

BOOK REVIEW

***Megaphone Bureaucracy: Speaking Truth to Power in the Age of the New Normal* – By Dennis C. Grube. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2019. 222 pp. \$29.95**

When Aaron Wildavsky wrote ‘*Speaking Truth to Power*’ in the 1970s, he probably could not imagine that public servants would speak truth by using a megaphone while live streaming it to the Internet. This however is exactly what Dennis Grube is encouraging top public servants to do. In his recent book *Megaphone Bureaucracy*, he stimulates public servants to find their voices in *public* debates. While public servants at the executive level have always discussed issues with ministers and government leaders, they usually did so behind the screens, at least, in many Westminster and European governmental systems. This book suggests that this may have to change.

Pervasive trends such as 24/7 media, social media usage, and Freedom of Information Acts have made ministerial departments into glass houses and public servants subject to *public* scrutiny, Grube argues. *Megaphone Bureaucracy* focuses on the question how top public servants can adapt to these trends in four Westminster countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) and the United States. The book builds on a number of published articles by the author (Grube 2015; Grube and Howard 2016). Using in-depth interviews with (former) public servants from each country (n=45), illustrative case studies and supporting quantitative material, Grube shows how top public servants in Westminster settings have seen their political-administrative system move towards US practices: public servants with a public face. One can think of classic examples like James Comey (FBI) and Robert Moses (NYC).

Grube presents a concise argument: *‘If more accountability, transparency and creativity are being demanded of public servants, they must be allowed the room in which to embrace those new styles of engagement. They are “governing in public”, and conventions governing their behaviour need to catch up with that empirical reality’* (p. 197). Although partisanship is still out of the question, and democratic control remains the norm, something needs to change. In other words, the public service bargain has changed, which calls for a different role-taking and craft for top public servants (cf: Hood and Lodge 2006).

The way forward, Grube argues in chapter 2, is a hybrid ‘Washminster’ model, blending Westminster conventions with Washington’s practices. In this model, public

servants no longer take a vow of silence – senior officials add their voices to public debates on government policies and they let the public make up their own minds. This, Grube stresses, will be better for governments in the long run. The Washminster model *'couples the willingness of US leaders to speak up with Westminster reticence in terms of how and when that is appropriate'* (p. 46).

Chapters five to eight provide empirical substance, related to the different aspects of governing in public: appearing before parliamentary committees (ch. 5), appearing in the traditional media (ch. 6), sharing too much in public and its risks, especially on social media (ch. 7), and reminiscing in public through memoirs (ch. 8). In these chapters, Grube unpacks dilemmas and illustrates these with well-suited cases from each of the five countries. In the book's conclusion, Grube identifies seven factors for officials to consider before speaking out in public (p. 192). These culminate in a spectrum of public behaviours for top public servants, ranging from *'complete silence'* to *'off the deep end'*. Most bureaucrats would be most comfortable on the conservative side of the spectrum; they would reserve the public side for rare occasions or when one is faced with little choice. Finally, Grube sums up the argument and restates that *'adopting the Washminster framework of leadership offers the best way forward, as senior civil servants seek to operate effectively in the age of disruption'* (p. 197).

The book appears to be based on high quality interviewing. Its comparative nature comes across well, especially due to the fact that the text is pleasantly structured. Although light on theory, the case studies provide the reader with a clear sense of dilemmas and stakes. The case study on James Comey's public interventions to reopen the investigation into Hillary Clinton's e-mail server, a few weeks before the US 2016 presidential elections (ch. 3) is exemplary. Also, Grube does not shy away from normative issues such as ministerial responsibility. Finally, foregrounding 'prudence' in chapter 7 seems spot on for top public servants working in ambiguous offices. Discernment of whether to 'govern in public' – and if so, how – may be an element of the top public servant's craft in the years to come (p. 138).

Grube's eloquent writing carries the qualities of this book. However, there are also three jarring questions that puzzles this reader. First, there is a most basic empirical question, one that comes before the stress upon the new Washminster model. Are public servants indeed becoming more public? More precise, are public servants operating in increasingly public environments? Grube argues they do, and his interviewees tend to agree. However, the quantitative materials (presented as cross-sectional descriptive data) hardly ground these claims. Also, Grube admits that the idea of anonymous administrators is in decline, but accepts there is no complete 'freefall' (p. 189). So, how widespread and irreversible is this phenomenon really?

Second, if public servants would go public, what should they do? Although Grube's point on prudence is sensible, it is hardly enough to establish new professional

practices. For example, how should they work alongside their political masters who may feel threatened by Grube's argument? Also, what does it imply for training and development of future top officials?

The third question is about the resonance of these findings in non-Westminster and non-US contexts. Although hardly a criticism, as it is beyond the scope of the book, Grube's diagnosis of hollowed out ministerial responsibility and public servants in the line of fire is bewildering to this continental European reader. Though this may occasionally occur here, it seems like the exception, not the rule. Explicitly theorising nuances between different countries seems warranted.

Nonetheless, *Megaphone Bureaucracy* is a timely book that is accessible and interesting to both academics and top public servants beyond Westminster systems and the US. This book reimagines officials by handing them a megaphone. Grube's search for leaders in public enlarges the potential of top *public* servants. Its dilemmas are tangible and Grube's way forward might be provocative but is also inspiring, especially for a government class that has grown accustomed to whispering truth to power behind the scenes.

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ISSN 1662-1387