This article seeks to better identify Edmund Burke's views on human reason and human nature, tradition, representation, and law, and the implications of these views for public administration. Parallels between Burke's thought and that of the Founders (Founding Fathers) are examined. Also, the reasons for neglect of Burke's thought by public administration writers are discussed. Drawing on Burke's thought, the article presents an argument for the exercise of significant discretion by public administrators but argues that this discretion should be limited by administrative rules and procedures and by a set of ethics that emphasizes prudence and tradition.

REASON, DISCRETION, AND TRADITION
A Reflection of Burkean Worldview and Its Implications for Public Administration

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Edmund Burke was one of the most prominent political philosophers of the 18th century. The contribution of Burke to political thought is understood and acknowledged in disciplines such as history, political science, and philosophy. Yet the implications of his ideas for public administration have not been adequately explored. Certainly, references to the work of Edmund Burke can be found in the writings of public administration scholars (e.g., Cook, 1992; Gaus, 1947; Rohr, 1986; Terry, 1990; Waldo, 1984). Also, it is clear that Woodrow Wilson had great admiration for Burke's work, arguing that his words "ring out the authentic voice of the best political thought of the English race" (1896, p. 78).
However, no attempt has been made to examine fully the implications of Burke’s thought for public administration.  

The purpose of this article is to better identify Burke’s worldview and to examine its implications for contemporary public administration. First, the article examines Burke’s view with respect to the limits of human reason and human nature, the role of tradition, the idea of representation, and the role of rules and law as a guide to public actions. Second, the article explores parallels between the Founders’ (‘Founding Fathers’) thinking and that of Burke. Third, the article examines why Burke’s thought has received little attention in public administration writings. Finally, the article develops a vision of a Burkean administrator based on his writings and speeches.

THE WORLDVIEW OF EDMUND BURKE

HUMAN NATURE AND HUMAN REASON

A central theme of Burke’s thought is that he saw the application of human reason to political affairs as inherently limited and prone to error and uncertainty. He saw the world of human affairs as too complex and unpredictable for reason alone to provide an understanding of it or the laws governing it. Following the Scottish philosophers, Burke saw the dark side of human nature and argued that it was interests and passions, rather than abstract reason, that dominated human nature and human action. He was wary of those who employed abstract forms of reasoning in the pursuit of political ideals. He believed that when we base our actions solely upon such reasoning, this must inevitably yield consequences or results that we neither intend nor want. In order to contribute to human affairs, the exercise of reason for Burke must be grounded in experience and tradition rather than abstract theory.

Burke’s views on the limits of reason are revealed in his assertions that there is a “radical infirmity in all human contrivances” (Burke, 1789/1967, VI, p. 48), a “want of foresight in all our designs” (1789/1967, VI, p. 49) and an “unavoidable uncertainty, as to the effect, which attends on every measure of human prudence” (Burke, 1791/1901, IV, p. 6). As a result, for Burke, “Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral, or any political subject” (1791/1901, IV, p. 80). He believed that “we have made no discoveries, and we think no discoveries are to be made, in morality, nor many in the great principles of governance” (1790/1901, III, p. 345)
and that the causes, which "necessarily affect the fortune of a state," are "infinitely uncertain" and "difficult to trace" (1791/1901, V, p. 235). Consequently, "A wise man draws all his ideas from experience rather than Speculation" (Burke, 1756/1957, p. 111). Experience, for Burke, allows us to "reverse our notions; makes us adopt what we rejected and reject what we were fondest of" (1756/1901, p. 89).

THE ROLE OF TRADITION AND THE CONSTITUTION

The necessity of limiting the application of abstract reason and the desirability of knowledge gained through experience, as underscored by Burke, has an important link with tradition. Burke saw tradition as the cumulative addition of the past experiences of a society. Burke championed traditionalism as a defense against abstract rationalistic conceptions of society and government. Burke's advocacy of tradition is shown in his observation that our "stock of reason" is "small," and that individuals "would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages" (1790/1901, III, p. 346). Traditions, for Burke, were the "great influencing prejudices of mankind" (1790/1901, III, p. 449).

