

# The « New Public Administration » (Circa 1968) : Minnowbrook revisited\*

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by Ira SHARKANSKY,

The University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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In September, 1968 thirty-three young academics wrote papers and met to discuss themes pertaining to the « New Public Administration » at the Minnowbrook Conference Center of Syracuse University. The historical setting of the Conference made itself felt. The previous five years had been marked by upheaval and changes in basic features of American politics and administration, and the preceding five months had provided fresh signs of turmoil. The list of stimuli range in time from the assassination of John Kennedy, conflagrations in Watts and other urban ghettos, the first years of the Johnson Administration and the development of Community Action with its concern for « maximum feasible participation », Vietnam and most recently the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, plus the confrontations at the Democratic Convention in Chicago.

## **The Minnowbrook perspective.**

It is appropriate to note the incidence of sharp disagreements among the authors and other participants at the conference. Yet most seemed to share certain points of view. Although these were not articulated into any tight framework, they do bear some affinity for one another and seem to reflect the era that preceded the conference. To paraphrase

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This essay is revised slightly from a version presented at a panel on Politization of Administration, World Congress of the International Political Science Association, Montreal 19-25 August, 1973. Many thanks for the constructive criticisms received there, and from Matthew Holden, Jr., my colleague at the University of Wisconsin.

a prominent reviewer of the conference volume (1), its perspective includes :

- a) a perception of revolutionary ferment and change ;
- b) a perception of government being repressive and unresponsive to demands from racial and low-income minorities ;
- c) claims for the maturity of young people ;
- d) advocacy that social science, including public administration, adopt explicit value orientations to promote equity in income and power, and to identify with the interests of powerless minorities ;
- e) urge overt political roles for public administrators ;
- f) advocate a political process of confrontation rather than negotiation and compromise.

The participants signalled their commitment to confrontation by challenging the leadership of the conference itself. Although nine authors had accepted invitations to prepare papers and were — at least in my case — expecting to discuss their merits and inadequacies in a traditional conference-seminar format, we consumed many hours debating the purpose of our meeting : Why did we have to have formal papers ? If we were really the young and the new, why were we so bound by the traditional in our conference arrangements ? Who chose the topics ? Weren't there more important topics ? (2).

In 1971 the Chandler Publishing Company produced *Toward A New Public Administration : The Minnowbrook Perspective*, edited by the conference chairman, and including the papers initially written in the summer of 1968, plus formal critiques of those papers, excerpts from the discussions at the conference, four additional essays and a preface written by the organizers after the conference. There are several indications that the conference had some impact on its participants and others. Courses titled « New Public Administration » have appeared in the curriculum of some institutions, there have been efforts to reestablish contacts among the conferees, and occasional essays on the conference have appeared in the *Public Administration Review*. At least one dissertation is under way on the topic of the Minnowbrook Conference.

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(1) See the review by Victor A. Thompson in *The American Political Science Review*, LXVI (June 1972), pp. 620 ff.

(2) Frank MARINI, « Introduction : A New Public Administration ? » in Marini, ed., *Toward a New Public Administration : The Minnowbrook Perspective* (Scranton, Pa. : Chandler Publishing Co., 1971), p. 4.

My own experience at Minnowbrook was extreme discomfort in the fact of obvious and basic disagreements with most participants, and the difficulties of transportation that kept me from leaving when it became clear that the confrontation was hostile and unpleasant. We were isolated some fifty miles into the Adirondack Mountains, and dependent on a charter bus that would not arrive until the scheduled end of the meetings. In the five years since that time, the pain has dulled enough for me to open the book, re-read the essays, and reflect on their significance.

This essay is conceived narrowly as a review of the Minnowbrook publication. Even more narrowly, it concentrates on those papers and related discussions which reveal most fully what has come to be considered the « Minnowbrook perspective ». The reader should not view this as an assessment of the more general issues subsumed within the topics of advocacy administration ; and administration privileges, rights and responsibilities. These are important issues, and should not be dismissed lightly. Perhaps the Minnowbrook perspective deserves a more persuasive expression than it receives in the volume to be reviewed here.

