

John Stuart Mill's Theory of Bureaucracy within Representative Government: Balancing Competence and Participation

The relationship between bureaucracy and representative government has been a subject of concern to public administration since its inception. John Stuart Mill addressed this question in an 1861 essay, in which he explained his theory of government. Mill suggests a role for public administration that is not only legitimate, but also necessary for good government. His writings contain remarkable references to the concerns addressed in current theories of public administration. Mill worked to balance the spirit of popular government with governance by the most educated, skilled, and experienced of the nation, whether they were citizens, elected representatives, or administrative officials. This article examines Mill's theory and the contribution it makes to current public administration discussion.

The role of bureaucracy within representative government has been a central concern of American public administration since its inception, and it continues to be central in important dialogue today. At the heart of this concern is the relationship between bureaucracy and representative government. How does bureaucracy, a hierarchical organization of skill and expertise, fit within a representative government, commonly referred to as democracy by many?

Public administration scholars have lamented the lack of an adequate theoretical base to reconcile or explain this relationship (Stivers 1990; Wamsley and Wolf 1996). Finding an adequate theoretical base requires public administration to be examined in its context as a component of a political system. The most commonly referenced treatment of bureaucracy is that of Max Weber (Roth and Wittich 1978); however, Weber never defined bureaucracy, nor did he write a succinct description or analysis of the relationship of the concepts of representative government and bureaucracy (Albrow 1970).

Weber's treatment of bureaucracy is often referred to as though it were the earliest modern treatment of the subject. However, prior to Weber's writings, John Stuart Mill set out a remarkably succinct yet impressively comprehensive theory of bureaucracy within representative gov-

ernment. This is clearest in his essay, *Considerations on Representative Government*, written in 1861, about a half-century before Weber's main writings on the subject (Mill 1958). Moreover, there are other reasons for the utility of Mill's version of American public administration: Mill's argument was articulated in English, with explicit and clear reference to the kinds of issues that have been most germane to American public administration. He paid attention to developments in America and even commented carefully on Tocqueville's observations and commentaries about it (Mill 1958, 1961b, 1961c).

Mill recognized the dangers of bureaucracy, including the potential for abuse of power and the limitations it placed on human creativity. He also recognized that bureaucracy had many benefits for representative government. Mill warned of the dangers of democracy, as did some of our founders, but he emphasized the importance of the education that citizens receive when they participate in government. Mill tried to balance the spirit of representative democracy with governance by the wisest,

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most educated, skilled, and experienced people in the nation, whether they were citizens, elected representatives, or administrative officials.

Mill's work references issues that are important to recent competing arguments about the role and legitimacy of American public administration in representative government. His theory provides an understanding of the relationship between bureaucracy and representative government that can contribute to an integrated public administration theory. In this article, I argue that considering the relevance of John Stuart Mill's work to American government suggests a place for public bureaucracy that is not only legitimate, but also necessary for good government.

I begin by discussing some of the recent public administration literature that has addressed the legitimacy and role of public administration in American government, identifying an apparent division between participatory themes or competence themes. Second, I provide a summary of Mill's theory of government and his structure for balancing participation and competence. Finally, I explain the relationship that Mill saw between bureaucracy and representative government, identifying bureaucracy's important place in society, and discuss Mill's relevance to current public administration discussion.

Legitimacy for Public Administration

Ambivalence in the last decade about the democratic possibilities of public administration and a growing societal distrust of bureaucracy led to the appearance of the Blacksburg Manifesto and *Refounding Public Administration* (Wamsley et al. 1990). These works reignited discussion among those concerned with the role of public administration in the American political system. In *Refounding Public Administration*, several writers attempt to provide a normative base for public administration in the founding of the United States, in the Constitution, and in the skills and experience of the members of professional public administration. Recognizing public administration as a social asset, the authors argue that public administration has an institutional tradition and support system that nurtures a comprehensive, long-term, deliberative function that is essential to determining the public interest. Their argument is that this unique role and capacity gives public administration its legitimacy within our political system.

Generally, the discussion that grew out of this literature involved schemes to make public administration more democratic or to find legitimacy for a seemingly undemocratic institution within a political system that assumed a democratic goal. Even perspectives that are sometimes characterized as elitist (because they defend the special skill and experience of public administrators) usually rest their defense on claims that public administration facili-

tates democratic intent. The search for greater legitimacy for public administration has led many to espouse a more direct relationship between administrators and citizens, sometimes minimizing or bypassing the role of the elected representatives.

