William Robertson: Exemplar of Politics and Public Management Rightly Understood

William Robertson, director of the City of Los Angeles’ Bureau of Street Services, is profiled here as an exemplary public administrator. The authors suggest that Robertson practices politics appropriately in his role in order to achieve great outcomes for his bureau, the citizens with whom he works, and the city as a whole. To adequately define the ways in which Robertson uses politics, Sherry Arnstein’s “ladder of participation” is reconceptualized as a circle of participation in which Robertson uses multiple strategies of interaction with citizens, elected officials, employees, and peers. Lessons for public administrators are offered based on Robertson’s example.

In this Administrative Profile, we present William Robertson, director of the Bureau of Street Services in the Los Angeles Department of Public Works, as an exemplar of the practice of public administration. We believe he illustrates the way in which public executives can engage in politics appropriately, or, to paraphrase Alexis de Tocqueville, politics and administration “rightly understood.” Political activity by administrators is sometimes viewed as an insurmountable problem: Politics is a necessary evil under the circumstances of modern government—the dark side of administration that always threatens to subvert the professional, technical management of public administration. We intend to legitimize political behavior in public management by showing how Robertson uses it effectively on behalf of the citizenry in a society that aspires to be democratic.

Whether one thinks the politics-administration dichotomy has been well behind us since the last half of the 20th century or that it never was advocated in as simplistic a fashion as textbook treatments sometimes suggest, the fact remains that we still lack a generally accepted normative understanding of how politics should be accommodated in administrative practice. If politics with a small “p” cannot be fully separated from public administration—and we believe it cannot and should not—then the ways in which it should be employed need to be addressed. We believe that focusing on current, practicing public administrators may be the best way to stimulate a discussion about normative politics for public administration. Examining the work of living exemplars may be the best way to ground such a discussion.

We had an opportunity to examine Robertson’s conduct over a period of approximately one year as part of an action research project that brought neighborhood councils in Los Angeles together with city departments to work out written agreements about service delivery in their areas.1 Robertson participated in all of these sessions with his program managers. Since that time, we interviewed nine key people inside and outside the Los Angeles Department of Public Works,2 and we also conducted two interviews with Robertson himself. In addition, we had opportunities to observe him in other settings, such as meetings of neighborhood councils,3 and the Congress of Neighborhood Councils,4 as well as in guest lectures to students in the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California.

Our conclusion, based on these sources of information, is that Robertson has honed his political skills into an art that holds in dynamic balance both the