My impressions of the Minnowbrook papers are hardly more positive five years removed from the conference than they were at the time. As I read my colleagues' papers and the editor's report of the discussion, I recall the writers who prematurely abandoned the social scientist's quest for learning to take up the role of advocacy. The administrator's freedom and the client's needs occupied primacy in the Minnowbrook value structure. The authors claimed to be expressing a social conscience, but the equal positions of the administrators' freedom of action and the clients' needs is only one instance where the strength of feeling seemed to mask difficult issues. What if the needs of the administrative insiders and outsiders were in conflict ? There is no clear answer, but such excerpts as the following sound suspiciously self-serving in listing the « life opportunities » of insiders ahead of the outsiders : ... [O]ur primary normative premise should be that *the purpose of public organization is the reduction of economic, social, and psychic suffering and the enhancement of life opportunities for those inside and outside the organization* (3).

The papers contain a number of sweeping allegations that are simplistic and fadish, but not documented and in some cases clearly wrong : for example, assertions about the « increasing youthfulness » of a

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(3) Todd R. LAPORTE, « The Recovery of Relevance in the Study of Public Organizations », in Marini, ed., p. 32 italics in original.

population whose demographics were already showing increasing age (4) ; and allegations about the discrete policy biases built into such macroscopic phenomena as « pluralistic government » or « the procedures of representative democracy » (5). One writer wrote about unnamed strawmen who stand for « the mode of objective social science » and « most contemporary theories of organization » that allegedly « assume that productivity is good if it is efficient, [and] that rational decision making will somehow return good decisions in terms of the social conditions associated with them » (6) — in order to knock these down and leave room for his own mode of value relevance.

In their concern to promote policy-making by administrators, most conferees at Minnowbrook overlooked the problems of administrative control and discipline. Indeed, the criticisms of Weberian hierarchy and the advocacy of confrontation and « consociated » (7) models of administration suggest the writers felt that control was inherent in the proposed structures. Few writers concerned themselves with the historic roles of the constitutional branches of government (i.e., those established by the Magna Charta and at other prominent episodes in Western history for the express purpose of controlling the administrative units of government).

Some conferees were clearly spokesmen for administrators in their quest for more power and subordinated issues of administrative control. In the words one writer : In searching for the foundations of a new approach to normative theory in Public Administration, this essay has thus far suggested two general guidelines : 1° that such a theory must accommodate the values and motives of individual public administrators to theories of administrative responsibility ; and 2° that the essential congruence of administrative freedom and political freedom must be recognized. Stated in somewhat more generic terms, the presumed distinction between freedom and responsibility (or between freedom for self and freedom for others) should be rejected (8).

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(4) Orion F. WHITE, Jr., « Social Change and Administrative Adaptation », in Marini, ed., p. 61.

(5) H. George FREDERICKSON, « Toward a New Public Administration », in Marini, ed., p. 311.

(6) LAPORTE, p. 31.

(7) « Consociated » models are offered as an alternative to the bureaucratic model, and are said to include a « multivalent authority structure » summarized as « a. no permanent hierarchy ; b. situational leadership ; and c. diverse authority patterns among various project teams ». See Larry KIRKHART, « Toward a Theory of Public Administration », in Marini, ed., pp. 158-161.

(8) Michael M. HARMON, « Normative Theory and Public Administration : Some Suggestions for a Redefinition of Administrative Responsibility », in Marini, ed., p. 179.

To me, this passage says that « administrators' freedom » is equivalent or superior in value to « administrative responsibility ». During part of the discussion that was recorded, one participant went even further with the notion of an administrator's prerogatives; and seemed to provide a blanket justification for administrator's sabotage of their own organizations: « How does an administrator justify organizationally destructive forms of activity, or at what point is it justifiable for an administrator or anybody in an organization to justify destructive kinds of behavior? But the question can very appropriately be reversed. At what point does an organization justify not letting an individual destroy his organization? The burden is really on the organization. The assumption behind the idea that an individual must justify his sabotage is that organizational permanence is a legitimate value. I don't think it is » (9).

Another author likened Public Administration with the Supreme Court, both in their recently increased involvement in policy-making and in the likelihood that the Court and Public Administration will speak for disadvantaged minorities while « elected officials speak basically for the majority and for the privileged minorities... » (10). This same author suggests a future hostility between elected officials and the Administration and would not keep Public Administration in a passive role *vis a vis* the elected officials: ... Public Administration... must find means by which it can enhance the reelection probabilities of supporting incumbents... building and maintaining of roads or other capital facilities in the legislators' district, establishing high-employment facilities, such as federal office buildings, county courthouses, police precincts, and the like, and distributing public relations materials favorable to the incumbent legislator... As a consequence it is entirely possible to imagine legislators becoming strong spokesmen for less hierarchic and less authoritative bureaucraties (11).