As properly understood, Burke's defense of existing institutions is not based on any feelings of reverence for antiquity. Rather, the rationale here is to preserve what useful knowledge is embedded in traditions and institutions. He observed that "when the reason of the old establishments is gone, it is absurd to preserve nothing but the burthen of them" (1789/1901, II, p. 305). Burke noted that "whenever we improve, it is right to leave room for a further improvement" (1789/1901, II, p. 280).

Burke believed that, when it is necessary, reform should be made earlier rather than later, because otherwise drastic reforms might be made in the heat of the moment that would do more harm than good. In postponing necessary reform until later, Burke argued, the people "never attempt to correct or regulate; they go to work by the shortest way: they abate the nuisance, they pull down the house" (1789/1901, II, p. 280). Drastic reform, he knew, "alters the substance of the object themselves, and gets rid of the essential good" (1796/1901, V, p. 186). As a result, according to Burke, "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation" (1790/1901, III, p. 259).

A knowledge of the constitution presupposes, for Burke, a deep awareness of tradition. Burke saw the constitution of a country as the supreme tradition that reflects the imperfect knowledge of wise and common men and women alike passed down through the ages. He argued that we cannot
understand a constitution as a mere scheme upon paper, since it has a spirit and a life of its own. He saw the constitution as necessary to limit the abuse of power. Without the constitution, “competence and power would soon be confounded, and no law be left but the will of a prevailing force” (Burke, 1790/1901, III, p. 258). However, in its practical application, Burke was aware that a written law has no value unless it is being exercised by public officials acting in pursuit of its objectives. Burke emphasized:

The laws reach but a little way. Constitute government how you please, infinitely the greater part of it must depend upon the exercise of the powers which are left at large to the prudence and uprightness of ministers of state. Even all the use and potency of the laws depends upon them. Without them, your commonwealth is no better than a scheme upon paper; and not a living, active, effective constitution. (Burke, 1770/1901, I, p. 470)

It is clear that Burke believed that the actions of public administrators were central in determining the character of constitutional governance: a theme more recently emphasized by Rohr (1986) and others. Following Burke’s practical politics, it is not surprising that he would emphasize the practical side of the constitution rather than the abstract. How a constitution operated was more important to him than theorizing about “the constitution” itself.

Friedrich (1972) has noted that Burke made tradition a central aspect of his philosophy. He argued, “Burke’s ideas on prudence as a political virtue, on the nature of society and government, on the importance of manners and religion, are all interrelated with his defence of tradition” (p. 28). Friedrich believed that, for Burke, “tradition was a better guide in politics than ratiocination” (p. 28). He argued that Burke saw the continuity of a tradition exemplified in the constitution, which is “an elaborate fabric fitted to unite private and public liberty” (p. 28). This established tradition becomes a “thought of many minds and many ages,” which therefore “becomes the guide superior to all rational theory” (p. 28). In the same vein, Selznick (1993) argued that Burke rejected speculative reasoning because “custom has its reason that logic may not know” (p. 395).

THE IDEA OF REPRESENTATION

The idea of representation as used by Burke also has important implications for public administration. Although Burke mostly dealt with elected representatives, the uniqueness of his idea of representation has important implications for other forms of representation as well. Burke’s idea of representation follows from his idea of reason. The question that
Burke conceived as important was "whose reason should be followed, the representative's or the constituent's?" Burke sided here with the wishes of the constituents, but set a clear limit to how much can be expected from a representative. Burke did not accept that the representative should serve as mere instrument of popular opinion; rather, he saw the representative as serving the interests of the people. He acknowledged that public wishes ought to have "great weight" with their representatives, "their opinion high respect; their business unremitting attention" (Burke, 1774/1901, II, p. 95), but he also believed that the representative's "unbiased opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you; to any man, or to any set of men living (1774/1901, II, p. 95).