In spite of many similarities, including their commonly stated goal of democracy, current theories of public administration can be divided into two streams of thought. One stream emphasizes public administration's unique ability to facilitate public participation, thereby creating a more democratic state. The other stream emphasizes the special competence of public administration and the importance of that competence to governance.

To answer questions of legitimacy, the first stream of thought emphasizes ideas of citizenship and participation. Common here is the perception that we are losing touch with the participatory and egalitarian emphases of our tradition. Topics such as citizenship, civic capacity, and community governance are frequently discussed against a backdrop of citizen distrust of government and public administration's unique role in repairing that relationship (Box 1998; Dennard 1996; Heying 1999; Kass 1999; King, Felty, and Susel 1998; King and Stivers 1998; Melkers and Thomas 1998; Morgan and Vizzini 1999; Simonsen and Robbins 2000; Stivers 1990; Stivers 1996; Wamsley and Wolf 1996). Much of this literature espouses a collaborative effort to move the practice of citizenship into bureaucracy so that, through the efforts of public administrators, people may feel empowered to participate in government and find ways to develop their full human potential. Here, citizenship is important as a process of civic education that enables citizens to consider the public interest rather than their selfish interests and also contributes to the enhancement of this ability.

Writers in the second stream of thought focus on the institutional contribution of public administration. In its agential role, public administration provides competent, skilled experience that is capable of focusing on the long-term, shared public interest (Cook 1996; Kass 1990; Morgan 1996; Terry 1995). Terry (1995) explains that public administration is responsible for conserving the cultural values and traditions of political society. He argues that administrators' primary function is to preserve institutional integrity, provide continuity and stability to the political system, and maintain constitutional values and processes. Cook (1996) suggests that public administration has a responsibility as a constitutive or formative contributor to society through the contribution of its specialized knowledge to public deliberation enlarging the discussion from immediate concerns to long-term public goals. The neoinstitutional perspective adds another component to the institutional view by recognizing the role of public administrators in shaping institutional frameworks in the midst

of social change. Institutions that are attentive to public deliberation and susceptible to interaction with social processes are open to creative tension that allows institutions to evolve, carrying with them the long-term shared interests of society (Morgan 1996).

For both the participative and institutional schools, public administration has a special perspective on the public interest and a special contribution to make to the political system. The goal for each is to protect and facilitate representative (or in some cases, democratic) government, though one set of arguments emphasizes citizen participation, while the other emphasizes specialized, trained expertise and experience. Mill's theory of government addresses many of the important issues in these arguments. He seeks to create good government by balancing participation and competence to protect and facilitate representative government, and public administration plays an important role in his scheme.

Mill's Theory of Government

Mill consolidated his theory of government in his 1861 essay, *Considerations on Representative Government*, which is the culmination of his thoughts on government after considerable study, evaluation, and experience in government. By this time, Mill had carefully considered Tocqueville's observations of democracy in the United States, he had served as a public administrator in the East India Company, and he had served as an elected member of Parliament. Mill was trained to be a social and political reformer by his father, James Mill, and by Jeremy Bentham.¹ This training made a lasting impression on him, demonstrated by his commitment to removing government from the hands of aristocrats and his fight for universal suffrage and emancipation for women, workers, and slaves.

John Stuart Mill is reported to have been one of the prime "democratic theorists" because of his work toward inclusion and his emphasis on public participation in government. But Mill has also been characterized as a political elitist because he argued for competent leadership in government. Some of this confusion is due to the fact that Mill gives a greater role to citizens than do most other elitist theorists (Thompson 1976). And, as Burke (1994) explains, Mill was a liberal rather than a democrat. His central concerns were liberty, individual rights, and limited government.² Mill's theory combines public participation with competent leadership as a way to protect his central concern.

In his analysis of Mill's theory of government, Thompson argues that the principles of competence and participation are the cornerstone of Mill's good government. The principle of participation requires citizens to participate to the greatest extent possible; the principle of competence

requires the influence of the more qualified citizens to be as great as possible. Thompson writes that Mill strongly emphasized participation and then constrained it with competence to promote good leadership and civic education. Conversely, participation develops competence in the people while checking the power of those in leadership. In this view, good government requires a balanced weaving of virtue, interest, skill, and experience in those who serve and those who are sovereign.

