory democracy and active citizenship, we make no use of time-tested direct mechanisms for public accountability and have generally strayed little from the vote as the centrepiece of both democratic participation and accountability.

This essay examines mechanisms for direct ex post accountability. Following a brief clarification of public accountability, it explores the extraordinary history of such mechanisms in the ancient republics of Athens and Rome, where they were used to increase institutional responsiveness, engage citizens in governance and deter abuses of power. Attention then turns to current pressures on public accountability, and the quickening emergence of more direct and populist forms of participation. The use of ex post and direct mechanisms for public accountability in recent policy innovations is then critically reviewed. Finally, the essay seeks to analyse the apparent effectiveness of such mechanisms, and to show how they afford powerful antidotes for an ailing democracy. Among the various effects of direct mechanisms for accountability, both real and symbolic, is their ability to reveal how far we have yet to go with open information and citizen empowerment if our good participatory intentions are to mean anything at all.

Public Accountability

Public accountability always has a particular ‘who’, a ‘what’ and a ‘when’.1 Yet so does it signify a family resemblance between particulars, one involving elements of scrutiny and sanction.2 Scrutiny entails examination and evaluation by an informed public, and so raises inevitable issues around the openness of information. Sanction entails empowered action, a public agreement that accepts or rejects the account given by a public official and a stark demonstration of popular power. Thus, electoral accountability constitutes a moment of profound clarification, for here, the people actively assert their ultimate sovereignty over government.3 In all democratic societies, public accountability is a crucial site of political contestation and an important symbolic moment of reckoning.

Indeed, public accountability is the very touchstone of democratic participation. Here, if anywhere, participation really needs to bite. In our democracy, participation bites when a leader is removed by election. Here also, accountability has a public quality, in that it holds public officials to be answerable to the sovereign people.4 Public accountability is also exercised by parliament over government,5 judges over parliament and senior public managers over their subordinates.6 In our liberal society, it also ranges over markets, the media and the public sphere. Public
accountability is thus multifaceted and multi-layered. It operates both horizontally and vertically, can be informal and/or variously formalised in an array of institutions and mechanisms. It is not the same as representation - which more accurately denotes a relation between interests and outcomes - but does assist it. It differs from institutional responsiveness, though does help provide it. Nor is accountability to be equated with participation. In a representative democracy, accountability can involve participation by the populace, while in bureaucratic accountability, participation plays no part.

**Historical Uses**

Ancient republics of Athens and Rome made extensive use of direct mechanisms for public accountability, and spent centuries tweaking their constitutions to get them right. In each, public accountability often took the form of a 'ferocious populism,' with public officials required to account for their actions before the assembled people at the end of their official term. These events were powerful symbolic demonstrations of public scrutiny and sanction. Part theatre, part genuine *ex post* examination, they operated to engage and educate the citizenry and to increase the responsiveness of office holders.

The historical recovery of mechanisms by which the people call public officials to account, demand answers and hand out sanctions, requires us to move from a liberal orientation that seeks to control the people, towards the more republican concern with controlling elites. Republicanism sees elites as the greater threat to liberty, and has thus, historically, sought to control their corruption, divide their powers and reject their domination. Republicanism also encourages us to move from conceiving of politics as a search for consensus and compromise, and instead, to value dissensus, contestation and difference. Republicanism is thus characterised by a mixture of aristocratic and democratic institutions that articulate conflict and enable forms of participation that are more expressive than the vote.

