

Lecture by B. Guy Peters

Theoretical Debates in Public Administration in the Past 50 Years

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Organized by the Institute of Public Administration, the Croatian Political Science Association, and the Faculty of Law in Zagreb, the lecture of Professor B. Guy Peters took place on 14 June 2011 at the Assembly Hall of the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb. Professor Peters is a professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Pittsburgh, where he teaches American and comparative public policy and theoretical concepts of public policy and administration. As one of the world's leading scientists and experts in the field of public administration and public policy, Professor Peters has been a visiting lecturer at many universities worldwide and is perhaps the most competent person to speak about the condition of a complex scientific discipline such as public administration. This lecture came as an acceptance of the invitation of Professor Ivan Koprčić, professor of administrative science at the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb and president of the Institute of Public Administration. Several dozens of interested university teachers and professional community witnessed an interesting one-hour lecture in English followed by a fruitful discussion.

The main part of the lecture was a recapitulation of scientific and practical achievements in the field of public administration since World War II onwards followed by an analytical overview of the current status and future perspectives of the discipline, both scientific and practical. As a starting point of his lecture, Professor Peters underlined two important facts: that public administration is an independent scientific discipline, but integrating other disciplines, the most important of which are the law, political science, organizational theory and economics; and that

knowledge of public administration must be based on a strong correlation between theory and practice, each of which must be extremely relevant to the latter. Throughout the history of the discipline, practice-oriented doctrines and prescriptions have always had a significant impact on scientific research, which was particularly evident in the period when the New Public Management concept was the dominant doctrine. Practical and theoretical excerpts were intertwined during the lecture, suggesting that it is the only possible way to capture the developments and the situation in the discipline. The framework of the lecture was structured along seven conceptual dichotomies whose titles reflected the lecturer's attitude (inspired by Herbert Simon): the most important things about public administration could be explained through the conceptual dichotomies and contradictions. Consequently, the parts of the lecture were titled Management and Administration, Impartiality and Responsiveness, Simplicity and Complexity, Specialization and Coordination, Autonomy and Integration, Rationality and Evolution, Authority and Democracy.

In the first part of the lecture, Professor Peters commented on a dichotomy which has been immanent to public administration since its very beginning: the one between legal (Weber) and managerial (Wilson et al.) orientation of administrative organizations. Peters believes that the historical pendulum in the last few decades actually turned to the managerial values of efficiency and effectiveness, but that deregulation and strengthening the powers of public managers, inter alia, led to weaker protection of citizens' rights and to the requisition of the powers from the only people who actually have legitimacy to manage public affairs: the elected politicians. From that, Peters drew a conclusion about re-strengthening of legal and political values in the functioning and science of PA (swing back to bureaucracy) in the recent period.

The second part addressed the ways of combining the two indispensable qualities of public servants: their impartiality (neutrality) towards both the citizens and the political group currently in power, and their responsiveness to citizens and dedication to serve to the proclaimed political goals. These two seemingly confronting demands are to be met and balanced. Top professionals (upper echelon of the public servants) are crucial in achieving this goal. In this context, Peters commented on the problems of politicization, and an equally serious problem of de-politicization of public administration, in which technocratic managerial tendencies caused lack of necessary steering instruments in the hands of political leaders.

The third part of the lecture discussed the constant pursuit of both science and practice for simple organizational solutions to complex problems

of public administration. Professor Peters stated that efficiency could not be attained by reorganizational means, particularly in a short period of time. The traditional and somewhat simple hierarchical model of the administrative pyramid has been replaced by one of the two models: one, under which central ministries are becoming relatively small policy units, while the executive tasks are entrusted to the number of (quasi) autonomous agencies (easier control, easier to measure performance), and the other that creates large administrative departments, which contain numerous, more or less similar activities, that are grouped for the sake of better coherence and easier coordination. Peters noted that most of the public activities are difficult to place into a single department, this being the major reason for wandering and searching for the ideal organizational structural distribution.

Related to the previous statements, Professor Peters next analyzed the dichotomy between the need for ever greater specialization of parts of public administration in order to reflect the complexity of the society that surrounds it, and the need for intensive coordination that comes from it. The number of cross-sectoral policies is growing and thus more public resources are spent on their alignment and harmonization. Commenting on the various methods of coordination, Peters concluded that it was of great importance that 'government speaks out with a single voice'. Because of both the involvement of various stakeholders in the process of public service provision (civil society, citizens as individuals, outsourcing to the private sector), and the independence of parts of the public sector, a problem of integration of public administration arises. In this context, Peters presented a network approach to the management of public affairs, which in a way limits the primacy of the elected political bodies (governance without government), and makes administrative organizations the supporting columns of particular public policies and the managers of policy networks. These processes gradually cause greater exposure of public administration and create alternative lines of its accountability directly to citizens. Furthermore, public administration is increasingly perceived as a locus of democratic influence and participation. It somehow becomes a second track of democratic processes; public policies are more easily influenced at the point of their creation and implementation than via traditional route of elected representatives. Democracy is seen not only as a precondition, but also as the outcome of public administration functioning.