Mill measures the goodness of government in two ways: First, "the degree in which it tends to increase the sum of good qualities in the governed, collectively and individually"; and second, "the degree of perfection with which they organize the moral, intellectual, and active worth already existing, so as to operate with the greatest effect on public affairs" (1958, 28). Mill believes government should be judged by its actions upon citizens, its tendency to improve or deteriorate the people, and its ability to perform good work for them and by means of them.

Mill emphasizes that good government is more than honest officials and well-run institutions. Good government strives to develop the intelligence and virtue of the citizens, and the enhancement of these attributes in turn sustains and nourishes improvement of government itself. If citizens of a "self-government" do not possess the necessary level of interest, civic virtue, and morality, their government will reflect their inadequacies.

The only government that could fulfill Mill's criteria of good government is one in which the whole people participate in government, even if only in the smallest public function. Mill explains that participation in government gives the citizen a feeling of self-esteem and belonging. But more important is the discipline learned "from the occasional demand made upon the citizens to exercise, for a time, and in their turn some social function" (1958, 53). Private citizens receive moral instruction, even through rare or occasional participation which helps them to weigh the interests of others along with their own, to learn to think about conflicting interests, and to make decisions in terms of the common good. Through this participation, citizens are usually exposed to those who have more experience, knowledge, and skill, and who can help them to see the long-term shared interest. This exposure works to improve the citizenry and, in turn, to improve government (1961a, 322).

Mill believed that every person should have a voice in government for its value as an instrument of training and "to have his consent asked and his opinion counted at its worth, though not at more than its worth" (1958, 131). As this passage suggests, it is a completely different question, to Mill, whether everyone should have an *equal* voice. Here, Mill's principle of competence limits the influence of those with less education and experience in government. Mill

expects that interaction with others in the civic arena will teach citizens to defer to those with the most competence in specific areas, but that the interaction will educate and enlighten them all.

Mill believes there is a range of public-oriented activities that could fulfill this need; these activities do not necessarily include all aspects of government. The types of contributions and educative experiences to which Mill refers include jury trial, local and municipal government, industrial and philanthropic enterprises, and voluntary association. Mill also limits the necessary frequency and the duration of participation, recognizing that “the people” are busy making a living. The goal of public participation is to protect the interests of the people by giving them a voice in government, to educate them, and to open up their narrow self-interests by interaction with others in the community.

Though Mill’s writing reflects strong advocacy for popular limited government and argues for the benefits of participation, he believes it is more important to preserve liberty for individuals through limited government than it is to have pure democracy. Mill’s strong reservations about democracy are reinforced by the appearance of Tocqueville’s account of democracy in America. Mill published a review of Tocqueville’s work in 1835 in which he explained his own observations about democracy (1961b, 1961c). His reservations include concern about the power of the majority over minorities and the mediocrity of democratic government that results from the lack of diversity and loss of individuality that occurs when working toward consensus.

The danger in democracy, according to Mill, is a misunderstanding of what democracy should be. “The idea of a rational democracy is not that the people themselves govern, but that they have security for good government” (1961b, xxx). Mill believes the people are responsible for choosing good governors and for retaining ultimate control of those governors in their own hands, but phrases such as “self-government, and the power of the people over themselves do not express the true state of the case” in democracy (1961a, 257). Self-government is not government of each by himself, but of each by all the rest. He explains that the will of the people, “practically, means the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority” (1961, 258). Mill believes there is danger in the preponderance of any politically relevant grouping because all are equally tempted to abuse power for their own interest. This concern applies to rulers and to citizens alike.

Mill wishes to protect the individual’s ability to retain unique characteristics and opinions within democratic society. The increase of equality among the masses also in-

creases the helplessness of the individual against the mass (1961c, xxix). Mass decision making relies on common values, needs, and desires to come to a majority position from which to determine the legal structure of society. This sameness camouflages difference and contributes to mediocrity. Agreeing with Tocqueville, Mill thinks majority consensus can stifle the creative uniqueness and extraordinary ideas needed to improve society. Democracy that is modified, instructed, and inclusive of diverse opinion is good; but left free to evolve, it will suffer and become dangerous in its excesses.

It is Mill’s belief that, properly understood and administered, representative government would be the best form of government in practice as well as theory. The phrase “properly administered” is a crucial one, of course. Mill writes that the “best form of a popular constitution” combines “complete popular control over public affairs with the greatest attainable perfection of skilled agency” (1957a, 170). Mill expects that the political processes of representative government will be one of several mechanisms that work to improve the intellectual level of the citizenry. He expects that the citizens will learn to choose the best among themselves to represent them in government, that they will see the benefit of having their affairs managed by persons of greater knowledge and intelligence through participation and civic education (1963, 316).

