

## **Minnowbrook 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference**

### ***Rethinking the Administrative State***

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As we reflect on the state of the discipline as a part of the 50th anniversary of the Minnowbrook Conference two issues re-emerge as worthy of reflection and analysis. These two issues are social equity and diversity. Both social equity and diversity have long been core principles guiding the teaching and practice of public administration. Today, for a host of reasons, their appropriateness and roles are challenged, thus warranting our discussion and reflection. In doing so, there are several key questions which should guide this discussion. First, how well has the field done in advancing the goals of social equity and diversity? Second, what roles have, (and indeed should) theorist and practitioners play in advancing/promoting social equity and diversity in public administration? Third, are these still relevant considerations/objectives for public administration? Fourth, have the efforts to promote social equity and diversity in the field of public administration been adequate? These questions are important for this analysis and subsequent discussion.

In 1968, H.G. Frederickson introduced the notion of social equity as the third pillar undergirding the study and practice of public administration. His purpose was to expand the guiding principles in public administration theory and practice beyond a concern for efficiency and economy to include consideration of social equity. Specifically, he argued that it was not adequate to simply consider whether a service was administered well or if it was cost effective. Indeed, he argued the questions of for whom was it well managed, for whom was it economical and for whom was it efficient must be asked as well (Frederickson 1990). Social equity, he argued, was therefore as important a consideration in public administration as economy and efficiency because it addressed the “for whom” questions. Understanding how the definition of social equity has evolved and the challenges inherent in its implementation as a guiding principle are also important considerations. Most notably, is the suggestion that our society has evolved such that the concept of ***post-racial*** should be used to offset the need to pursue goals

of social equity (particularly as they pertain to racial equity) in public administration and public policy. In other words, racial equity need not be a major consideration or objective in public policy. How accurate this contention is and its implications for the continued pursuit of social equity are critical considerations for the discipline.

Diversity as a guiding principle in public administration emerged in the 1980s and can be traced to efforts to achieve social equity particularly for racial and ethnic minority groups. Overtime it evolved to include several additional demographic characteristics. Hopkins and Johnston (1988) and Thomas (1990) presented the concept of diversity as an expansion of (and in Thomas' case alternative to) traditional views on affirmative action. Ultimately and for a variety of reasons Thomas' alternative approach resulted in the use of the term diversity not in addition to, but rather in place of affirmative action. While some attention to the morphing of the concept of affirmative action to diversity has occurred (Gooden 2015), the significance of this has important consequences for the future of the discipline and for pursuing the goals of social equity. How does the incompatibility of policy outcomes in affirmative action versus diversity make their synonymous use problematic? Moreover, what are the implications of this disconnect for achieving the goals of social equity in the field of public administration? How did the expansion of the definition of diversity beyond race, ethnicity and gender impact its support and alignment with the goals of racial equity?

As we rethink the issues impacting the administrative state in 2018 the issues of social equity and diversity as public policy goals seem much more questionable than when they first emerged decades ago. Indeed, the current political and policy climate suggests a major threat to the acceptance and legitimacy of what have been for some time agreed upon components of "good" public administration. It would be easy to attribute the current challenges to the goals of social equity and diversity to the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president and the subsequent appointment of his administrative team, but this would be shortsighted. If one looks well before these occurrences it becomes clear that challenges to continued pursuit of the goals of social equity and diversity began much earlier and are more complex than they may appear.

What will it mean to remove either of these concepts from the core principles and objectives of public administration? As such, a serious review of the discipline's commitment to social equity and diversity both in theory and practice is timely and necessary. In conducting such an analysis, it is important to assess not only the impact of overt actions by those staunchly opposed to these concepts, but we must also examine the covert and perhaps "naively benign failures" of those who purport to strongly champion these notions.

At issue for me and what I believe important for discussion by participants of the Minnowbrook 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference is to question the re-emergence of social equity and diversity as critical tenets at the forefront of the discipline of public administration. These discussions must challenge notions of "post-racialism" and the labeling of social equity and diversity as negative attributes.

#### References

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