

## **VB-NIG Dialogue 18 november 2021**

### **Coreferaat door dr. Warda Belabas t.a.v. keynote speech van Paul 't Hart**

#### **Reflection on VB-NIG Dialogue:**

Thank you Paul 't Hart, for the interesting keynote. Also thank you to Brenda Vermeeren, who asked me today to reflect with you on the role of public administration in science, in policy making and in society at large. In the short 10 minutes that I have, I will share with you some of my thoughts, which are based in some observations from a young public administration scholar, that is herself searching for answers on the question of 'Do we – or even more do I - matter (enough)?'. Even though it sounds a bit self-centered to change the question to 'Do I matter?', I will start my reflection there, only to return to the 'We'-question in the latter part of my talk.

In my own research, which focuses on the question of how local governments are dealing with migration-related diversity, I often ask my self this question: is or can the research that I am doing impact on policy-makers that are involved in developing policies related to migration, integration and diversity? Can my work make a difference in how we perceive and how we organize government steering on migrant integration? Can city branding professionals, for example, learn from my work on the use and (mis)use of diversity in government communication?

For me as an individual researcher, these kind of questions are important as they mirror all kinds of social problems that are desperately asking for solutions. It is in the public and political debate where problems are defined and solutions are suggested.

Yet, as Paul observed, it is precisely in these arenas and on these issues that public administration has had too limited a presence. This has to change, as there are many urgent social problems that would benefit tremendously from its distinctive perspective on the governance and management of public issues. PA scholars need to be feeding the public and political debates with their distinctive insights:

- To have an impact on the governance discourse that evolves, sometimes by being critical on the substantive claims, tones of voice or silences within that discourse itself.  
To reflect on the type of solutions that are suggested: on their desirability and feasibility from the perspective of effective, achievable, humane, just and legitimate public governance.

I will give you an example of how a public administration perspective can contribute to social issues that keep recurring on public, political and policy agendas.

My example revolves around the issue of institutional discrimination. While the death of George Floyd in the US has held up a mirror to the US criminal justice system and its political institutions at large, it has also prompted soul-searching and debate in Europe, and the

Netherlands. How can we, too, make progress on moving towards public institutions and frontline services practices that really embody human dignity and social equality?

In the Netherlands, the scandal and tragedy of the so called '*Kindertoeslag-affaire*', triggered a same sort of discussion. How was it possible that within the tax authorities, an institution that in itself represents state authority in a very explicit way, tax officers could repeatedly treat people in such unjust ways? And how is it possible that the victims - the parents and families that were driven to poverty and despair – overwhelmingly shared certain social and ethnic characteristics?

From a public administration perspective, there are many questions that would be relevant and timely to study: how do discriminatory beliefs and practices arise and how do they get normalized and indeed institutionalized? How might we design, lead and manage governmental institutions in a way that prevents such practices and the terrifying outcomes that they can bring about?

There is much to gain and learn from the body of knowledge on the logic of institutional behavior and how for example concepts such as organizational culture, organizational structures and also mechanism such as path-dependency play a role. In my own role as a researcher, and this is just a cautious observation, I feel that this existing body of knowledge is not being put to optimal use in tackling deep-seated discrimination in our systems of governance.

A solution that is now being suggested by the government itself is, for example, to reduce the complexity in the '*toeslagen-system*', as one of the problems in the current way of organizing fees for childcare, is that the responsibility lies with parents and submitting their applications is a very complex process. From an institutional perspective, the question remains however if this will indeed solve the problem that the tax authorities are facing. It is not only about changing the rules and procedures, it is also about changing the practices and routines of civil servants, changing the ways they come to their decisions. It is about challenging and changing their assumptions and biases, at all levels of the organization.

The example of the *Kindertoeslagen-affaire* shows, there is much work to do in improving the institutional behavior, structures, cultures and mechanism that have led to such unjust and shocking outcomes. Reducing complexity in the process is as putting a bandage on a wound that is severely infected. It simply needs much more to heal.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that as public administration scholars we have much to offer, but we have to make ourselves visible and share the knowledge that there is to make a change. To make a difference. And to make a difference, we also need to understand the context of the public debate and its sensitivities. Not only knowledge matters, but also an understanding of these sensitivities is needed, to actually come to useful academic insights on suggested policy directions and solutions. Especially in the case of complex public issues, such as institutional discrimination, there are multiple truth claims, multiple frames and multiple normative perspectives. A public administration scholar who wants to make an impact needs to be well-equipped for this. They need to have not just the professional drive but the prudence, perseverance and courage to operate effectively in tense public arenas

The 'nuanced', governance-focused content of PA scholars' messaging may not always fit the heat of the societal and political debate. But to get the strategically important governance questions to the table, we need to own and radiate the urgency of our contributions. As public administration scholars we have been teaching our students how to 'speak truth to power'. It is high time, however, that we make a stronger effort to speak our truths in the public arenas that we have avoided for too long.

Thank you for your attention.