Burke saw representatives as subservient to their appointers' interests but not necessarily dependent on their opinion. The representative must be careful not to sacrifice his or her own judgment to the will of some majority, and not to manipulate public wishes for personal gain. Burke said that it would be "most dishonorable for a faithful representative of the Commons to take advantage of any artificial expression of the people's wishes, in order to frustrate their attainment of what they have an undoubted right to expect" (Burke, 1780/1901, II, p. 281). In Burke's view, "We are under infinite obligations to our constituents, who have raised us to so distinguished a trust" (1780/1901, II, p. 281).

From Burke's perspective the real purpose of representation is corrupted when a representative depends on the rule of the majority. Citing Aristotle, Burke said, "In a democracy the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppression upon the minority whenever strong divisions prevail in that kind of policy, as they often must" (1791/1901, III, p. 397).

As Pitkin (1967) observed, Burke's "political representation is the representation of interest, and interest has an objective, impersonal, unattached reality" (p. 168). The representative does not sacrifice his judgment to opinion but to the interests of the people. The idea of representation therefore becomes unattached because the representative should not always concur with citizens' opinions unless they serve the interest of the whole. Pitkin argued that, from a Burkean perspective, it becomes legitimate for representatives to exercise discretion when they seek to promote the interests, rather than the opinions, of the people. Furthermore, Burke's notion of representation allows nonelected representatives, including public administrators, who seek the interests of the people, to be a legitimate part of the polity. Indeed for Burke, as Pitkin argued, "the whole
electoral machinery is only the formal trappings of representation for Burke; its substance or 'virtue' is promotion of interest" (p. 182).

THE ROLE OF LAW

An important part of Burke's argument was that human beings were motivated by passions and interest and that checks, in the form of rules, were necessary for the purpose of control. He observed:

The substance of the question is, to put bounds to your own power by the rules and principles of law. This is, I am sensible a difficult thing to the corrupt, grasping, and ambitious part of human nature . . . the greater the power the more dangerous the abuse. (Burke, 1771/1901, VII, p. 62)

Burke further understood that the abuse of power of a ruler is "doubled" when public officials, including public administrators, allow and perpetuate the unlawful acts of rulers. He remarked that "there is no prince so bad, whose favorites and ministers are not worse" (Burke, 1756/1901, I, p. 32). Burke believed that public institutions "have been formed for the purpose of checking popular excesses. . . . If not they ought to be made so" (1770/1901, I, p. 492). As argued above, Burke favored the exercise of independent judgment by representatives, but he did not advocate unbounded discretion. Burke did not wish to rely on any institution's unbounded authority, because he knew "all power will infallibly draw wealth to itself by some means or other. . . . This is true in all parts of administration, as well as in the whole" (Burke, 1780/1901, II, p. 335). Therefore, he emphasized:

In a plan of reformation, it would be one of my maxims, that, when I know of an establishment which may be subservient to useful purposes, and which at the same time, from its discretionary nature, is liable to a very great perversion from those purposes, I would limit the quantity of the power that might be so abused. (Burke, 1780/1901, II, p. 328; emphasis in the original)

Furthermore, Burke stressed that the discretionary powers vested in the executive system must be exercised within the constraints of the law. Burke believed that "law and arbitrary power are in eternal enmity" (1788/1901, IX, p. 458), and no one can both obey law and at the same time allow arbitrary rule. It seemed obvious to him that "it is a contradiction in terms, it is blasphemy in religion, it is wickedness in politics, to say that any man can have arbitrary power" (1788/1901, IX, p. 458).
Burke recognized that to attain freedom and justice, the laws must be made clear and should apply equally; discriminatory law, for Burke, is a great impediment to freedom. "The properties of law," he said, "are, first, it should be known; secondly, that it should be fixed, and not occasional" (1771/1901, VII, p. 64). In his vision, he saw equality before the law as an underlying principle of government action. He argued that it would be impossible to differentiate between legal judgment and illegal judgment when "the judgement makes the law, and not the law directs the judgement" (1771/1901, VII, p. 67). "There is no equality among us, we are not fellow citizens" he said, "if the mariner, who lands on the quay, does not rest on as firm legal ground as the merchant who sits in the counting house" (1777/1901, II, p. 199).