This kind of patronage is standard operating procedure in relations between the elected chief executive and members of the legislature. Yet the Minnowbrook perspective would have administrators dispense patronage in order to reduce the chief executive's control over the bureaucracy. Just who within the administrative units would have the opportunity to dispense patronage? The conferees do not make it clear. Indeed, it is not clear what they mean by Public Administration (the words are always capitalized in the published volume). At times the

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(9) MARINI, p. 11.

(10) FREDERICKSON, p. 329.

(11) FREDERICKSON, p. 326.

meaning seems to be the academic discipline ; at times some undefined group of government personnel. It is not surprising to find vagueness and imprecision where there is no little anger expressed against aspects of the status quo and intense advocacy of change. Yet this does not make the prescriptions offered any more intelligible, or less threatening to an orderly process of government.

What is surprising in the papers that advocate more power for undefined personnel in the administration is the virtual lack of concern that the devolution of authority may turn against the values expressed by the writers. What would control the brutality of an unrestrained police officer, the racism of a school teacher, the undisciplined infantry lieutenant in Vietnam, or the Air Force General who would ignore specific orders of his superiors against bombing ? Each of these events was a feature of the era that prompted the Minnowbrook conferees to urge more political and policy-making activity by administrators. Yet the conferees seemed blind to the possibility that the freedom they urged upon administrators would loosen vital control procedures and unleash more of the forces they abhor.

None of the formal papers mentions the extensive literature and juridical commentaries developed out of the war crimes trials of the Nazis, and later reexamined in the trials centering on Vietnam. If the advocates of looser administration had considered that material, they might have recognized a difference between a standard that frees an administrator from his superior's control when the superior's instructions violate the most basic of moral precepts, and a standard that simply frees an administrator from his superior's control. The one temporarily replaces bureaucratic order with a limited set of higher virtues ; the other challenges control altogether and threatens chaos. One writer recognized that the « politics of love » associated with the Minnowbrook perspective might become a « politics of suppression ». But in his final sentence he could offer only « hope » that things would go the right way (12).

The Minnowbrook participants demonstrated their commitment to confrontation and showed their capacity to take over the conference organization. But that should not be taken as an indication of their skills at what one called « multivalent authority structures ». During the student revolts of the era it was said that the weak administrative structures of universities made them inviting targets. The Minnowbrook Conference was weaker administratively, and more inviting to confrontation than even a university. The setting was isolated ; the population

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(12) WHITE, p. 83.

entirely self-contained ; there was plenty of alternative means of recreation for those participants who wearied of the battle ; there seemed to be a sizable majority of participants in favor of a departure from traditional formats ( many, presumably, were attending their first academic conference and thus had little familiarity with the usual patterns ) ; and the chairman was clearly without the capacity and perhaps without the motivation to maintain the customary procedures. Without having kept up with most participants, I cannot say how their successful assault on the conference may have shaped subsequent careers. Yet it is appropriate to take a look at the intervening years in American politics to assess the continued relevance of the 1968 intellectual output.

### A retrospective assessment of Minnowbrook.

To assess the utility of the papers and discussions for what has ensued since Minnowbrook, it will be necessary to select a definition for public administration. This may violate the assumptions of some papers ; none defined clearly the field at hand, although several lamented the problems of unclear boundaries. One author struggled with the issue before concluding : ... that, when all is said and done, the major and perhaps only point of general agreement among us is that the process of *cooperative rational action* is the conceptual tie that binds (13).

For my purposes, that tie is not tight enough as a definition of public administration. Recognizing that I will leave out some of what my colleagues might include (but not knowing just what they would exclude), I will proceed with the assumption that the issue concerns the « administrative branch of government », i.e., those departments, agencies, bureaus, offices, *et al.*, separate from the legislative and judicial branches, and usually arrayed on organizational charts under the chief executive ; but *excluding* the elected chief executive and his immediate supporting staffs (e.g., the Executive Office of the President) (14). Thus, we have the notion of four branches of government in the context of the United States, three of them (legislative, judicial, and executive) defined in the Constitution and traditionally having the responsibility for controlling the fourth (the administrative).

