Locating Accountability: One or Many?

Singularity versus plurality

Accountability for collective actions gives rise to a recurring problem of whether accountability should be concentrated or diffused. Is such accountability more effective when it is clearly located with one person or body, such as a president, a minister or chief executive, who can speak on behalf of the collectivity? Or should accountability be dispersed among the various individuals and groups, including rank-and-file officials, who have contributed to the collective action and should therefore be held directly accountable? Views about the respective merits of single and plural accountability also have a bearing on issues of basic constitutional and institutional design. Should institutions be structured with strong centralised control in order to facilitate single-line accountability? Or should a more fragmented structure be encouraged with the purpose of facilitating a more pluralist form of accountability? The issue goes to the heart of debates over parliamentary versus presidential government and over unitary versus federal systems. Do the separation of powers and constitutional checks and balances, as built into the United States constitution, help or hinder government accountability? Does the sharing of functions between different levels of government make governments more or less accountable? Similar questions also arise over trends to devolve and dispersal of government power away from monolithic departments to semi-independent bodies linked to government by contracts and partnerships (Chapter 5). Does the replacement of hierarchies with networks improve or damage accountability?
The case for a single point of accountability was classically stated by J. S. Mill:

As a general rule, every executive function, whether superior or subordinate, should be the appointed duty of some given individual. It should be apparent to all the world who did everything, and through whose fault anything was left undone. Responsibility is null and void when nobody knows who is responsible. Nor, even when real, can it be divided without being weakened. To maintain it at its highest, there must be one person who receives the whole praise of what is well done, the whole blame of what is ill.

(Considerations on Representative Government 1861 [1964], p. 332)

By contrast, most recent accounts of accountability (for example, Day and Klein, 1987; Romzek and Dubnick, 1987; Finn, 1993; Fisse and Braithwaite, 1993; Stone, 1995; Barberis, 1998) have favoured a more multifaceted, pluralist approach. A more diverse range of accountability points, it is argued, provide a better guarantee of accountability than any reduction in the inadequate structures of hierarchical accountability.

The question takes one of two forms, depending on the institutional context. First, it concerns where best to locate accountability within a given institutional setting, such as an individual agency or a government system. For instance, should all accountability be directed through the person in charge, as Mill recommended, or should different members or sections be able to answer to the public? Here, the possibility of choosing between a concentrated and dispersed system of accountability implies a particular type of organisational structure, with a centralised authority capable of assuming overall accountability and with other elements capable of sharing that accountability. In such a setting, it makes sense to ask whether accountability should be concentrated or dispersed because the institutional structure allows for the possibility of either option.

Secondly, the issue arises in relation to alternative institutional structures, some of which, such as hierarchical organisations, allow at least the possibility of centralised accountability and others, such as federations and networks, which rule out such a possibility. For instance, does a federal system provide more effective accountability than a unitary system? Are networks more accountable than hierarchies? Here, the choice is not so much between alternative accountability structures within a given institutional structure as between alternative institutional structures each of which allows different accountability possibilities. In both cases,