Conceptualizing Burke's thought is a difficult task because he never wrote a theory or a formal piece to unfold his own philosophy. He expressed his ideas and confronted problems as they occurred rather than theorize from abstraction, which he himself so much detested. So far our discussion has been able to identify a vision of Burke that clearly puts human nature at the starting point of all his analysis. In summary, Burke emphasized the inadequacy of our reason and nature as a tool to deliberately fashion society. He thought that we must accept our imperfections and infirmity, and should use experience, not abstract formulated principles, as a guide to action. Burke argued that radical innovation was a chancy business to be avoided when it concerned the great interest of the society. Burke noted that we must respect traditions and institutions and learn from them because they are "the great influencing prejudices of mankind." He saw the constitution as the supreme tradition and saw its effectiveness depending primarily on how the laws were being executed. Burke argued that we must have a broader view of representation in which the representative does not sacrifice his or her own judgment to public inclination. Burke feared that the representative, without having enough discretion, could be used simply as an instrument by those constituting a majority. Finally, although Burke favored discretion, he was against unbridled discretion. He argued that discretion must also be limited by rules and laws to curb the abuse of power that arises from arbitrary action.

BURKE AND THE FOUNDERS

It may be asked here what relevance the ideas of Burke, an 18th-century British politician and political writer, have for American public adminis-
tration. The answer is that there are strong parallels between Burke's thought and that of the Founders of the U.S. Constitution. It is true that the Founders were prone on occasion to engage in a type of abstract analysis more reminiscent of John Locke than of Burke, as when Alexander Hamilton argued, for example, that "in disquisitions of every kind there are certain primary truths or first principles upon which all subsequent reasonings must depend" (Wills, 1982, p. 147). Nonetheless, the Founders, like Burke, displayed more generally a significant degree of skepticism regarding the powers of reason. Hamilton's awareness of the limits of reason is clearly shown in his references to "Utopian speculations" (p. 21) and to "airy phantoms" that flit before "distempered imaginations" (p. 37) and his warnings against "the chimerical pursuit of a perfect plan" (p. 446). James Madison similarly warned that, in understanding human institutions, "we must moderate our expectations and hopes from the efforts of human sagacity" (Wills, 1982, p. 179). Also, the Founders, like Burke, believed in the importance of history and experience. James Madison thought "experience the guide that ought always to be followed whenever it can be found" (Wills, 1982, p. 267) and that history "presents to mankind so many political lessons, both of the monitory and exemplary kind" (p. 287). In designing the U.S. Constitution, he argued that the Constitutional Convention should "avoid the errors suggested by the past experience of other countries, as well as of our own" and "provide a convenient means of rectifying their own errors, as future experience may unfold them" (p. 177).

Furthermore, like Burke, the Founders emphasized the shortcomings of majority rule and the necessity of checking power. Madison argued that "dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions" (Wills, 1982, p. 262). He warned, "When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government . . . enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest, both the public good and the rights of other citizens" (p. 49). The U.S. Constitution, with its separation of powers, was to "overcome the defect of better motives" by providing for "opposite and rival interests" (p. 263). Hamilton also saw the dangers of unrestrained legislative power when he warned that "energy in the executive" was essential to "the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations, which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice" and to "the security of liberty against the enterprise and assaults of ambition, of faction and of anarchy" (p. 355). The Founders felt that checks on power were necessary because they, like Burke, held a
somewhat pessimistic view of human nature. Hamilton was most explicit in this regard when he warned that "momentary passions and immediate interests have a more active and imperious control over human conduct than general or remote considerations of policy, utility or justice" (p. 24) and that "the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice" (p. 72).

