

Moving beyond Westminster

Michael Keating
Research School of Social Sciences
Australian National University

Marian Simms
Department of Political Science
Australian National University

Ralph Chapman seems to agree with our key points and with the arguments of several of the contributors, so this is less of a rejoinder and more of an attempt to continue and extend the discussion. At the outset we will isolate the points of agreement and then move on to the main areas of disagreement.

We are in agreement that the debate over government accountability is important, particularly in an age of uncertainty and rapid change. We (Keating and Simms), and most of our contributors, consider that Westminster is too often misconceived popularly. Or at best that it's far too broad to be useful and needs breaking down into its component parts.

Let us enumerate. As Chapman notes, Simms points out that several generations of political scientists have already stated that Westminster a la House of Commons is too limited a notion to apply as some kind of underlying systemic rationale to the operations of the Australian Commonwealth. Other contributors especially John Braithwaite and Carmel Niland and Shalini Satkunandan start out with other systemic goals, such as social justice. Keating's chapter is equally concerned with responsiveness in a way that extends beyond a simple Bagehotian notion that the discipline of the ballot box forces government to be aware of the electorate. So we are falling over ourselves in agreement on that score.

To paraphrase one social scientist, the point is not to abolish Westminster, but rather to embellish it. Our symposium does attempt to set up some new yardsticks for accountability and sets of new definitions. Disappointingly, Chapman does not engage with this part of the

symposium. Why is this? It seems that his overarching goal differs from ours. Our purpose was to discuss recent governmental practices and values and tease out how they related to different notions of accountability. Chapman, on the other hand, wants a fully developed theoretical framework that would provide an ideal model as a basis for the future consideration of accountability — a sort of 'Holy Grail'. To realise this he calls for more history and more theory. Specifically this will require new detailed administrative histories at both state and federal levels of government — particularly the former arena. But his larger project is to start what he perceives as a new search for a specifically Australian set of goals or parameters. He is searching for the elusive Australian ghost in the British machine. That's where we would start to take exception with Chapman, precisely because much of the work of the founding fathers of Australian public administration, such as FA Bland, Gordon Reid, LF Crisp, LJ Hume, RS Parker and RA Spann, did focus on the Australianess of the system. Most of the historic Australian deconstructions of Westminster from FA Bland to EV Thompson (the inventor of 'Washminster' mutation) have been concerned with writing in the Australian contribution to the theory and practice of government.

Chapman also leaves out political complexity. He does this in two main ways. In the first instance, in his response to Bill Blick's innovative contribution to the ministerial resignation saga, Chapman implies that politics is a nasty business. Yet politics is at the heart of the accountability debate. Whether we are

talking of party politics, the clashes between parliamentary and non-parliamentary bodies, the tensions between the executive and the parliamentary opposition or of the underlying contest over resources and values that have been central to democracy, Australian style. More significantly, and secondly, his search for an overarching theory is almost Aristotelian in the manner in which it ignores the flexibility and toleration that are at the core of many current views of democracy. Chapman's approach is perhaps more in keeping with a European legal code approach to the polity. We would argue that it is impossible to understand the past, present and future of political accountability in Australia without an understanding of political complexity.

In our symposium, we discussed different accountability traditions, mechanisms and 'multiple institutions of accountability' (Geoffrey Brennan, p96). We deliberately refrained from the construction of an 'ideal type'. The publication of Ralph Chapman's response now provides us with a timely opportunity to explain this choice, which was implicit rather than explicit in the accountability symposium. We now argue that a universal standard is impossible. Indeed the pursuit of Chapman's illusory 'ideal model' of accountability may even prove counter-productive.

The history of Australian democracy has involved different people seeking different objectives, both over time and over different issues. We identified multiple strands to the history of Australian accountability, such as utilitarianism (with happiness as the goal and efficiency as a sub-goal), responsiveness (with democratic participation through stakeholders

as the aim), fair and equal treatment (with its emphasis on due process), and egalitarianism (with fair outcomes as the goal (see especially Simms 1999)). Each of these strands has its place, but they are not always mutually consistent.

We also identified overlaps between these multiple strands, and whilst much was inherited from Britain (liberal democracy and ministerial responsibility) much was also invented in Australia — for example the statutory authority (see Keating 1999). On closer examination the history of the statutory authority (which contra to Chapman has spawned a huge literature) also provides us with ample evidence for our next point. Namely, that there has been competition between the various accountability criteria listed above. The 'arms-length' status of the authority often enabled stakeholder participation (or, in the eyes of some, interest group takeover), but downright discouraged ministerial oversight and parliamentary accountability.

In our view intellectual purity of a single 'ideal model' is obviously desirable where there are no tensions between competing requirements or objectives and it is practical. By contrast the supreme virtue of Australian pragmatism is its realism. Australians have recognised over many years that expectations of government are numerous and not always mutually consistent. The appropriate balance between competing expectations and objectives depends upon the circumstances appertaining to the particular case. The balance may also shift through time as society and its expectations change. No one should be surprised that these tensions are reflected in the different strands of accountability that were discussed in our symposium.