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Chapter 4

Loss of Balance? Exploring the 'Dark Side' of Accountability

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In the previous chapter Ellen Rock explored 'questions of measurement' and, more specifically, how questions of 'too much, or too little' could be settled. Her conclusion focused attention on the underlying rationale for accountability in any given context, and the primary goals being sought through the application of accountability processes. This chapter continues this focus on proportionality and balance – themes that define this whole collection – while expanding and complementing Rock's approach. It achieves this through a novel emphasis on excess and asks: *can accountability be bad for democracy?* Although Bovens, Schillemans, and 'T Hart (2008) suggest that accountability 'is one of those golden concepts that no one can be against' this chapter seeks to explore *how*, *why* and *when* accountability might be detrimental to the broader health of democracy. More specifically, it seeks to construct and interrogate an argument regarding whether a link exists between *increasing* levels of public accountability and *falling* levels of public confidence in politics in advanced liberal democracies. This is clearly a wide-ranging argument. It embraces a range of debates and discussions which although difficult to settle in a definitive sense do at least deepen our understanding of the interplay between individuals, institutions and society vis-à-vis accountable governance. In doing so this chapter helps provide the foundations for later chapters that drill-down into more specific concerns and controversies. It is also a chapter that innovates in the sense of embracing, presenting and developing its core six-word 'question of accountability' (i.e. *can accountability be bad for democracy?*) by returning to an influential text and then exploring how the debate it set in train has evolved over time.

In 2011 Matthew Flinders wrote an article entitled 'Daring to be a Daniel' which crafted a controversial argument concerning the pathologies of too much accountability. It was defined to stimulate a debate and a series of response pieces subsequently critiqued, revised and refined Flinders' core thesis. Moreover, over the subsequent decade a large number of research projects and academic publications have attempted to test – or, at the very least, explore – Flinders' core thesis through applied empirical analysis in a range of settings. These three stages of debate and discussion (initial intervention, immediate response, incremental analyses) provide a framework through which to range from micro-political questions of institutional inertia or reform, through to far larger macro-political questions concerning the changing socio-political context, the role of academics in society and the ontology of 'accountability spaces'. In order to capture and present this breadth this chapter is divided into three question-focused sections:

Part 1: *Initial Intervention* – Why might accountability be 'bad' for democracy?

Part 2 - *Immediate Response* – How was this 'dark side' of accountability thesis initially received?

Part 3 - *Incremental Analyses* – What do we know about the pathologies of accountability ten years on?

In seeking to explore questions of excess, salvation and sorrow this chapter is not, of course, arguing in any way against the concept of accountability *per se*. Accountability, and the relationships through which this concept is enacted and made real, provide the core essence of legitimate democratic governance. The 'be bad' dimension of this chapter's primary question is therefore partial in the sense that it accepts and recognises the core centrality of accountability processes but simply seeks to provoke a debate about *dis*proportionality, excess, overloads and imbalance. In order to start this debate, the next section provides a precis of Flinders' original 2011 article.

Why might accountability be 'bad' for democracy?

'Accountability' Flinders suggests (2011, 595) 'is not always a good thing.' In this regard he draws inspiration from two key sources: the first being Elinor Ostrom's (2000) warning about 'the danger of self-evident truths', and the second being Melvyn Dubnick's 'seeking salvation' argument concerning the limits of accountability. 'The fact that something is so widely believed' Ostrom (2000, 33) suggested 'does not make it correct.' Furthermore, reforms 'based on overly simplified views of the world have led to counter-intuitive and counter-intentional results.' For Ostrom there was an urgent need for social and political scientists to question dominant self-evident truths, accepted foundational assumptions and simple 'common-sense' understandings. The link across to Dubnick's work was that he sought to expose the danger of a core and dominant accountability assumption within advanced liberal societies. 'There exists an almost unquestioned assumption' Dubnick (2002) suggested 'that the *creation or enhancement of accountability mechanisms* of any sort will *result in greater democracy* [emphasis added].'

This implied logic of 'more accountability equals greater/better democracy' was the 'self-evident truth' (*qua.* Ostrom, 2000) that Dubnick sought to question, and that Flinders sought to explore in his 2011 article. As such, Flinders surveyed a vast seam of scholarship and identified a common four-step logic-process (see Box 4.1, below) that tended to dominate debates, almost without question:

Box 4.1 The 'Self-Evident Truth' of Accountability

Step 1.
The transition from *government* to *governance*
has undermined traditional mechanisms of democratic accountability;
⇓
Step 2.
As a result, politicians have become more untrustworthy
and bureaucracies less responsive;
⇓
Step 3.
New modes and mechanisms of accountability
therefore need to be implemented; and
⇓
Step 4.
Any individual or organization that argues
against greater accountability must have something to hide.