In both Athens and Rome, this mixture was particularly apparent in systems for the selection of magistrates. Public officials thus became so by a variety of routes, with class bias consciously addressed through the use of lottery and rotation. In these political cultures, public servants served the public, and were constantly reminded of the fact. Athens seems to have institutionalised the automatic public scrutiny and sanction of officials at the end of their term (*Euthynai*) and to have experimented with a number of different kinds of assembly at which such hearings would occur. Whether in front of aristocratic fora (such as the *Areopagus*), the Council of the Five Hundred, huge public courts or the popular assembly, these involved a public debriefing and a severe examination of incumbent performance. After scrutiny came sanction, and this could range all the way from commendation to execution. Such mechanisms were used for centuries and to great effect (Elster cites the case brought against Thrasybulus in 403 as exemplary), though on a number of occasions popular judgments became long-running political footballs or were, in the light of new information, subsequently reversed; in some cases after execution.
In Athens, and then in Rome, the most commonly used direct mechanisms for public accountability was the public accusation. In both polities, the public were able to bring charges against public officials for political misconduct, corruption and treason and to demand they answer in a public forum. Such charges were brought with amazing frequency, particularly in Athens (Eisangelia, Graphe Paranomon), where they enjoyed a long and varied history. Equally extraordinary was the severity of sanctions metered out by the Athenian assemblies, as well as their tendency to blame leaders for events beyond their control, or for what amounted to bad luck.17

Republican Rome also celebrated its culture of public answering, and held its officials to account in a variety of fora (Concione, Comitia Curiata).18 Here, however, a specific institution - the Tribunate - became the conduit for ex post and direct mechanisms for public accountability. The Tribunes were the plebeian counterparts of the Consuls - the latter being almost exclusively patrician and selected by the patrician Senate – and served to balance the republic's more aristocratic tendencies. Indeed, it was only by twice evacuating the city and camping, en masse, beyond the city walls, that the plebs were able to force the patricians to accept the Tribunes. Fully empowered to veto policy, call plebiscites and make public accusations,19 the Tribunate made extensive use of direct ex post mechanisms for public accountability and, with its complex network of fora guiding the elected Tribunes, also delivered enhanced plebeian representation.20

A recurrent concern in these ancient republics, and indeed, for their Renaissance commentators such as Guicciardini and Machiavelli, was the problem of false charges or frivolous suits. The Athenians developed a number of ways to limit false charges, principally by imposing costs on the citizen bringing the charge. So, for example, if the accusation failed to get a fifth of the votes at trial, the accuser was punished with a fine and future ban on making accusations. Once begun, abandoning a case also warranted a fine. Elster refers to this as a "two-step accountability device," and describes it as "holding to account those who held officials to account for no good reason."21

McCormick, in his examination of Guicciardini and Machiavelli's commentaries on ancient republican constitutions, shows that Machiavelli, in particular, favoured public accusations before large assemblies. It is these practices that he highlights in his reading of Livy's History of Early Rome.22 Yet Machiavelli was careful to distinguish between accusations and what he termed 'calumnies.' The latter included frivolous, anonymous and unconfirmed charges (Machiavelli uses Manlius as an example) and those who made them warranted a counter-accusation on these grounds.23 Both Athens and Rome thus experimented with imposing a variety of costs on frivolous suits and made frequent constitutional adjustments that limited the number and nature of accusations citizens could make.

The centrality of open knowledge to effective accountability emerges again when we consider the danger of false charges, for in practice, the most frequent and sophisticated check on such charges is whether they can be defended in open debate. McCormick thus suggests that "high standards of evidence and widespread publicity are antidotes for calumnies."24 Where fora are able to consider expert testimony, gain access to information and properly inform their judgments, those
raising false charges do so at considerable risk. In the end, McCormick sides with Machiavelli against Guicciardini, concluding that a republican populace is eminently capable of good judgment, has limited political aspirations and is substantially less threatening to liberty than are elites. It is for these reasons that he concludes in favour of public accusations. "Accusations," he states, "are an efficient and relatively immediate way of holding elites to account." Among their benefits, he cites "deterrence and punishment."25

It is important to note that accountability mechanisms have effects beyond their brute capacity to deter abuses of power. One of Machiavelli's great contributions was his evocation of a dynamic, conflictual and enthusiastic republican politics, one in which the political virtue of citizens held sway. Institutional design, for Machiavelli, was not oriented to compromise and consensus, but to contestation and dissensus. He held that "every city should have modes by which the people can vent its ambitions," and applauded Rome for its productive institutionalisation of class discord. Participation was thus engaging and educational, as well as effective. Machiavelli thus called for direct and public forms of accountability because they rehearse and display the sovereignty of the people.