Although Mill uses representative government as a prescription for the dangers of democracy, he recognizes it must be structured to ameliorate these same dangers. “Even in representative democracy, absolute power, if they chose to exercise it, would rest with the numerical majority; and these would be composed exclusively of a single class, alike in biases, prepossessions, and general modes of thinking” (1958, 127–8). Mill argues that inclusion of diverse opinion, skill, and experience diffuses prosperity and knowledge and generally benefits society. Exchange of difference, “the antagonism of interests are the only real security for continued progress” (1958, 34). If the community could be assured that diverse interests would be represented, the institution of government could serve the greatest social function in society: the function of antagonism.

Mill’s Structure for Balancing Participation and Competence

According to Mill, the antagonistic influences of competence and participation are necessary for good government. “Government by trained officials cannot do for a country the things which can be done by a free government”; conversely, “freedom cannot produce its best effects, and often breaks down altogether, unless means can be found of combining it with trained and skilled administration” (1958, 91). Mill explains that the pursuit of one without the

other ends in the decay and loss of both. A combination of the two should be found that makes compatible “the great advantage of the conduct of affairs by skilled persons, bred to it as an intellectual profession, along with that of a general control vested in, and seriously exercised by, bodies representative of the entire people” (1958, 91).

Mill’s combination separates the work that should be performed by skilled and knowledgeable persons and the work of watching, selecting, and (when necessary) controlling the governors. To progress toward a skilled and effective government, the people must be willing to allow the work that requires skill to be performed by those with the skill (1958, 91). Those who are best fitted to the various political tasks in a representative government, Mill believes, should be placed in the appropriate positions and allowed to perform as their ability dictates, subject only to broad constraints. Mill’s theory of representative government was, in fact, a theory of articulated and responsible functional elites representing different interests: (1) the elite citizen; (2) the wise representative; and (3) the skilled bureaucrat. He describes the roles and responsibilities of each of these groups and the relationship among them.

The Elite Citizen

Mill believes that, in addition to other forms of participation, voting is one of the most important responsibilities of a citizen. Rather than thinking of it as a right, though, voting should be considered a moral responsibility, a trust. He explains that a vote gives a person power over others and no one has a right to that power. The voter has a moral obligation to conscientiously consider the public interest and to use his or her best judgment in casting the vote (Mill 1958).

Mill also writes that a citizen should not be forced to vote, and voting should not be made too easy. A person indifferent to voting shows little concern for others and even less concern for self. Instead of fostering patriotism, civic education, and a sense of public duty, an indifferent voter robs the interested citizen of the power of his or her thoughtful vote. Taking an active interest in politics and civic participation is the first step toward elevating the individual from a narrow perspective to become the elite citizen.

The *first governing elite*, then, consists of interested voters who make the effort to take part in public affairs, to be informed, and to conscientiously cast the best possible vote for the public good. Mill expects citizens with educational qualifications, special public roles, and superior occupational positions to serve as opinion leaders who can be emulated or listened to during public deliberation because of their special skills, knowledge, or experience.

Mill thinks the influence of the more intelligent and informed citizens will give an enlightened tone to the elec-

torate. But the wisdom of these opinion leaders will be primarily reflected in their willingness to choose and to be ruled by the best among them. The voter’s duty and interest is to select the wisest person available and then to let the wisest govern; thus, the elected representatives, the wisest among the people, constitute what can be called the *second governing elite*.

The Wise Representative

Mill’s representatives are chosen from among the people, but they are carefully chosen from among those who possess the benefits of superior intellect, educational credentials, business or supervisory experience, and who have shown long dedication and practical discipline to the special task of governing. Representatives should reflect diverse opinions to secure the necessary antagonism of interests needed for responsible government. Mill explains that the ability to recognize and make the best choice of representative can be developed over time, with the assistance of the educated citizen.

Reminiscent of Edmund Burke (Langford 1981) Mill argues for the role of trustee rather than delegate for elected representatives. Representatives have a moral duty to govern according to their own wisdom. This is the trust that is given when voters choose a representative wiser than themselves. However, representatives must be responsible to the voter—they cannot expect citizens to be governed in opposition to their fundamental beliefs. Voters must be active, interested citizens to be sure they are being governed wisely, and to know when they have been misgoverned. The process of election, if taken as a duty and a civic trust, will teach the voters to recognize wisdom and ability for governing.