Steps 1 to 4 were from this perspective imbued, as Dubnick (2002) had argued, with the 'unquestioned assumption' that more accountability would result in greater/better democracy. Flinders sought to question this assumption through a focus on caution and proportionality. Caution in the sense that accountability processes can mutate into self-fulfilling prophecies. If rational-choice theoretic assumptions are accepted about the behaviour of politicians and bureaucrats (i.e. Machiavellian rationality that they are intrinsically self-interested and not to be trusted) then there is a risk that healthy *dis*trust may mutate into corrosive cynicism (discussed below) in ways that squeeze- out any possibility of recognising or acknowledging of virtuous or selfless behaviour (see Hay, 2004). If normative caution about *always* prescribing self-interested motivations for public service provides the first of Flinders points, then the second focuses on proportionality and the capacity to govern. Put simply, politicians and the officials who work within the public sector must be able to make decisions. Overly demanding or complex accountability requirements born out of excessive *dis*trust can suffocate the capacity and morale of any organization. Governing capacity is therefore a requirement of any political system. 'My point is that we cannot bind the hands of politicians by placing more and more limits on their governing capacity, or by subjecting their every decision to forensic analysis' Flinders (2011, 599) suggested 'and then attack them for failing to govern with conviction or take decisive action.'

In highlighting the themes of caution and proportionality Flinders was able to draw-upon British constitutional history. In *The British Constitution*, for example, Walter Bagehot (1867 [2001]) went to great lengths to explain that the convention of ministerial responsibility was intended not simply as a sword of accountability but also as a shield *from* accountability. The convention's role was to deliver an acceptable degree of accountability while at the same time protecting ministers from 'the busy-bodies and the crotchet-makers of the House' thereby preventing 'the incessant tyranny of parliament over public offices.' Constitutional texts from the 19th century that considered the birth and risks of representative democracy were almost defined by a focus on how to deliver an acceptable balance between *representative government* (emphasizing accountability, transparency, and public participation) and *responsible government* (emphasizing stability, executive capacity, and control). A. H. Birch's *Representative and Responsible Government* (1964) and David Judge's *The Parliamentary State* (1993) providing astute analyses of how this balance has gradually evolved to the benefit of the executive over the legislature (for a review see Flinders and Judge, 2017).

Flinders was able to draw-upon a thin stream of more recent analyses when seeking to emphasise the themes of caution and proportionality, and in this regard the focus on Anechiarico and Jacobs' (1996) discussion of the 'integrity/efficiency trade-off' provided a particularly important reference point (discussed in Chapter One, developed in Figure 1.1 above). 'Some politicians' Anechiarico and Jacobs (1996, 59) suggested '[were] anxious to appear morally pure, support dubious and cumbersome 'reforms', regardless of the possible effect of those reforms on public administration. . . moral entrepreneurs are likely to be so consumed with stopping corruption that they rarely even consider the integrity/efficiency trade-off.' What might from this perspective be termed *the accountability dilemma* at the heart of the 'integrity/efficiency trade-off' revolves around the simple recognition that the requirements of accountability (i.e. regular reporting, audit mechanisms, threat of sanctions, short-term time horizons, etc.) may grate against the imperatives of effective service delivery (freedom to manage, innovation, flexibility, risk taking, long-term planning, etc.). The simple point that Flinders was attempting to highlight was that this dilemma or trade-off too often

appeared to have been overlooked against a backdrop that Moore and Gates (1986, 2) had correctly described in terms of an 'unquenchable thirst for accountability'.

Unquenchable thirsts are rarely a sign of good health and Flinders supported this concern with reference (*inter alia*) to a range of studies and perspectives that had each in their own ways questioned simplistic 'accountability-is-good' assumptions. This began with Romzek and Ingraham (2000) exploration of the 'cross-pressures' of accountability and ended with Falaschetti's (2009) analysis of the economic costs of accountability – with works including Behn's (2001) *Rethinking Democratic Accountability* with its emphasis on dysfunctional incentive frameworks, O'Neill's (2002) philosophical 'question of trust', Koppell's thesis about 'multiple-accountabilities disorder, Hood and Heald's (2006) questioning of the link between transparency and better governance, and Philp's (2009, 43) warnings about 'delimiting democratic accountability' providing important intervening reference points.