**Contemporary Pressures**

Today, consideration of ancient republican uses of direct and ex post mechanisms for public accountability serves to highlight the almost "total exclusion of the general citizenry from censure, impeachment, or removal proceedings directed at suspect public officials."26 This is accompanied by widespread citizen disengagement, a palpable lack of institutional responsiveness and a range of democratic deficits.

Most commentators agree that our existing mechanisms of public accountability are being progressively undermined by privatisation and globalisation, that accountability faces diverging imperatives27 and that it is presently in crisis.28 Recent high profile problems with public accountability (Railtrack; Enron; Yamamoto; the Bristol Eye and Alder Hey Hospitals; the Criminal Records Bureau and the computerization of health records; various quangos, unelected political advisors and consultants; food labeling; BSE; Foot and Mouth; Brent Spa; Bhopal; Iraq) certainly suggest that government institutions remain doggedly unresponsive and corporations continue to get away with murder. Declining voter turnout, the increasing power of the executive branch of government and new forms of consumer and environmental activism now contribute to widespread calls for greater public accountability.29 Here, a vibrant civil society, domestic and global, exerts an upward pressure on governance institutions.

Demands for greater public accountability highlight the importance of scrutiny, and thus also, of open information.30 In this, civil society associations are much aided by developments in information technology, which not only make more information available for scrutiny but also enable the instantaneous formation of communities.31 Where citizens and associations are armed with knowledge, they have played an important part in developing a raft of new 'disclosure systems' requiring corporations
and governments to share information and be transparent in their procedures.\textsuperscript{32} So, for example, upon discovering that up to 98,000 Americans died each year from medical errors, the \textit{Institute for Medicine} recommended that hospitals be compelled to disclose their rates of error to the public and to use the internet to do so.\textsuperscript{33}

Public accountability thus raises inevitable concerns about the quality of knowledge available to participants, and by implication, the quality of their subsequent judgments. Where sanction follows scrutiny, knowledge is all. The stakes are particularly high in the area of contemporary political protest, where mass direct action and internet swarming now threaten governments and corporations with new and virulent forms of public attention.

\textbf{Policy Innovations}

Direct democracy affords direct forms of accountability, often involving 'democratic dialogue'.\textsuperscript{34} Contemporary policy innovations, such as citizen-led initiatives to arrange public hearings and inspect public services,\textsuperscript{35} have thus entailed the scrutiny and sanction of office holders by empowered and informed citizens using deliberation as part of their decision-making.

Innovations in public accountability for the most part address the element of scrutiny rather than sanction, and have therefore focused on the issues of open information, procedural transparency and public disclosure. So, for example, the NGO \textit{Solidarity in Literacy} now uses a transparency software programme that enables stakeholders to track the movement of donor's money through the organisation on a website.\textsuperscript{36} Similarly, the Australian Department of Finance has pursued, in its \textit{Performance Management and Reporting Framework} in Victoria, a focus on the public reporting of policy outcomes, explicitly, to inform public scrutiny,\textsuperscript{37} and the \textit{Global Reporting Initiative} lists the many companies that publicly report their 'economic, environmental and social performance.'\textsuperscript{38}

Rather more direct forms of public accountability are listed in Fung's recent surveys of participatory institutional designs. The crucial innovation here has been the construction of 'minipublics', or deliberative fora, in which citizens can gain information, deliberate and sometimes, decide. Such fora have been used with great diversity to reconnect citizens and public officials in a direct way, often in an advisory or consultative capacity. Examples include citizens' juries and panels, peoples' parliaments and panels, public hearings and oversight boards, appellate fora and Deliberative Opinion Polls.\textsuperscript{39} Though not usually empowered to deliver sanction, minipublics enable direct and deliberative participation.