The lecture ended with an overview of the main theoretical concepts in public administration; the ideas of rationality and bounded rationality and the ideas deriving from them. New modes of supervision over

the functioning of public administration were mentioned. Supervision methods are even more difficult to implement as such, while public management becomes more complex, larger and more versatile. Thus, one solution does not fit all the problems and 'reinventing the wheel' is a frequent phenomenon in public administration research and practice. The dichotomies used as the analytical framework stem from the absence of a comprehensive theory that would unite the various theoretical ramblings and overlaps. There are many ideas, but there is no strong theory that may enable us to offer solid enough answers to problems that, as time passes, become more complex. Public administration, as a specific discipline, requires firm and unambiguous theoretical support for further research in this complex area.

The lecture inspired a number of questions from the audience, which allowed Professor Peters to elaborate on some ideas that were, due to time limit, only briefly mentioned during the lecture.

Mihovil Škarica, assistant at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb, asked two questions: How to reconcile the relative brevity of the political mandate in modern democracies with the need of public administration to be continuous, predictable, and expected to plan and implement long-term policies? This is a serious problem in the countries where there is a distinct dominance of politics over administration and the constant danger of politicization of administration prevails. In the second question Professor Peters was asked to explain the relationship between administrative science and public administration as separate, but related and complementary disciplines. In response, Peters highlighted that predictability and continuity in some areas are more important than in others. It is the question of democratic political culture whether public administration will, each time after a change in government, experience a radical shift or changes will be evolutionary and incremental. Professor Peters noted that ensuring predictability often means providing a significant organizational autonomy which is, at times, questionable from democratic point of view (e.g. central banks). There are, according to Peters, two types of democracies: majoritarian (Westminster) and consensual. It is up to political actors and dominant political culture which kind of relationship towards public administration will be actualized. Peters considers administrative science as a component of public administration. In his words, administrative science (or organizational theory) is an important prerequisite for public administration scholars along with other important disciplines.

Maja Horvat, from MAP Consulting d.o.o. asked a question about policy analysis and its importance in the functioning of public administration, i.e. what kind of knowledge from policy analysis field should be relevant for work in public administration and which skills should public servants possess in this respect? Professor Peters could not offer an answer of general validity, but as the most important skills of the public servants, he pointed out: creativity, relying on hard evidence, ability of positivist analysis, argument analysis and ability to 'place' the problem in relevant context.

Questions about the future perspectives of public administration (as a scientific discipline, but also as an organizational system) and the role of public administration in contemporary society were asked by Jasmina Džinić from the Faculty of Law in Zagreb. Public administration, according to Professor Peters, is to retain a similar role as it is performing now, and drastic changes in its organization and operation should not be expected. The core functions will be of the utmost importance in future decades. There is a noticeable and strengthening tendency of positivist orientation based on sociological method. The practice of public administration (policy-making mostly), will also be, according to Peters, increasingly based on objective and measurable facts (evidence-based), rather than inspiration, discretion, talent and feeling.

Vedran Đulabić, PhD from the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, inquired about network theories and network management and the applicability of these concepts in countries like Croatia where the primacy of politics is still dominant. How is it possible to establish a network of actors in the ambient where most policies are designed and implemented in a top-down, authoritarian manner? Professor Peters responded that the actors themselves should fight for participation, regardless of the government's initiative. Horizontal policy networks linking the various actors and stakeholders are primarily considered to be the method that develops and operates beyond and besides the expressed will of the public authorities. Its informality is certainly its biggest strength. It is considered that such networks exist everywhere, visible or not. This is especially true at the local level of government.

Many other questions were raised during a lively discussion.

The lecture by Professor B. Guy Peters has opened a number of topics and vividly reflected the complexity and dynamism of a field such as public administration. His lessons on the importance of interdisciplinary research and the necessity of comparative study, and on the mutual relevance of theory and practice are an encouragement and a basis on which

the contributions of young scientists from the discipline may be added. The lecture was full of witty and scenic remarks and digressions that made this complex and studious subject comprehensible to the audience.

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