My analysis will focus on the growth or decline of administrative policy-making. This may be a far cry from the intellectual excitement of Minnowbrook. Yet the empirical questions of growth and decline will

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(13) LAPORTE, p. 23.

(14) For greater explication of these boundaries see my *Public Administration : Policy-Making in Government Agencies* (Chicago : Markham 1972), Chapter 1.

permit us to determine if the Minnowbrook preference for a growing administrative role tapped a chord whose appreciation was shared by important other actors in politics. After looking at some indications of growth and decline, I shall raise some further questions about the norms of Minnowbrook; I will note the free-wheeling behavior of administrators that many of us would judge undesirable, and suggest a benefit-cost evaluation of greater administrative freedom.

### **The executive's growth.**

As I assess the years since Minnowbrook, it does not appear to be the administrative branch that has shown the most growth. Indeed, the administrative branch of the United States national government has decreased in absolute numbers: from 3,018,125 civilians in 1968 to 2,796,911 in 1972 (15). State and local administrative employees in the United States have continued to increase in number from approximately 6,387,000 in 1960 to 9,358,000 in 1968, to 10,444,000 in 1971 when the latest figures are available, but the rate of growth has declined. Agencies at all levels of American governments grew in size during most of the 1960's, largely in response to growing demands from an increasing population, and the actions of supportive legislative and executive branches in Washington controlled by the Democrats. As the war babies of the 1940's and their younger brothers and sisters aged their way through elementary school and later to higher education they produced the demands for more facilities and personnel. As the new people grew — and as the total economy expanded to provide for them — we added the personnel to plan and implement new highways, parks, hunting and fishing opportunities, hospitals, job training facilities, welfare programs, and correctional facilities. Now that the rate of population growth has diminished — and the demographic bulge of the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's has not yet reached the nursing home bracket — the demands on all levels of government have declined in intensity. With a retrenchment-minded Republican in the White House, the size of the national administration has actually declined. In state and local governments (whose administrators spend much of their time on programs designed or funded in Washington), we can find a decline in the rates of growth for administrative personnel starting about 1968. For the eight years prior to then, state and local personnel increased at an average rate of 5.8 %

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(15) *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1972* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 400.



per year. During the four years after then, the average rate of increase dropped to 3.8 % per year.

It may be deemed improper to challenge the Minnowbrook perspective with anything as mundane as data showing declines (or declining growth rates) in administrative personnel. Yet the figures are only part of the story. They reflect other conditions that suggest growth sectors of policy-making power in American politics were in the executive branches of national and state governments during 1968-1972 and not in the administrative agencies. Some of the signs were already apparent at the time of Minnowbrook, but have increased in intensity. Vietnam was a President's war, fought with only the passive support of Congress and with the President himself involved in the intimate details : selecting bombing targets in the Johnson years, and directing the withdrawal and overseeing armistice negotiations during the Nixon years. It is not possible to summarize the record of the relevant administrative units in Vietnam policy-making. The military seems to have been sharply divided over the wisdom and nature of escalation and deescalation ; and cases of the Army lieutenant who ordered the massacre at My Lai, and the Air Force general whose self-conceived bombing embarrassed his commander-in-chief and upset one effort at armistice negotiations do not provide salutary examples of the Minnowbrook perspective in operation. Outside of the military sector the executive branch also showed signs of greater prominence than the administration. Nixon's initiatives with respect to the USSR and China seem to have rested largely on his own shoulders or those of his personal emissaries rather than the State Department ; the Office of Economic Opportunity and its Community Action Agencies had given the greatest impetus to the Minnowbrook perspective during the 1964-1968 period, but it went into sharp decline with the Nixon Presidency ; the Watergate scandal also represents the growth of executive power, although in this case beyond the range of the chief executive himself to control (or perhaps to know) what transpired. Looking again at figures to summarize these movements in power, the Executive Office of the President grew almost 40 % during the first term of Richard Nixon : from 1,851 employees in 1968 to 2,585 in 1972 (16).