They also offer fertile ground for a range of representative innovations. Thus, minipublics can be carefully structured to make them representative of both individual and group interests, and of demographics.\textsuperscript{40} Often drawing on debate and decision methods akin to those developed by \textit{AmericaSpeaks},\textsuperscript{41} minipublics are increasingly combining new information technologies with techniques of group facilitation. \textit{The Virtual Agora Project}, for example, allows for online collective deliberation.\textsuperscript{42} Minipublics can also be adjusted to ensure adequate representation of excluded groups and to compensate for intransigent class-bias in the selection of officers. The
latter seems particularly well addressed by recent innovations in the use of random selection (lot, sortition), in the selection of officers and for populating minipublics. When we turn from minipublics that advise to those that 'monitor', we encounter initiatives that cover scrutiny and sanction. Though less common, Fung describes minipublics that are empowered to act as the highest form of citizen engagement. His main example is the participatory budget programme at Porto Alegre, where public accountability is direct, and owed to an empowered deliberative council. Many organisations have, at their heart, a sovereign assembly of members to which all officers are accountable, including Consumers International, the Women's League of Voters, the National Framework for Tenants Participation Groups, Friends of the Earth International and the Sierra Club. Fully fledged citizens' or constituent assemblies now sit in British Columbia, Bolivia and in New South Wales, Australia, where they are variously empowered to make legislation and steer constitutional change.

Where accountability is owed to a carefully constituted forum affording a public space for informed and deliberative participation, we have direct mechanisms for public accountability. Such fora are highly empowered examples of Fung's 'monitoring' type of minipublics. Indeed, if participation is a ladder, as Arnstein and others have suggested, then the degree of empowerment evinced by such mechanisms is right at the top. Once again, direct and public accountability is the very pinnacle of citizen engagement.

Two innovations in particular suggest ways in which direct forms of accountability might be used for public scrutiny and sanction, and these are Public Reviews and Citizens' Audits. Citizen's Audits were developed by the Alliance of Public Accountability and are intended to provide public assessments of institutional performance. Citizen Audits are able to evaluate a variety of outcomes and to involve the public in the construction of evaluative criteria. The public and deliberative setting of performance expectations for local public services is a further area of experimentation, and is particularly advanced in recent debates over 'public value'. Such methods are, however, all too often under-powered, particularly when it comes to sanction, and perhaps serve best to reinforce the worth of using direct accountability mechanisms to judge policy outcomes at the end.

Ex post evaluation has also taken place in parallel institutions set up by citizens to express public judgment on incumbent performance. So, for example, a variety of public hearings and mock trials have pronounced on issues such as the legality of the Vietnam War, police brutality and crimes against humanity. Though lacking powers of sanction, such retrospective evaluations share the symbolic power of truth and reconciliation commissions. Both entail a public giving of account, an opening up of information and an ex post airing of grievance. However, while truth and reconciliation commissions seem to derive their effectiveness precisely from their lack of power to sanction – here by removing consequences for disclosure - direct public accountability is participation that really bites.

Our consideration of policy innovations that use direct mechanisms for accountability at the end illuminates a particularly powerful and effective combination of scrutiny and sanction. In regard to scrutiny, we have identified "back-loaded
participation and deliberation that reviews the quality of ongoing action and implementation." In regard to sanction, we have highlighted the importance of empowering citizens to act upon such reviews.

**Anticipated Returns**

Analysis of elections in terms of Principals and Agents highlights public accountability's characteristic combination of scrutiny and sanction. In an election, the Principal – here the citizenry - scrutinises and sanctions its Agents – here, elected officials. This is a quite particular kind of Principal/Agent relation, however, for it primarily involves the authorisation *ex ante*, of an empowered and autonomous Agent that can then rule over the people. Here, elected officials themselves become Principals, with public managers becoming *their* Agents in turn.

During their time in office, elected representatives are autonomous, they are the Principals, they rule. Yet the moment of electoral accountability continues to exert pressure upon them, and thus to increase their responsiveness, even between elections. This is because elections not only select and authorise future leaders and policy bundles, they also express an *ex post* public judgment on incumbent performance. The threat of losing a future election requires representatives to 'anticipate returns' on their present actions, even if only out of 'cynical compliance' or the instrumental avoidance of 'reputational costs.' In this way, the anticipation of *ex post* accountability increases incumbent responsiveness and acts to deter abuses of power.

