

## THE ART OF PUBLIC STRATEGY: MOBILIZING POWER AND KNOWLEDGE FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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**Geoff Mulgan**

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At the heart of our institutions, be they public or private, for profit or non-for-profit, a peculiar discourse dominates the conversations about governance, organizational objectives and best practices that ought to help accomplish them: this powerful discourse is

the discourse of strategy. Far from neutrally describing reality, it gives form to ideas, shapes our mental maps of the world, guides our sense-making processes, and operates as a springboard for action. To claim: 'I think strategically' is a marker of an individual's influence and power, for it signals the ability and willingness to shape the imagined futures most of us will have little choice but to inhabit.

Geoff Mulgan's book *The Art of Public Strategy: Mobilizing Power and Knowledge for the Common Good*, provides a thought provoking analysis of the *lingua franca* of strategy and the methods it prescribes to put plans into action. He is uniquely positioned to do so: he has worked as a strategist for Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd; in the 1990s, he co-founded the influential think-tank Demos, and currently, he is affiliated with several universities, including LSE, UCL, and the University of Melbourne, amongst others.

Mulgan's book maps out possible applications and implications of strategy for the public sector: he starts with a caveat, stressing that there are important differences between strategy in the corporate world and the public sector. First, public organizations do not seek competitive advantage (although competition can be of importance); second, they face different constraints, such as public opinion and high levels of scrutiny; third, compared to the mantra of profit maximization, public organizations' goals are complex, ambiguous and often contradictory; finally, they cannot adopt a strategy of survival by adapting to their environment as their task is to shape the environment. Hence, to be strategic is neither 'natural nor easy for governments', as Mulgan posits. There seems to be a premium on being populist and tactical, and on sacrificing the present for the future, while choosing prevention over cure usually yields small rewards. Facing such an adverse starting point how does Mulgan frame strategy for public organization? Read critically, *The Art of Public Strategy* consists of two competing narratives that reflect the Janus-faced nature of the strategy discourse. Mulgan conflates both views of strategy, resulting in a somehow contradictory yet rewarding reading experience. Let me explain.

First, as Heraclitus remarked, war is the father of all things, including strategy. From the Chinese writer Sun-Tzu's *The Art of War* to Machiavelli's *Prince* and Clausewitz's *On War*, strategy has been informed by military thinking. Most of corporate strategy research reflects this lineage by talking of competing with opponents that need to be defeated. Mulgan's book adds to that canon when he offers strategy tools and models ready for implementation. For instance, he outlines a rather linear model of strategy making (p. 5 and 76ff) that starts with the purpose (why should we act?); analysis of environments (what is the context?); possible directions (what are the goals?); a list of actions (how to accomplish goals?), and learning (what worked, what didn't?). Strategy making unfolds in a neat strategy project phase model that moves linearly from project plan through interim analytical report to preferred strategic direction and final report and delivery plan (p. 122). In language that exhibits MBA-speak qualities, Mulgan proposes that the implementation of strategy will be facilitated through 'tough targets, precise measurement of performance (to enable the principal to judge the agent), clear divisions between purchasers and providers, and competitive markets to weed out the weak' (p. 137). Although Mulgan is aware of the problems of performance measurement systems and KPIs (people tend to manage indicators and not the performance), he seems to suggest that the answer lies in 'more sophisticated approaches to performance management' (p. 139). The focus on hard performance is paired with a fondness for soft allegory: 'Rather than a Leviathan or a marketplace', the state of the 21st century will shine like a rainbow: 'A rainbow

combines many different colours which add up to a coherent whole. It is transparent. And it constantly pulls our attention to the horizon' (p. 258).

The other face of Mulgan's book can be read as a counter-narrative to the simplistic how-to fare it serves up. Implicitly, yet somehow unreflexively, Mulgan challenges his own how-to approach. Following his own advice, he argues that '[n]eat strategies which offer a simple model of causation can work for very simple tasks' (p. 216). Since public organizations face complex tasks, strategy has to reflect that complexity. When Mulgan talks about complexity that escapes the neat logic of models, when he describes the unintended consequences of strategy, and when he writes about strategy as socio-political process, he gives a fascinating account of strategy in practice. In truly Machiavellian spirit, he provides a realist account that leaves little doubt that policy follows power. These reflections are dotted through the book and undermine the neat logic it presents.