It may be objected here that by focusing on the views of Hamilton and Madison, we have neglected the arguably more rationalist views of other Founders. However, even Thomas Jefferson, who believed the human mind "perfectible to a degree of which we cannot as yet form any conception" (Jefferson, 1984, p. 1064), struck a distinctly Burkean tone when he warned that "human nature is the same on every side of the Atlantic" (p. 246) and that "the concentrating of "all the powers of government...in the same hands is precisely the definition of despotic government" (p. 245). Similarly, the Anti-Federalists were often no less insistent than Burke on the limits of human nature and the necessity of checking power. Brutus, for example, warned that "power lodged in the hands of rulers to be used at discretion, is almost always exercised to the oppression of the people, and the aggrandizement of themselves," and that, as a result, "powerful checks" were necessary to prevent the abuse of power (Ketcham, 1986, p. 331). While the views of the Founders are obviously diverse and subject to differing interpretations, it is not difficult then, even among the opponents of Hamilton and Madison, to find the expression of distinctly Burkean sentiments.

Burke and the Founders, therefore, both emphasized the limits of human reason, the importance of experience and history, and the necessity of checking power in light of the limits on human nature. In this regard, they both display what has been termed elsewhere an antirationalist worldview (Spicer, 1995), which "sees the powers of human reason as inherently limited and inevitably prone to both error and abuse" (Spicer, 1995, p. 88). That this should be so should hardly be surprising, since the U.S. Constitution drew heavily from the British custom and law that formed the British Constitution and shaped colonial political institutions (Kirk, 1990; Stillman, 1991; Wilson, 1889). As Kirk (1990) argued, "American Constitution recognized and incorporated a body of historical experience far older than the North American colonies: the constitutional development of England, the country with the highest degree of both freedom and order during the eighteenth century" (p. 89). Furthermore, the Founders, by accepting the Burkean worldview, "rejected a priori theories of government, settling for politics as the art of the possible"
Burke and the Founders shared a similar worldview because they drew upon common political traditions, and for this reason, while there may be differences in emphasis, Burke's views can be seen as consistent with founding values.

**BURKE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THOUGHT**

As noted earlier, explicit references to Burke's thought have been relatively rare in public administration writings. Given the similarities in the worldviews of Burke and the Founders, this is clearly unfortunate. However, more important from the perspective of this article is the influence of the particular ideas about which Burke wrote. In this regard, it must be said that the influence of Burkean ideas on public administration has been rather limited. Public administration writers, by and large, have been strongly influenced by a rationalist vision of the world—one that places great faith in the powers of reason and science (Spicer, 1995), and one that consequently places those powers at odds with the Burkean worldview.

This is especially true in writings of public administration that drew upon the rationalist worldview of the Progressives. Early public administration writers had a deep faith in the power of reason and its role in human progress. They shared the Progressives' faith in science as a tool for designing human institutions. Indeed, Waldo (1984) characterized the early public administration movement, along with scientific management, as part of "a general movement to extend the methods and spirit of science to an ever widening range of man's concerns" (p. 49). Far from being deferential to political tradition, early public administration writers were often critical of American constitutional tradition, seeing the Founders' separation of powers as an impediment to effective government and administrative action. Furthermore, most of them saw government as a means for introducing greater rationality and fairness into the conduct of human affairs, and, as Waldo (1984) has observed, they "generally accepted the alternative of a planned society" (p. 19).

Woodrow Wilson, for example, despite his several references both to the virtues of Burke and to the importance of political tradition, argued that "man by using his intellect can remake society, that he can become a creator of a world for man's advantage" (Waldo, 1984, p. 18), a notion more characteristic of the French Revolution than its chief intellectual
opponent. Wilson (1956) clearly rejected the important elements of American political tradition that Burke would have thought important when he dismissed the Founders' design as "paper pictures" (p. 31) and termed their purpose "a grievous mistake" (p. 187).