Evidence suggests, however, that *ex post* evaluation plays a surprisingly small role in elections and constitutes only a minor part of voter intention. Still less do citizens conceive of their vote as a pronouncement on promises broken or kept. *Ex post* scrutiny and sanction, though effective, is thus underused in our representative democracy. Direct mechanisms for public accountability would serve to supplement the vote, strengthen the deterrence of power abuse, increase the responsiveness of incumbent institutions and re-engage the citizenry.

While the real and symbolic power of *ex post* direct and public forms of accountability would seem to warrant further experimentation, it is perhaps understandable that they are so studiously avoided. For while scrutiny entails asymmetrical knowledge, sanction entails asymmetrical power. At the end, there will be consequences. For all our protestations about participatory democracy, we are nowhere near granting such powers of scrutiny and sanction to our citizenry. Indeed, we have barely begun to challenge the sufficiency of the vote as the primary mechanism for democratic accountability.

If associations, communities, localities or states were to make use of *ex post* direct mechanisms for public accountability, we would need clarification of their real and symbolic effects, and experimentation to establish who, how, over what and when, such mechanisms operate to best effect. In the ancient republics, these mechanisms were specifically designed to address many of the problems we face today, such as the puzzle of popular disengagement, democratic deficits and pressures on existing accountability mechanisms. The prospect of mobilised and
informed communities, now armed with sophisticated information technologies, might reawaken interest in this most powerful of participatory tools. Certainly, as securitisation seeks to further control citizens, so will our restless and diverse democratic society find ever new ways of controlling elites.

In 1994, Blair told us to ask him back afterwards. If we had direct mechanisms for public accountability at the end, we would have done just that.

Notes:

4 Przeworski, 1999, p. 4; Dowdle, 2006, p. 3, 12.
5 On accountability to parliament, see Przeworski, 1999, p. 21; re separation of powers see Dowdle, 2004, p. 13;
6 Usually termed bureaucratic accountability.
9 Przeworski, 1999, p. 10 mechanisms; Dowdle, 2004, p. 4 re types; Cameron 2004, p. 60 describes the 'chain of responsibility' in hierarchic bureaucracies.
10 Przeworski, 1999, pp. 8-10
15 Elster, 1999, p. 274.
19 McCormick, 2006, p. 158.
20 See suggestions for a 'Tribunate Assembly' in McCormick, 2006, p. 159.
Dowdle, 2006, p. 17, 25, particularly tensions between democratic, legal and bureaucratic accountability.

Dowdle, 2006, p. 1.

Dowdle, 2006, p. 10.

Cameron, 2004, p. 59.


However, Graham shows how political obstacles to implementing this recommendation gave rise to sub-optimal outcomes, 2002, pp. 104-136.


Hanberger, 2006, p. 3


Cameron, 2004, p. 61.

www.globalreporting.org


Fung, 2003 on minipublics, Young on representation; Burnheim on proportionality; development NGOs have sought mechanisms that incorporate all their various stakeholders, see Newell, 2006; Benner, T. Reinicke, W.H. Witte, J.M. "Multisectoral Networks in Global Governance: Towards a Pluralistic System of Accountability," Government and Opposition, 2004, p. 201; Graham, 2002.


http://virtualagora.org/


The California Recall was a direct and plebiscitary mechanism that does not entail a minipublic.

Fung, 2003; Carson, p. 2


Hanberger, 2006, p. 16.

 Accountabilitycircle.org

Hanberger, 2006, p. 4


For example, the Public Hearings on police brutality by local activists in Detroit, for which see Kenyon, A.M. Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Postwar Space and Culture, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004.


Braithwaite in Dowdle, 2006, p. 39 shows that republican conceptions of accountability are, in fact, circular chains of Principal/agent relations.


Elster

Przeworski, 1999, p. 12; and chapters 1 & 7.