Among state governments, some evidence of increasing executive power appeared in the incidence or reorganizations that favored the governors' position. The 1972-73 edition of *The Book of the States* records that more than 30 states have studied reorganization recently, and that some 12 have

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(16) *Loc. Cit.*, with the figures for the Executive Office excluding those for the Office of Economic Opportunity which has operated more like a « line » unit of the administrative branch than a truly integrated unit of the executive staff.

completed substantial reorganizations in the last 5 years. The dominant pattern has given more power into the hands of state chief executives by consolidating departments ; permitting the governor to appoint more of the administrative heads ; permitting the governor to reorganize the administration further by executive order ; extending the term of the governor ; removing limitations against a governor's succeeding himself ; providing a transition staff for a governor-elect ; and centralizing various revenue, budgetary and expenditure controls under the governor's authority (17). Such proposals for executive-centered reorganizations continued into 1973, but meet severe resistance. My own observation of one proposal in Wisconsin indicated that reactions against the Watergate scandal at the national level have permeated the entire political system to work against the further extension of any executive's authority.

### **The balance of risk and benefit in administrative discretion.**

What seems most naive about the essays presented at Minnowbrook is the lack of attention to practices under the heading of administrative discretion that would turn against the values of its proponents. How guard against actions of administrators that counter policies laid down by established constitutional authorities ? Or the callous, intemperate and occasionally uncivilized acts of administrators acting under the color of public authority ? How determine if the nature of such actions is sufficient to place the emphasizes on administrative discipline rather than discretion ? At this point, we do not know enough about these issues to advocate major changes for the administrator's role in the formulation or implementation of public policy.

We do know that administrators exercise considerable discretion within the provisions of existing programs, and often take the lead in formulating the measures considered by the executive and legislative branches. At issue, however, are demands that administrative discretion be enlarged and given more formal autonomy from the other branches.

The evidence on behalf of administrators acting in accordance with values we all consider salutary is not clearly better than that of the officials and procedures evolved over the years to direct and control the administrators. If the American chief executive must share responsibility for the war in Vietnam with his counterparts in North and South Vietnam and the leadership of the Vietcong, then certain American officers

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(17) George A. BELL, « State Administrative Organization Activities 1970-71 », in *The Book of the States 1972-1973* (Lexington, Ky. : The Council of State Governments, 1972), pp. 141 ff.

and enlisted personnel (fitting into most definitions of administrators) must accept responsibility for destructive acts taken on their own which violated explicit orders from their commander-in-chief. Although the Mayor of Chicago (a chief executive) has received widespread condemnation for denying freedom of expression in his city during the Democratic Convention of 1968, it was members of his police force (administrators) seeming to act in an undisciplined manner who acquired the label of police riots. While administrators in local programs funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity have earned much praise from those who applaud initiative from within the ranks of public agencies, these programs have also earned much scorn. As I drafted this essay, administrative personnel of an OEO-funded agency in Montgomery, Alabama were being investigated on allegations that they directed the involuntary sterilization of young black females. Are these merely instances of errant behavior on the part of generally creative and benevolent administrators? Or are they signs of chronic problems that warrant continued efforts to direct and control administrators through mutually suspicious executive, legislative or judicial personnel who owe their own selections to the procedures the American society has evolved to protect itself from capricious governors? The question we must pose to those who express the Minnowbrook perspective is: will we risk more than we gain in creative and benevolent government by granting more discretion to administrators? My own reading of the Minnowbrook papers reveals no research strategy that will produce appropriate benefit-cost ratios.

### **The future of a Minnowbrook perspective.**

What is also unknown is the holding power of the Minnowbrook perspective among academics and government personnel involved in public administration. The heady days of maximum feasible participation during the mid-1960's and the campus-centered challenges of government authority in the late 1960's and early 1970's may leave their mark strongly, especially on academics who matured intellectually during that period. There are ambiguous signs of the future strength for each branch of government. It is not possible to judge the full particulars of the Watergate scandal, much less how it may affect the executive branch and perhaps allow a resurgence of legislative, judicial, or administrative powers in the national government or elsewhere. The critiques of administrative procedures represented by Ralph Nader and his associates began to appear mostly during the period of executive ascendancy, yet may serve as a counter-movement to encourage independent-minded, socially-conscious administrators. Insofar as Minnowbrook did not

prescribe a rigid or logically consistent code of behavior, but was merely a « perspective » involving predispositions toward greater administrative freedoms in policy to the public, then it may survive the intemperate and imprecise nature of its birth in upstate New York. If it does survive, then we should hope along with one of its advocates that it fosters a politics of love and not a politics of suppression.