The special role of the representative in Mill’s theory is to talk, publicize, deliberate, discuss, present diverse views, to be the nation’s “committee of grievances, and its congress of opinion” (1958, 82). The most important duty of the representative assembly is to facilitate public discourse. This includes publicizing the activities of all parts of government. Talking and discussion, for Mill, are the proper business of representatives while doing (as the result of discussion) is the proper business of those specially trained for it. The representative assembly should see that individuals who are trained to “do” are honestly and intelligently chosen, and “then interfere no further with them except by unlimited latitude of suggestion and criticism, and by applying or withholding the final seal of national assent” (1958, 83).

Mill explains there is a radical distinction between controlling the business of government and actually carrying out that business (1958, 70). Governing, according to Mill, consists of legislating and administering. A representative body whose responsibility is to control the business of

government is, in his opinion, not fit to do either aspect of actual governing. The skilled bureaucrat, the *third governing elite*, is better suited for both aspects.

The Skilled Bureaucrat

Mill explains that the “essence and meaning of bureaucracy” is when “the work of government has been in the hands of governors by profession” (1958, 89). Governing requires professional training, skill, and devotion. The public’s business should be the primary occupation of a group that is specially trained for governing. Mill’s bureaucracy of actual governors includes both a legislative commission and an administrative body.

Mill holds that a representative body cannot legislate adequately because the work necessary to construct sound laws must be performed by those trained in legal study and experienced in constructing legal devices. A law must be “framed with the most accurate and long-sighted perception of its effect on all the other provisions; and the law when made should be capable of fitting into a consistent whole with the previously existing laws” (1958, 77).³ Achieving this is impossible when the laws are voted on clause by clause. By the time a law comes out of committee, essential clauses may have been omitted and incongruous ones inserted to please a private interest or “some crotchety member who threatens to delay the bill” (1958, 78).

A legislative bureaucracy would do away with many of the faults of “ignorant and ill considered legislation.” This legislative commission would be responsible for protecting the existing law, making sure that new laws fit with previously existing laws, and ensuring that long-sighted consideration is maintained. The representative body would originate ideas for legislation and refer these ideas to the legislative commission; it would have the option of enacting the legislation subsequently prepared by the legislative commission as written, rejecting it, or sending it back for reconsideration and improvement. But Mill’s plan limits the representatives from “tinkering” with the legislation with their “clumsy hands” (1958, 78).

In Mill’s view, a representative body cannot administer properly either. The need for technical training and skill is even more obvious in administering than legislating. “Every branch of public administration is a skilled business, which has its own peculiar principles and traditional rules” (1958, 72). Mill adds here that he does not mean to imply that public administration “has esoteric mysteries, only to be understood by the initiated” (1958, 72). The principles of administration are understandable to anyone who studies them, but they do not come by intuition.

An administrative bureaucracy, Mill argues, could wisely and efficiently take care of the details of public business by applying the principles of public administration to actual governing of the state; it could be above partisan or

sinister interests and internally ordered on merit principles with clear lines of responsibility. Mill suggests that recruitment of bureaucrats should be based on intelligence, education, and potential governmental skill since the qualifications for the discharge of their duties are special and professional (1958, 199). Mill’s discussion of bureaucracy includes tests for selecting the best officers, rules for promotion, appropriate provisions for order and convenient transaction of business, good record keeping, and proper measures for responsibility and accountability. He recognizes bureaucracy as the “permanent strength of the public service” (1958, 206).

Mill urges strict limits to the representative body’s interference in bureaucracy. He warns that representative bodies tend to interfere in administrative details that they are unfit to direct. A representative assembly does not have the knowledge or experience to decide special acts or details of administration. “At its best, it is inexperience sitting in judgment on experience, ignorance on knowledge—ignorance which, never suspecting the existence of what it does not know, is equally careless and supercilious, making light of, if not resenting, all pretensions to have a judgment better worth attending to than its own” (Mill 1958, 73).

Mill also warns that when representatives interfere in administration representing strong private interests, the result can be more dangerous corruption than when it takes place in a public office by administrators. Administrators who engage in corrupt activities can, in Mill’s scheme, be removed from their position by representatives who are responsible for publicity and checking the work of the actual governors. However, representatives rarely lose their jobs over administrative detail.