While this rationalist vision is expressed in somewhat more muted tones among contemporary writers than it was prior to World War II, rationalism remains a dominant influence in public administration thinking. The emergence of such fields as policy analysis, management science, system analysis, public management, and management information systems as new areas of focus for public administration writers is evidence of the continuing power of the rationalist vision, as is the current popularity of strategic planning, total quality management, and techniques for reinventing government. Waldo (1984) argued, "In four decades, nothing has caused me to change my view of scientific management as locus of political theory" for public administration (p. xxxi). Even among those schools of thought critical of the positivist mainstream, including the new public administration, interpretivism, and critical theory, there is a strong undercurrent of rationalism, a belief that truth can be found and pursued if properly enlightened approaches are used. Indeed, writers such as Frederickson (1971) and Denhardt (1981), by seemingly advocating a radical transformation of organizational and political relationships, perhaps exemplify most clearly the rationalist approach in contemporary public administration thought.

Furthermore, there remains within public administration a lack of comfort with American constitutional tradition. Stillman (1989), for example, argued that the state should not be "chained and immobilized to the ancient varieties of the Founding Fathers" and warned against "clinging to antiquated republican solutions for contemporary governance" (p. 83). Adams and his colleagues (1990) at Evergreen State College go further and reject what they see as the Founders' liberal and procedural notion of democracy, noting that, because of an excessive emphasis on constitutional values, "Responsiveness and accountability have become profoundly problematic and tendencies of statis and drift . . . have brought into question the very governability of the modern state" (p. 231).

All this is not to suggest that Burke's worldview is totally without influence in public administration. Perhaps the most Burkean strands of thought in contemporary writings on public administration can be found in the work of Rohr (1986), who seeks to define an appropriate role for public administration based on his reading of American constitutional tradition. Rather than seek to reinvent government, Rohr (1986) attempted
to define and defend the administrative state as a "plausible expression of the constitutional order envisaged in the great public argument at the time of the founding of the Republic" (p. 81). In a tone reminiscent of Burke, he argued that "[t]he case for public administration should run with the grain of the American political culture and not against it" (Rohr, 1993, p. 246). The writings of Wildavsky also have a distinctly Burkean tone. Wildavsky, like Burke, believed that the "human mind is drastically limited in what it can encompass" (1964, p. 10). He argued that "man's ability to calculate is limited, and there are few theories and no a priori basis that would enable the participants to predict the consequences of alternative actions" (1964, p. 146). Wildavsky stressed that "policies should not be considered as eternal truths but as hypotheses subject to modification and replacement" (1987, p. 16) and that we must learn from our experience to correct our mistakes and improve our understanding of policy problems. All "analyses," for Wildavsky, must be "retrospective" because "it involves establishing a view of the past that would justify a desired future" (1987, p. 14).

Notwithstanding these important exceptions, rationalism continues to dominate public administration thinking. Because of this dominance, Burke's worldview then has had only a limited impact on the field. It might be countered here that the limited impact of Burkean thought reflects the fact that, given his conservative disposition and the age of limited government in which he wrote, Burke has little to say of relevance to public administration. Not surprisingly, we disagree.

**BURKE AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

Burke's thought has a number of implications for the role of public administration in the governance process. Burke's emphasis on the limitations of abstract reasoning and on the importance of experience would suggest that public administrators do have something of value to contribute in helping shape public policies; namely, the experience that they bring to bear by working with policies over extended periods of time. The importance of the expertise of public administrators to the policy process has, of course, been emphasized by public administration writers since Woodrow Wilson. However, emphasis has typically been placed on the importance of their technical or scientific expertise. Burke's observations suggest that what is more valuable is the ordinary or practical knowledge
that administrators can bring to bear by virtue of their extended experience in working with different problems and policies. In other words, Burke suggested that we must confront problems with an enlarged view of the world rather than bind ourselves to technical rationality. If this is correct, then Burke's writings and speeches can be interpreted perhaps as supporting a significant discretionary role for public administration in our constitutional system. Administrative discretion may be seen as consistent with the Burkean worldview because it allows for greater use of the practical knowledge possessed by administrators and drawn from their experience.

