

Quangos In Britain: Government And The Networks Of Public Policy-making

Quangos: UK Ministerial Responsibility in Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This article considers the theory and practice of accountability arrangements for quangos in the UK. Theoretical notions of accountability are discussed and the practice of parliamentary accountability evaluated in the context of the traditional notion of ministerial responsibility. The study outlines the results obtained through an empirical analysis of parliamentary questions, M.P.s' replies to a questionnaire and several interviews with M.P.s. The analysis suggests that ministerial oversight over these bodies is more extensive than scholars have traditionally assumed. In addition, the study draws attention to the role of members' constituencies in raising concerns about quangos and the extent to which M.P.s collaborate with quangos rather than scrutinise their activities.

Introduction

Concern about the accountability of quangos has played a key role in the debate about quasi-government. Discussion about the accountability of quasi-government was prominent in the Anglo-American discussions thirty years ago (see for example, Hague, Mackenzie and Barker, 1975). Concern about the accountability of bodies created at arms' length from politicians has been voiced by participants in the 1990s UK debate about quangos (see for example, Weir and Hall, 1994) and by scholars writing about arrangements in other countries (see for example, Leazes, 1997).

Similarly, there has been a long-standing scepticism about the effectiveness of ministerial responsibility in the UK (see for example, Finer 1956; and Madgwick and Woodhouse, 1989). In addition some scholars have expressed doubt about the traditional notion that ministerial responsibility is clearly and consistently restricted in relation to quangos (see for example, Massey, 1995).

This article analyses aspects of the accountability process in the UK in relation to quangos. The role of ministers and backbench M.P.s in the account-

32

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