This does not mean that representatives should have no voice in administrative affairs. Representatives are useful for administrative business as advisors, as a voice for popular interests, and as a body that represents diverse opinions on public matters. Most importantly, representatives are responsible for checking, criticizing, giving final approval, or withdrawing approval of public business (without piecemeal meddling). Mill separates the functions of representative bodies from the legislative and administrative bureaucracy “to attain as many of the qualities of the one as are consistent with the other” (1958, 91).

The Relationship between Bureaucracy and Representative Government

Mill is not blind to the faults of bureaucracy, but he is optimistic about the correction of such faults by representative government. He explains that bureaucratic government has important advantages over representative government in skill, experience, and practical knowledge (1958, 89).⁴ However, bureaucratic governments usually

“die of routine” because they do not encourage individuality and creativity. Bureaucratic governments need the spirit of individuality and originality that is found in representative government (1958, 90). Mill views popular representation and bureaucracy as equally necessary but antagonistic components of government that would be mutually corrective of their respective faults and dangers.

Mill recognizes that perhaps the gravest problems of bureaucracy within representative government are control, accountability, and responsibility. He emphasizes that experts should ultimately be responsible to the governed through the representatives, just as he argues they must be allowed to do their job unhampered by the interference of amateurs. Government by trained officials without an “outside element of freedom” will not be effective, and freedom will not hold without trained and skilled administration. This is the paradox of ability yet responsibility, of autonomy yet accountability, which pervades all of Mill’s theory. The antagonistic interests of representative government and bureaucracy provide security for good government.

Rather than eliminate or minimize one or the other, Mill values the differences in each of his governing elites for their ability to contribute varied skills to recognizing, deciding, and implementing the public good. These groups check one another, but they also require a relationship of mutual respect for skills and responsibilities. The importance of this relationship, or constitutional morality as Mill calls it, is to restrain the strongest powers in government from excessive and arbitrary use of power, while allowing the different components of government to use their skill, experience, and knowledge to govern (1958, 68, 176). This system of ethics or understanding defines the boundaries of the relationship among the governing elites so that each performs its public-trust responsibly without piecemeal meddling and so that each acts as a check on the other’s use of power.

The relationship among the governing elites relies on the people to serve as the ultimate sovereign power. But the people must recognize that to achieve good government, different kinds of political, legislative, and administrative tasks must be performed well. Those who are best fitted to do the various tasks should be allowed to perform as their abilities dictate, subject only to broad constraints and the ultimate authority of the electoral and appointive processes.

The bureaucracy—which performs the actual work of government—is responsible for providing policy and decision-making feedback to representatives and citizens so they can make better-informed policy choices. The bureaucracy monitors policy deliberations and decisions for their consistency with the long-term public interest and for their ability to fit into the comprehensive scheme of political, cultural, and social values.

Each governing elite is checked by publicity (including citizen activity in government), and elected or appointed government officials are ultimately removable if they betray their trust. Ideally, Mill’s system requires that interested and responsible citizens, the mainspring of the political system, possess the civic virtue needed to fulfill their public trust.

Constitutive Institution

Cook’s (1996) distinction between the instrumental and constitutive roles of governance is helpful for understanding the importance Mill places on recognizing different roles within the polity. A government’s instrumental roles are concerned with means–end rationality, which focuses on human wants and satisfaction and is mainly economic and market driven. In this role, political institutions engaged in making and implementing public policy are focused on allocation decisions that are defined in terms of means and ends, or on achieving predetermined goals with economic effectiveness. Cook explains that looking at government from this perspective leads the public to expect government to function as “instruments of individual welfare” (3).

Citizens, then, evaluate the success or failure of government based on how much they (as individuals) have gained or lost, usually measured by economic standards (King and Stivers 1998). Public agencies are simplified into problem-solving and service-delivery entities, a perspective that is often criticized in public administration literature (Box 1998; Cook 1996; King and Stivers 1998; McSwite 1997; Morgan 1996; Wamsley et al. 1990).

Cook suggests that public institutions have a larger social responsibility as constitutive or formative contributors to society. Institutions are the structures of society that maintain and reproduce cultural values and traditions (Burke 1994; Kass 1990; Morgan 1996; Terry 1995; Wamsley et al. 1990). Society’s norms are acted out and created by the interactions of human beings within their institutions. People become citizens through their roles within these social constructions, and it is here that societal change takes place. Therefore, government cannot be separated from the people as an independent entity or as something to be run.