All of these studies, Flinders suggested, presented reasons for why accountability *might* be bad for democracy in certain forms, contexts or quantities. Or, to put the same point differently, these studies posed critical questions about the need for design-based thinking and discussions when considering the introduction of new or enhanced scrutiny systems. But in addition to these predominantly economic or administrative analyses, Flinders attempted to make a distinctive *democratic* contribution by highlighting the implications of a changing socio-political context or, more specifically, *the pathology of politicised accountability.*

For Flinders the *pathology of politicised accountability* consisted of three inter-woven dimensions that, when taken together, risked creating a negative spiral of cynicism - possibly even the hollowing-out of democratic governance. The first element was the emergence of an increasingly dominant form of aggressive 'Gotcha!' accountability. The ultimate ambition of this mode of scrutiny was *not* to find out *what happened, why and what might be learnt to prevent similar problems in the future* but to enforce sacrificial accountability (i.e. to claim a political scalp). In theory accountability revolves around the balanced review of information and the subsequent allocation of credit or sanctions for performance; in reality, Flinders argued, had become synonymous with naming, shaming and ultimately blaming. 'Accountability means punishment' as Behn (2001, 3) had argued, and Flinders (2011) sought to explain who the dominance of such a one-dimensional blame-focused accountability emphasis could be 'bad' for democracy. 'Bad' in the sense of failing to identify 'lesson-learning opportunities' or 'what works', 'bad' in the sense of encouraging defensive behaviours on the part of politicians and public servants, 'bad' in the sense of not facilitating balanced or evidence-based discussions, 'bad' in the sense of generating risk-averse cultures and blocking innovation, bad in the sense of encouraging an emphasis on scapegoating individuals when often it was structures and systems that were often at fault.

Accountability is an inevitably political process. It revolves around the control of political power and public resources. But the point Flinders was making emphasised the emergence and dominance of a particularly pathological and highly partisan form of 'attack politics' in which the tools and processes of public accountability were increasingly used as little more than weapons of party-political point scoring (see Buell and Sigelman, 2009). This flows into a second shift that Flinders initial analysis sought to emphasise: the changing role of the media.

The emergence of 24/7 rolling media with a vast number of online and offline channels all competing for a slice of a finite and increasingly fluid viewing public had, Flinders suggested, created an additional layer to the *pathology of politicised accountability* discussed above. The 'if it bleeds, it leads' approach of key outlets reflected a media sphere in that had become increasingly imbued with a culture of negativity that ignored success or balanced reporting in favour of crisis

amplification and personalized attacks. Thomas Patterson's (2003) award-winning work, for example, linking increasing news media negativity bias with the phenomenon of 'vanishing voters' and in many ways what Flinders sought to hypothesise was the relationship between an ever-expanding (but largely negatively inflected) accountability universe and concern about the 'death', 'end' or 'suicide' of democracy. In this hypothesis what might be termed 'the dark side' of accountability mattered because: (i) it provided the public with a heavily distorted view about the performance of political institutions, political processes and politicians; which (ii) could have major implications in terms of fostering 'disaffected democrats' and nurturing anti-political sentiment; (iii) while at the same time also rationalising a reform agenda based on the movement of powers, responsibilities and decision-making capacity *away* from elected politicians (on the basis of their untrustworthiness, inefficiency, etc.) towards 'depoliticised' arm's-length agencies or actors in an attempt to solve a perceived 'credibility crisis' (see Fawcett *et al.* 2017).

Too much accountability, particularly of the wrong kind of accountability, can be as bad for democracy as too little. This was the simple argument Flinders attempted to craft in his 2011 'Daring to be a Daniel' article. To make such an argument was not to deny the concept's 'golden' qualities but it is to highlight the existence of a 'dark side' which can become highly problematic if allowed to evolve without requisite *caution* and *proportionality* (discussed above). Accountability might be 'bad' for democracy – to return to the core focus of this section – if it over-exaggerates or over-inflames the societal 'negativity bias' in ways that are in fact misleading, inaccurate or simply a gross misrepresentation of the realities of democratic governance. Accountability is also likely to be 'bad' if it cannot distribute credit, praise or reward; and if it fosters defensive and risk-aversive cultures within the public sector. This in itself underlines the basic chameleon-like quality of accountability structures with different systems having different aims, ambitions and unintended consequences. As such, and returning, to Dubnick's (2002) 'seeking salvation for accountability' argument – the answer to every governing dilemma is therefore unlikely to be found in the imposition of ever-greater and more strident scrutiny structures.