Take his ironic definition of the ultimate purpose of strategy in a democracy as being 'to meet public wants and needs, refracted through politicians' more immediate need to win elections' (p. 37). With wit and analytical rigour Mulgan describes the emerging nature of the strategy-making process, in which the best strategists are distinguished by 'strategic intuition' that can be supported, but never substituted, by analysis (p. 22; see also pages 30ff and 130). Mulgan has little doubt about the political nature of the strategy-making process in public organizations: '[I]n a democracy the people, and the politicians who represent them, have every right to ignore evidence', Mulgan states, as the full revelation of facts is a good idea in theory, but can be destabilizing and destructive in reality. Knowledge and 'hard evidence' play an ambiguous role in policy-making as the 'penalties for omission are less than those for commission ...' (p. 134). Mulgan also reminds us that there is a politics of visibility that drives data-hungry strategists: 'Knowledge becomes most compelling not just when it is useful but when it's very visibility makes it hard to ignore' (p. 134). In any case, action requires suspending 'awareness of the ambiguities and complexities' of reality for a while (p. 133) as sometimes the 'only way to gain knowledge is to act, tentatively, and see what happens. In any case certainty will be elusive' (p. 134). Mulgan offers an implicit critique at strategy's assumption that plans are made first, and action follows (which echoes the old Cartesian assumption that mind controls matter, or *res cogitans* precedes *res extensa*). Mulgan leaves little doubt about this problematic idea of implementation: '[...] the metaphors of delivery are misleading. Policies aren't the same as parcels. Competent public services are full of people with their own knowledge and ideas who aren't willing to be reduced to being agents for leaders who know less than them' (p. 143). Finally, linking *realpolitik* with strategizing, Mulgan argues that good leaders always need competing sources of advice to be able to change direction if needed, which is 'one of the reasons why the very best political leaders often played their staff against each other and acted deceptively' (p. 118).

The second narrative that runs like a critical stream through *The Art of Public Strategy* is incomparably richer than the flat surface represented by models and tools. It is this subversive stream, working against some of Mulgan's own concepts, that makes the book a fascinating read. In these heretical parts of the book, he conceptualizes strategy making as a socio-political process in which the simplistic tools and models of the strategy canon act as resources to rationalize and legitimize action. In doing so Mulgan's study does not answer, but opens up, a series of far-reaching questions for strategy research in public organizations. First, how does the strategy discourse change the public sphere? In the dominant conception, strategy is linked to competition and market mechanisms. As such, it is inextricably linked to neo-liberalism where, as Milton Friedman infamously

argued, 'government is the problem'. Adopting the discourse of strategic management might be a symptom of government's efforts to justify itself in market terms. Secondly, according to Goffman, people engage in impression management as they perform their reality, which begs the question: how is strategy performed? What scripts and props do strategists use to deliver convincing performances? How does the poetry of strategy as displayed in (re)presentations and clear-cut models differ from the prose of action and implementation? Finally, strategy needs to be studied at an institutional macro-level: it is a specific form of rationality that can travel through mimesis almost at the speed of light and be mimicked by almost any organization.

Mulgan's book is an important contribution to understanding strategy in its complexity. By coincidence it gives testimony to the Janus-faced nature of strategy as a managerial discourse *and* a study of politics and power in practice. It is an intriguing book to study since it embodies the secret dialogue between the two faces of strategy. It promises to become a seminal contribution about strategy in public organizations when it talks of strategy neither as Leviathan nor as a Rainbow but as a verb, an activity, a process, a practice. On these occasions Mulgan does not try to teach us how to become better managers through using simplifying models but how to become better strategists and strategy scholars through understanding strategy not as solution but as a symptom of a society that looks for certainty as it faces an unknowable future.

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