Mill recognizes similar distinctions that emphasize both the constitutive and instrumental functions of government. Mill’s theory provides constitutive guidelines in his two criteria for good government: “the degree in which it tends to increase the sum of good qualities in the governed, collectively and individually,” and “the degree in which it is adapted to take advantage of the amount of good qualities which may at any time exist and make them instrumental to the right purposes” (1958, 25). Mill says that govern-

ment should promote the advancement of the community in socially responsible ways and with a long-term, comprehensive focus on the public good. His concept of the public good is not one of simply economic ends; rather, Mill calls for a philosophy of human progress based on moral and intellectual advancement. Bureaucracy is in a prime position to contribute to this advancement.

Mill recognizes that bureaucracy must perform its instrumental and constitutive roles well to fulfill its trust. Bureaucracy is responsible for ensuring the best possible management of public affairs to further the moral and intellectual improvement of the people. Mill says the most effective way to improve the people is by doing the “direct work” well—that is, the work done by public administration. “The government is at once a great influence acting on the human mind and a set of organized arrangements for public business” (1958, 28). Doing public business poorly lowers morality, deadens intelligence, and lessens the activity of the people in their government.

In response, his suggestions for organization and management include the best possible checks against negligence and corruption in bureaucracy (1958, 26). But Mill points out that the best organization and management will have little benefit for the improvement of the people “if the checking functionaries are as corrupt or as negligent as those whom they ought to check, and if the public, the mainspring of the whole checking machinery, are too ignorant, too passive, or too careless and inattentive to do their part” (1958, 27).

Mill works toward balance. The people, the representatives of the people, and the actual governors are inextricably joined and responsible for good government. All must perform their duties and responsibilities to the best of their ability. All must understand their important role in government: what they can do well, and what should be done by others. Mill structures a somewhat antagonistic relationship among his governing elites, but one he believes will create a dynamic that will move the state toward improvement while maintaining its stability and popular control. Mill’s theory of governance gives an important role to bureaucracy—the actual governing of the state and the balance and care of stability and long-term vision.

He advocates a balance among these groups because competence in government is as necessary as popular participation. Mill writes, “It is but a poor education that associates ignorance with ignorance and leaves them, if they care for knowledge, to grope their way to it without help, and to do without it if they do not. What is wanted is the means of making ignorance aware of itself and able to profit by knowledge, accustoming minds which know only routine to act upon and feel the value of principles, teaching them to compare different modes of action and learn by the use of their reason to distinguish the best” (1958, 228).

Mill’s integrative approach to government gives public administration a unique role as a central depository and distributor of information that is critical to good government. In this role, public administration acts as a constitutive, educative institution, providing the knowledge that citizens need to develop responsible opinions about the public good.

The Politics–Administration Dichotomy

Mill does not set up a strict dichotomy between politics and administration. Public administration has an important role in the political process. However, there is a clear demarcation between what elected representatives and bureaucrats are qualified to do. Mill separates functions to take advantage of the special contributions that each subset can make and to create a checks-and-balances mechanism to control the potential power abuses.

Mill defines bureaucracy as the direct work of government and sometimes refers to bureaucrats as the actual governors. But ruling in the sense of sovereign power remains in the hands of the people and their representatives. Mill clearly separates the functions of ruling and governing. The work of the actual governors has to be filtered through the political system, where the people can give final consent. Still, the people are unable to make informed decisions without the experience and knowledge of the bureaucracy. Representatives do not have the benefit of the knowledge and experience of the bureaucracy (including policy implementation procedures, facts, experience, results, effects on citizens, program evaluations) unless public administration is recognized and included as an integral part of the policy process.

Separating the work of actual governance from the work of ruling helps governance, in Mill’s theory, to be seen as a nonpartisan instrument. Bureaucracy is not neutral in the sense of being value free, but it can strive to be neutral in partisan politics. Mill does not separate bureaucracy from the political process; rather, it is an institution of experience, skill, and knowledge, with values defined properly as those of the comprehensive, long-term, public good.

Public Discourse

Mill makes frequent arguments for the inclusion of various voices and opinions in determining the public interest. Regular public discussion of ideas and opinions contributes to good government by educating citizens as well as broadening the discussion. Citizens have a better chance of making good decisions when diverse voices and opinions are included in deliberations.