'This is clearly a wide-ranging article and, like painting on a large canvas, this has required the use of a fairly broad brush, in analytical and empirical terms' Flinders (2011, 597) noted 'However, it is hoped that by daring to challenge the normative assumptions that underpin the development of increasingly dense accountability webs and locating this perspective within a number of broader debates concerning public attitudes and the evolution of democracy, this article will stimulate more scholarly interest in this topic.' The next section explores the initial response to Flinders' focus on the 'dark side' of accountability and how these criticisms and refinements relate to issues and themes that have surfaced in earlier chapters in this collection.

How was the 'dark side' thesis initially received?

Too much accountability can be as problematic for democracy as too little. This was the basic argument that Flinders had presented. This was not a new argument. Although phrased in different ways at different times, the 'integrity/efficiency' trade-off (discussed above) had been a feature of scholarship for at least a century and basically highlighted that 'the pursuit of *absolute* integrity' [emphasis added] – the title of on Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996 book on the topic – was likely to impose major financial and administrative costs. The issue here not being about accountability *per se* or the demand for high-standards in public life but how to achieve some sort of balance between effective scrutiny, on the one hand, and governing capacity, on the other hand. The search for *absolute* integrity – the very highest levels of propriety and public service - may serve as an honourable ideal but may in practice create little more than a low-cost, high blame operating

environment. What Flinders added to this thesis was an emphasis on the changing socio-political context at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. More specifically, his concern about the *pathology of politicised accountability* sought to underline how scrutiny structures appeared to have become more aggressive, personalised and partisan in nature. This, in turn, was linked not only to a changing political climate but also to shifts in the political economy of the media which risked providing the public with a misleading sense of political life and public service that may, over time, lead to democratic *de*consolidation (i.e. the evisceration of public commitment to the core values and principles of democracy).

How then was this thesis received, and what did the tone and content of those responses indicate about other 'questions of accountability' that may deserve consideration?

Table 4.1 Main Immediate Responses to the 'Dark Side of Accountability' Thesis

Respondent	Discipline	Argument
Yannis Papadopoulos	Political Science	Flinders' etiology (i.e. causal interpretation) suggests but does not demonstrate the negative influence of the media, and it over-inflates the penetrative capacity of monitory democracy.
Philip E. Tetlock	Political Psychology	The micro-mechanisms underlying the accountability excesses that Flinders identifies will not be curbed by well-intentioned pleas for proportionality.
Melvin J. Dubnick	Public Administration	Flinders adopts an institutionalist approach that fails to grasp the role of socially mediated relationships. Understanding the 'accountability space' requires a radical reframing.

The immediate and direct replies came in the form of response pieces that were all written by leading and internationally renowned scholars specialising in accountability-related issues. The main thrust of their arguments is set out Table 4.1 (above) and the remainder of this section provides a very brief precis of each author's thoughts, criticisms and counter-claims. The reason for this review is to expand the debate and questions concerning the 'dark side' of accountability, before looking at how these issues and themes have developed and evolved over the last decade in the next and concluding section of this chapter.

Papadopoulos: A Salutary Note of Caution about Media Influence and Monitory Penetration

'Notwithstanding [the] undeniable merits of Professor Flinders' critical piece on the pathologies of accountability' Papadopoulos (2012, 240) notes 'I am afraid there are some weaknesses in his line of thinking…They are concentrated, in my view, in two partly inaccurate descriptions: one on the role of the media and one on the impact of 'monitoring' in contemporary governance.' In relation to the media Papadopoulos suggested that Flinders exaggerated the negative impact of the media, or at the very least failed to acknowledge the heterogeneity of media regimes and practices in different parts of the world and due to this presented an overly 'Americanized' (i.e. market-driven, sensationalist, conflict-focused, a culture of negativity, etc.). Papadopoulos also suggested that when it comes to media accountability and its effects on public trust and confidence in democratic politics what Flinders was really offering is 'insightful inductive hypothesis' that demands substantial empirical testing. The reason for this being that in advanced liberal democracies, Papadopoulos suggested, the public are increasingly well-educated, interested in politics and highly distrustful of the media to the extent that cognitive mobilisation may not inevitably lead to cynicism and disaffection in the way Flinders assumed.