It is true, of course, that Burke believed public administrators must be accountable to elected officials for their actions. Burke argued that "with regards to every species of political dominion," the granting of rights and privileges, in other words the granting of power, constitutes a form of "trust to be rendered accountable—and even totally to cease when it substantially varies from the purposes for which alone it could have lawful existence" (1783/1901, II, p. 439). Burke, therefore, cannot be seen as endorsing the idea that public administrators should exercise their discretion independently of the will of elected leaders as expressed in the law. However, at the same time, as suggested above, Burke had very serious reservations about unrestrained majority rule and saw constitutional checks on majority power as necessary to preserve liberty. He also believed that elected representatives should act for the common or public good rather than as agents for the expressed interests of their constituents. Burke did not see government as an instrument of every wish and desire that the majority might happen to express. Therefore, Burke would not approve of government officials simply determining the will of the majority on each and every issue and then seeking to use their knowledge to implement it. Burke's thought here would suggest that public administrators can and should play a role in seeking to inform and shape the will of elected officials, as expressed in the law, and to try to ensure or at least make it more likely that they act for the good of the whole community rather than simply for the benefit of a majority of their constituents.

Furthermore, where the law grants administrators significant discretion, Burke's thought would indicate that administrators should not necessarily exercise that discretion on the basis of what they believe would be the majority will. According to Burke, the elected legislature should be seen as a "deliberative assembly acting for one nation with one interest, that of the whole" rather than as "a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests" (1774/1901, II, p. 96). It follows that when elected
leaders have failed to provide clear direction to public administrators for their actions in the law, public administrators should not seek to identify and act on the objectives of particular factions, even when there is a majority faction, but rather should consider what actions the legislature would have taken had it acted as a “deliberative assembly” working for the general good. Burke’s thought, therefore, can perhaps be interpreted as sanctioning a role for administrators in determining public policy in the exercise of their discretion.

BURKEAN LIMITS ON ADMINISTRATION

While Burke’s thought can be seen as sanctioning administrative discretion, it is also clear that, given his views on the limits of reason and human nature, Burke himself would never have approved of unbridled administrative discretion and would be wary of administrative despotism. Burke’s views on this point seem clear in the following argument:

It is not necessary to teach men to thirst after power. But it is very expedient that by moral instruction they should be taught, and by their civil constitutions they should be compelled, to put many restrictions upon the immoderate exercise of it, and the inordinate desire. (1791/1901, IV, p. 163)

Certainly, Burke would see the necessity and importance of law as a binding restraint on the arbitrary exercise of discretion by fallible public officials possessing limited reason. In Burke’s view, “it is a wickedness in politics to say that any man can have arbitrary power” (1788/1901, IX, p. 458). “Despotism,” for Burke, “means a mode of government bound by no written rules, and coerced by no controlling magistracies or well settled orders in the state” (1788/1901, IX, p. 459).

It follows then that Burke might see as desirable the development of bureaucratic rules and procedures, or red tape, to limit the ability of public administrators to treat citizens in any arbitrary fashion and to enrich themselves at the expense of citizens. Burke’s thought here would seem consistent with Davis’s (1969) argument that “administrators must strive to do as much as they reasonably can to develop and to make known the needed confinement of discretion through standards, principles and rules” (p. 59). As such, Burke’s thoughts would seem to raise questions for those who would advocate a drastic reduction in administrative rules and procedures as a means of promoting a more flexible and entrepreneurial style of administration (“From Red Tape,” 1993; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993).
Beyond rules and procedures, it would also seem likely that Burke would have attached importance to an appropriate ethic of administrative discretion. Indeed, despite his dark view of human nature, Burke clearly attached great importance to the ethical character of public officials. However, his ethical advice for public administration would be appropriately constrained. Given his views on equality and social freedom, and his views on the limits of reason, it seems likely, for example, that Burke would have rejected the views of the new public administration. Despite his strong commitment to equality before the law, he would have undoubtedly rejected Fredericksen’s (1971) call for public administrators to pursue activities “designed to enhance the political power and economic well-being” of minorities (p. 311). He would probably have seen such a call, as does Thompson (1975), “as a call for equity by means of theft and subversion on the basis of the ageless fallacy that the end justifies the means” (p. 11).

