

Democracy in the 21st Century: Accountability and Prosperity

The developed world spends nearly \$60 billion US annually in aid to developing countries and yet there appears to be no end to the poverty and despair which the aid is supposed to alleviate. The slogans continue – “Make Poverty History”, “Cut infant mortality in half by 2015”, etc., but real sustainable progress is difficult to discern. Why does all this money seem to go into a bottomless pit? And where can we turn for ideas to increase the effectiveness of our aid?

Perhaps we should look at ourselves in the developed world and ask what it is that brings us our prosperity that appears to be lacking elsewhere.

One concept, encapsulated in a single word, is largely present in the developed world, but is often weak or missing elsewhere: accountability. Accountability is the simple notion that we are held accountable for our deeds and actions. We respect the rules or pay a price for breaking them.

Accountability can be defined as “forces beyond our control that cause us to think and act in a certain way.” Accountability in the developed world is built into our daily lives. Our performance at work must be satisfactory in order to keep our jobs. We must pay our bills on time if we want to enjoy good credit. We respect traffic lights and speed limits if we want to avoid traffic tickets and demerit points on our licenses. In each situation, when we break the rules there is a reaction by someone whom we do not control, but who has the capacity to pass judgment and impose a penalty on us. These are only three examples of a complex web of accountabilities which we have developed to build a prosperous society founded on ethical behaviour.

Accountability is all around us. The private sector is held accountable by competition and by government regulation. While the competitor is beyond the control of the business manager, we cannot say that government regulation is always beyond the control of the business manager. If a company can influence government regulation to provide it with a special benefit, e.g. government tenders written to meet the specifications of the company's product, then government regulation is no longer a force beyond the company's control.



For governments, however, there are no competitors and their own regulations are obviously not beyond their control. So where is the accountability for government? In a democracy, governments are accountable to Parliament. Parliamentarians are elected by their constituents to publicly oversee the government. Every political party seeks to form government and obtain a majority in Parliament at election time to support its agenda. That, coupled with rules designed to reward support of government and punish individuality, ensures that Parliament is not a force completely beyond the control of government.

Parliaments have evolved as the democratic overseers of government with four specific responsibilities:

- To publicly debate and approve legislation granting the government authority to manage society and deliver services.
- To publicly debate and grant authority to government to raise necessary funds through taxation (the budget).

- To publicly debate and grant authority to the government to spend money on specific services and programs for society (the estimates).
- To require government to report to Parliament in a public way.

When Parliament is independent, i.e. beyond the control of government, it acts for the benefit of the electorate to ensure that government delivers focused programs, lower taxation and a growing healthy economy.

While all Parliaments are influenced by government, the question is to what degree? How independent is Parliament? How well is the electorate informed by a free and open media, and are elections fair and honest to keep parliamentarians accountable?

In the developed world, Parliaments are a reasonable independent, open, and transparent check on government, hence our prosperity. For the rest of the world, Parliaments are dominated by their governments – one-party states being a common example of a compliant Parliament. Bribery and coercion of parliamentarians often ensure that Parliament is not a force beyond the control of government. Intimidation of parliamentarians, including jail or assassination guarantees the lack of accountability.

A compliant Parliament may be a wonderful thing for those in power but it produces an impoverished society. When people in government steal their nation's taxes with impunity, there is no ac-

countability, Parliament has failed to exercise democratic oversight and society breaks down.

It would therefore seem that foreign aid should focus on instilling the concepts of democratic oversight by well-functioning and independent Parliaments in the developing world. Building domestic accountability of a government will make the government listen to its citizens.

No one votes for poverty, infant mortality, illiteracy, inadequate health care, sub-standard housing and non-existent municipal services, but when corruption is out of control, that is what the people receive.

Lack of accountability of government ensures that corruption is alive and well. Theft of state assets by people in power continues unchecked, and the impoverished masses have little hope of their governments being responsive to their needs.

Foreign aid by itself is laudable, but aid by itself is not sufficient. Improved governance and accountability of governments must be part of the solution.

John G. Williams is the Conservative Member of Parliament for Edmonton–St. Albert. This is a revised version of a presentation at the Canadian Bar Association and Law Clerks of the Senate and House of Commons Conference on "Accountability as a Pillar of Democratic Governing" held in Ottawa, November 2 – 4, 2006.