Chapter VII

Citizens’ Trust in Ministries

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ABSTRACT
Citizens have many roles in our contemporary liberal democracies. From these roles one is to trust or mistrust governmental agencies. They must trust them, at least to a certain extent, because they experience in their own lives deleterious consequences of badly-designed public policies. They must distrust them, again to a certain extent, because a fear of distrust keeps policy-makers on alert about how their policy ideas might change public opinion. This chapter is the infrequent empirical analysis of citizens’ trust and mistrust in ministries as central policy-makers in Finland. It is based on the national survey. It shows that citizens are suspicious of most of the ministries in terms of developing public services, regulation, financial transfers, and citizen orientation. According to the empirical results ministries should be aware of public failure and quickly
rethink their priorities and policy-styles. This chapter stresses the need to reinvent policy-making and its political culture. Democracy will severely deteriorate if public authorities will not take on this challenge.

INTRODUCTION

It may not always be fully understood by citizens and professionals about how important and complex the relationships between citizens and government are in a civil society. They affect each other in many ways. Surely, many wish that these relationships could be as productive, creative and responsive as possible (Miettinen & Saarinen, 1990, p. 259). However, there are many on both sides who are of the opinion that this relationship is not as beneficial as they would like it to be and serious efforts are needed to restore it to working order. There are serious problems in this relationship.

There are many anomalies which produce dissatisfaction towards the way in which government acts and fulfills its political promises to citizens. Citizens complain about the high level of taxation and are worried about repetitious warnings of deteriorating public services (Palheimo & Wiberg, 1997, p. 349). They expect that government treats them equally before the law and are afraid of being driven into a judicial confusion that they do not understand or control (Harisalo, 1997, pp. 90-91; Ruostetsaari, 1995, p. 74). It is natural for citizens to hope that government would use its financial transfers in order to help and empower those who are disadvantaged and in real need, but they also seem to have reason to speculate otherwise (Lehto, 2001, pp. 26-28; Beers & Moor, 2001, pp. 115-129). And as if this were not enough, citizens have begun to think that they have gradually become powerless objects of governmental action (Pesonen & Sänkiaho, 1979, p. 449; Ruostetsaari, 1995, pp. 77-79). As a result, the voter turnouts in national and local elections have gradually declined over the past 15 years from 80% to close 60% (Ylönen, 2000, p. 14).

These problems dramatize an urgent need to introduce new information technologies to alleviate problems between citizens and government and to help democracy to develop with new means. Government could use them in order to promote transparency, impartiality, objectivity, service-mindedness, and sense of responsibility in its policy-making (OECD, 2000, p. 141). And if properly utilized, new technologies could make it easier for citizens to understand government’s choices and actions in different cases. In other words, a new emphasis of government is to maximize citizens’ voice in policy-making and minimize their willingness to exit (Bouckaert, Ormond & Peters, 2000, p. 14).
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