The Obsolete Nature of Bureaucratic Governments

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It is difficult to believe, but 100 years ago the television, the airplane, the credit card and the computer were only, at most, products of the imagination. One century later they became reality, demonstrating humanity’s capacity for creativity and innovation. However, this human aptitude to innovate is rarely manifested in the concepts that structured recent democratic governments. The same bureaucratic and centralized governments which developed and prevailed during the industrial era continue to exist today. The world evolved: these governments did not.

To begin, the bureaucratic model was developed in conditions very different from the existing currently. It was developed in a society where technological growth was slow, work was essentially manual, and small communities had little access to information. Today, these characteristics have disappeared. We live in a global market which imparts enormous pressure to institutions, we live in a communication era where practically all the population has access to information, we live in a society where educated workers demand autonomy, we live in the a time of tremendous technological growth, where today’s technology can rapidly become obsolete. In this dynamic and changing context, staid bureaucratic governments are totally out of place.

For a long time, however, the bureaucratic model of governance was successful. Its hierarchical authority and functional specialization was capable of completing large tasks. Under these governments, roadways were built, bridges constructed, water and waste systems maintained: in short the basic needs of society could be attended to under these old models. However, as bureaucratic governments are based upon regulations, bound to rigid procedures and tied to established hierarchies, these governments forget to evaluate and maintain their own standards of performance. As a consequence, serious problems have surfaced and delays and inefficiency now dominate the government landscape. Due to bureaucratic sluggishness, a five minute city repair job can take two months to get off the ground, employees are paid according to years of service regardless of performance and simple legal suits can take 25 years to complete. Innovation, progress and society cannot wait this long.

The shape of today’s society necessitates governments which are flexible and adaptable, responding to the interests of citizens, providing positive leadership through incentives, and above all, offering citizens the opportunity to participate in public life, and thereby imparting responsibility and feelings of authorship to the community as a whole. Governments meeting this description are by definition, entrepreneurial governments, better suited to the times, the needs and the dynamics of today’s evolving culture.

Yet, how can we distinguish these governments from bureaucratic governments? First, entrepreneurial governments follow well defined objectives, not rigid procedures and
unquestioned regulations. Second, these entrepreneurial governments continually evaluate the performance of their own ministries and departments. Third, entrepreneurial governments do not only spend required funds wisely, they are also concerned with investing accumulated income. Finally, these governments act as catalysts within the various sectors of society with the purpose of equipping communities with the necessary tools and abilities needed to problem solve effectively.

Despite its clear benefits, this entrepreneurial model of governance continues to be disregarded in Portugal. Therefore, there is nothing random about the fact that Portugal’s justice, health and educations are suffering in conditions, quality and performance. To a great extent, the fault of these shortcomings is direct consequence of obsolete bureaucratic excess. While concerned only with procuring votes, the current Portuguese government has forgotten that votes can be gained for the things we do, no just for the things we don’t do. In the vast spectrum that ranges from the bureaucratic to the entrepreneurial model, it is time now in Portugal, for the government to make a shift. In this context, a pact of real courage is necessary in order to restructure the system.

Yet, each of us, leaders and citizens alike, busy with daily life, still appear uninterested in evaluating the methods and fundamentals of the society we live in, and thus, we remain prisoners of old and obsolete procedures. Our own disinterest has allowed obsolete bureaucratic governments to erect barriers in the way of Portugal’s path toward innovation and modernization. To remove these barriers requires a profound analysis of our current and actual system of governance coupled with a desire to change and innovate. It requires vision, strategy, courage, action. For these changes to happen, governments must be motivated to drop bureaucratic initiatives that do not work, while citizens must be made ready to support government implementations of creative and innovative measures. Once these changes begin to occur, Portugal will see that the only power obsolete ideas hold lies in the difficulty we have in leaving these ideas behind.