Burke’s thought would reject as unwise and dangerous in general any attempts to use administrative discretion to seek radical innovations. Burke, we believe, would have emphasized the need for prudence in the exercise of administrative discretion. Burke’s thought suggests the need for caution in innovation and the advisability of building on existing policies and institutions. Burke, to use the terminology of Lindblom (1959), would emphasize the need for an incremental approach in seeking change. Burkean thought, as noted above, would also indicate the importance of constitutional tradition in guiding administrative discretion. Furthermore, Burke would probably also have emphasized the importance of the tradition of an agency, as does Terry (1990). This does not mean that the administrator should simply preserve the status quo; rather, it means that he or she, in initiating change, should be willing to accept compromise and generally not seek radical departures from past practice. Such compromises are not only necessary but desirable from a Burkean perspective, given the limits of reason, to avoid inflicting harm.

The implications drawn here regarding the role of public administration in governance can, in a sense, all be traced back to the central theme in Burke’s thought, that is, his ideas on human reason and human nature. More specifically, Burkean administration can be traced from Burke’s conception that our reason is inevitably limited and that our actions often are motivated by our passions and interests. It is because of the limits on reason of an elected majority that administrators should not see themselves simply as agents of majority will. Furthermore, it is because of the limits on reason of administrators and their interests and passions that
administrative discretion itself should be exercised within the law and be limited by both formal administrative rules and procedures and by appropriate norms of ethical conduct.

ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICE

In addition to providing implications with regard to the role of public administration in the governance process, Burke's thought also has implications with regard to administrative practice in general. Perhaps most important of all, Burke would remind administrators of the limits of their reason. He would caution them against excessive reliance either on sophisticated models of public policy analysis or simple-minded lists of management axioms so popular among contemporary management consultants. He would remind administrators of the importance of the particulars of the situations that they face and the inevitable conflicts that will arise even among well-intentioned public officials with regard to what is to be done. Burke would caution administrators against overzealous pursuit of narrow, particularistic visions of the public good, no matter how deeply held.

In a more positive vein, Burke would urge administrators to draw upon not only their own past experience but also the experience of their colleagues and predecessors and the history of the agency in resolving difficult and complex issues. He would remind them of the importance of law and the constitution in shaping their practice. Finally, Burke would advise public administrators that they are custodians of and contributors to administrative tradition, and that, as such, it is their task to draw upon the best of past administrative practice, to build on and modify it in light of current problems and challenges, and to be mindful that their own actions form a part of a tradition of practice for their successors.

CONCLUSIONS

This review of Burke's thought suggests much that is of relevance to public administration. It suggests the desirability of administrative discretion exercised within the law as a means of drawing on the experience of public administration. It suggests that public administrators should not simply follow the will of the majority; rather, they should seek to help shape it and use their discretion to promote the general good. At the same time, however, it indicates that public administrators must not abuse their
discretion. They should accept that their discretion, like the discretion of citizens in general, must be governed by rules and procedures and informed and constrained by a respect for past practice and tradition. As such, Burkean administration offers an approach that can avoid the dangers of the ambitious and potentially despotic discretionism of Friedrich (1940) and the narrow and passive instrumentalism of Finer (1941). A Burkean administrator is neither an unelected tyrant nor a pliant servant of elected tyrants.

That Burke's thought should have something to offer for American public administration should perhaps not surprise us. As noted earlier, Burke's thought has much in common with that of the Founders who shaped our political tradition. His thought, therefore, remains a continuing reminder that in seeking to improve public administration, we should neither reject nor feel uneasy with our Anglo-American classical liberal political tradition; rather, we should continue to draw insight from it.

NOTE

1. A detailed discussion of Burke's ideas on public administration can be found in Akhlaque Haque's recent dissertation, Edmund Burke: Limits of Reason in Public Administration Theory (1994).

REFERENCES


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