

Governance and Accountability – Starting at the Top

Everyone talks about governance and accountability but the practice misses the mark. The Australian government has drawn a clear link between governance and aid. This was highlighted in the 2004/2005 budget changes to AusAid. Governance has been a longstanding theme in the AusAid programme and an important theme to Australian aid activity. However, it is not good enough just to give money; you also need to make sure that it is used wisely. AusAid define governance as “...the competent management of countries resources in a way that is fair, open, accountable and responsive to peoples needs.”

Interest in governance is not restricted to the Australian government and it is now a major theme in the writings and pronouncements of organisations such as the World Bank who have also come to the clear understanding that it is not good enough just to give money away. It is important to ensure that those who get the money have the integrity and ability to make sure that the money is actually used for the intended purpose.

However, the initiatives which have been established to improve governance focus on changes to the bureaucracy or involve strengthening the watchdogs which are outside of the parliamentary system. AusAid highlight their work in developing economic institutions, establishing sound economic and financial management practices, assisting in the activities and professional development of judges and police forces, and assisting in the operation of fair elections. While these things are important I would argue that they are not sufficient and that the central issue has not been addressed.

Within the Westminster system the heart of governance and accountability is the parliament. The risk of the current focus is that the dignity and integrity of parliament and therefore the core process of democracy is undermined. This danger is evident when resources are put into the development of legal systems, financial management, ombudsmen and even auditors general with little to support the development of the governance mechanisms of parliament. Little effort has been focused on improving legislative capacity, particularly the functions of the Public Accounts Committee, or like Committees, which must be central to good governance.

The comparison would be a discussion of governance which failed to address the role and significance of the board of directors in a company. Is this in fact an implicit racism which regards the pacific island politicians as inherent less trustworthy than our own, or even an implicit colonialism which denies the democratic rights to others which we hold precious? We have the right to a democratic parliament but the parliaments of lesser nations are not to be trusted? Many of these concerning trends are evident in the anti-corruption movement. While stopping corruption is clearly an important objective, it is easy to tar all politicians with the same brush, particularly if they are from developing nations. The consequence is that anti-corruption campaigns turn their back on parliamentary systems and propose alternative structures and measures which also undermine parliamentary democracy.

My vision is that through the work of the La Trobe Public Sector Governance and Accountability Research Centre we will be a voice for good governance within parliamentary systems and will highlight the importance of strengthening parliamentary democracy. However, this is only possible with a partnership between

academics and practitioners. Within Australia and New Zealand we have a reservoir of applied and academic expertise in many of the issues of public sector governance and accountability. There exists an opportunity to share these insights with others.

Good governance and accountability needs to develop at all levels of the public sector. However, if the top level, that of parliamentary accountability and governance, is not valued and strengthened then much of the good work in other parts of the public sector will be wasted.

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