Giving voice to all opinions in open forum, according to Mill, allows conflicting opinions to benefit from in-

creased knowledge by taking other opinions into account. He believes that through public deliberation, the wisest person can learn from the average person. Genius and originality can learn from those who prefer stability and maintenance. He urges citizens to come together in open forum to listen, learn, and grow in an environment of public collaboration and cooperation. Choosing the best in society to lead, separating functions according to ability, and including diverse and minority voices contributes to the best public discourse and subsequent decision making and sets the stage for progress, improvement, and social change.

Bureaucracy—the work of the government, according to Mill—plays a large role in the progress of the state and the improvement of the people. Its qualities of stability, skill, knowledge, and experience help to mediate the passion and impulse of democratic decision making. Mill's theory is based on his belief in the importance of the individual in a relationship with others that is regulated by a constitution, rule of law, and popular representation. But Mill's constitutional morality, a system of ethics as well as a system of law, contributes to the development of trust and respect among the subsets of the political system. A collaborative effort to determine the public good through public discourse and deliberation institutionalizes that trust (Ruscio 1996).

Civic education takes place in the process of orienting citizens and public officials toward reconciling differences, separating real situations from emotional demands, and focusing on the good of the whole. Possibly more important, public discourse leads citizens to form networks and learn to trust each other, coming to understand their interdependence (Ruscio 1996).

Conclusion

When Mill thought about the relationship between bureaucracy and representative government, he carefully considered the inevitable growth of democracy. The question, he explained, was “between a well and an ill-regulated democracy” (1961b, xiii). He agreed with Tocqueville and the framers of the U.S. Constitution that, left free to evolve,

democracy could become dangerous in its excesses. Yet citizen participation in government provided the best opportunity for improving the community. His solution was to balance the concomitant needs of competence and participation through a well-administered representative government. “It is one of the most important ends of political institutions to attain as many of the qualities of the one as are consistent with the other; to secure, as far as they can be made compatible, the great advantage of the conduct of affairs by skilled persons, bred to it as an intellectual profession, along with that of a general control vested in, and seriously exercised by, bodies representative of the entire people” (1958, 91). Mill does not lead us toward democracy strictly speaking, but toward representative government with heavy doses of skill elites. The fact that we are not so far from the latter in the United States suggests that Mill's articulations may be helpful and suggestive to us.

Current streams of public administration discussion divide along the lines of competence and participation. One stream of thought emphasizes the role of public administration in citizenship and public participation, while the other emphasizes the special competence of professional public administrators and the institutional contribution that public administration makes to society. Both streams of public administration discussion recognize an important role for bureaucracy in improving government.

Mill's ideas are instructive in terms of our dilemma between competence and participation. Mill did not argue for equality of participation, for radically participatory democracy, or for direct citizen participation in administration. In that sense, his thought suggests some modification in some of the participatory themes of current public administration. While Mill took a competence view of administration, he did not argue that professional administrators had a representational function (in the sense of better representing the interests of citizens, the views of citizens, or the public interest). Because he was friendly to participation while deferential to competence of various kinds, he offers insights that may help us grapple with the two streams of contemporary public administration thought as we try to wend our way toward a resolution.

Notes

1. Mill lived from 1806 to 1873. For the first 20 years of his life, his father, James Mill, and family friend Jeremy Bentham worked together to train the younger Mill to become their successor in intellectual and moral thought. From the age of three, James Mill and Bentham used the child as an educational experiment, believing that children could learn much more in the younger years than was commonly thought. John Stuart Mill was unmistakably influenced by the ideas of his elders, especially by Bentham's concept of utility. However, a mental breakdown in his early adulthood led Mill to reevaluate his education and modify his belief in utility and other topics. His wife, Harriet Taylor, whom he credits for her contribution to the comprehensiveness and depth of his later ideas, was a strong influence in his reevaluation. (See Himmelfarb 1963; Morales 1996; and Robson 1968 for more discussion of Mill's early life and his influences.)
2. Mill's "On Liberty," originally published in 1859, is his best known work on this subject.
3. Mill's concerns about legislative adequacy can be traced to the influence of Jeremy Bentham. One of Bentham's primary focuses was to improve the logical and comprehensive codification of laws.
4. Mill differentiated between Continental bureaucracy and English administration, as did others during this time. He considered bureaucratic government to be a form of government contrasted with aristocracy, monarchy, or representative government. Similar to Woodrow Wilson in his essay, "The Study of Administration" (1887), Mill believed popular government could learn from the Continental bureaucratic system.

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