A second area where Pappadopoulos suggests the 'dark side' of accountability might be over-stated related to Flinders concerns about the emergence of 'monitory democracy' in which a vast range of watchdogs, integrity commissions, sleazebusters, flash mobs, civic associations, public assemblies, ethical guardians, ombudsmen, etc. utilise transparency regimes, freedom of information legislation, social media and communicative technology to enforce post-electoral and frequently direct forms of public accountability. These are the specialised accountability institutions - 'power-monitoring and power-controlling devices' - that John Keane (2009) argues are focused on 'checking-on, goading, and humbling' those elected to power. The impact of these organisations is, however, over-stated according to Pappadopoulos. The heavily mediatized and therefore 'frontstage' visibility of such monitory organisations has limited reach, he suggested, into the deeper structural 'backstage' dynamics of political life. The internationalisation of rule-making also complicates, Pappadopoulos suggested, the capacity of monitory bodies to penetrate policy-making structures, and extreme information asymmetries still define the relationship between the governors and the governed. Moreover, private international regulatory regimes proliferate in many sectors and 'probably even less than in other forms of governance beyond the nation state' Pappadopoulos (2012, 246) suggests 'private governance activities are not much the focus of monitory democracy.'

What's interesting, however, is that where Flinders is critical of 'monitory democracy' for potentially creating an *excess of accountability* Pappadopoulos drew upon his previous work (2010) to suggest that in some contexts *more accountability, might lead to less democracy*. 'In a democracy, the monitoring agents are the citizens who compose the demos. But in 'monitory' democracy' Papadopoulos notes (2012, 246) 'this is not true any longer.' For Papadopoulos the perceived pluralism that Keane promotes is, in fact, a form of 'advocacy democracy' in which monitoring agents or institutions claim to represent the people or to act in their interests. But the link between monitory bodies that claim to work for the public interest or for specific communities is often tenuous at best, and spurious at worst. The 'dark side' of accountability in this interpretation relates to the unequal distribution of resources and the mirroring of embedded structural inequalities within monitory structures. 'In my view, the major current pathology of accountability is not that there is too much monitoring in policy-making but that there is an increasing number of governance areas in which there is either too little monitoring or monitoring that lacks democratic credentials (2012, 247)'.

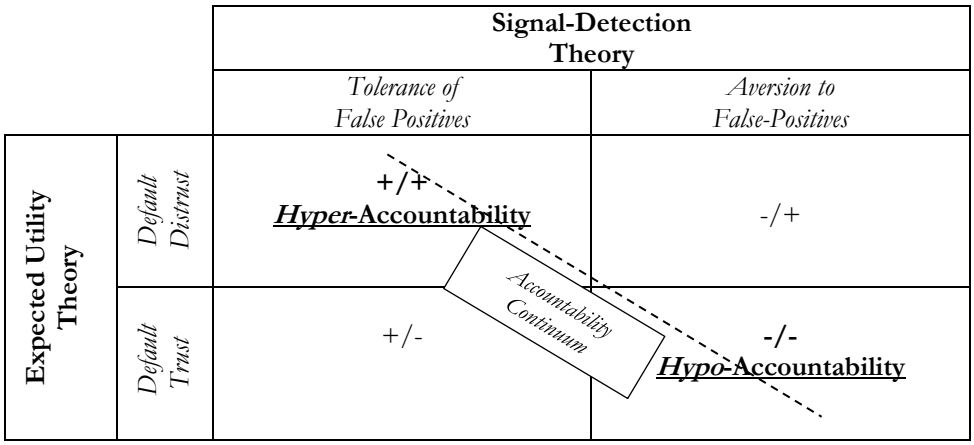
Tetlock: It's Too Easy to Look Down on Those Who Look Soft On (Accountability)

By focusing on the influence of the media and the legitimacy of monitory bodies Pappadopoulos focuses on large macro-political or structural issues. Tetlock, by contrast, focuses on micro-political matters. 'As a research psychologist' he notes (2011, 694) 'I approach the proliferation of accountability mechanisms from a micro-vantage point. My focus is on the cognitive and emotional processes that drive smart social-system designers to keep upping the accountability ante and demanding increasingly intrusive and expensive monitoring of the performance of various classes of political and economic actors.' The critical element of Tetlock's reponse, however, did not lie in its critique of Flinders thesis but in its explanation of the 'micro-mechanisms underlying accountability excesses' and why it will be 'impossible to curb these excesses via Flinders well-intentioned but inadequate pleas for proportionality (694).' What Tetlock highlights is the existence of a vast seam of psychological scholarship on motivated reasoning and cognitive dissonance that demonstrates why advocates of heavy-handed forms of accountability will feel no dissonance in simultaneously agreeing with the need for proportionality and balance *in theory*, while at the same time challenging the moral character and ideological agenda of those who seek to apply the proportionality principle *in practice* (see Tetlock *et al.* 2007). 'The

core problem' Tetlock suggests (694) 'is that the line between 'healthy skepticism' and 'corrosive cynicism' is much blurrier in the policy trenches than it is in political theory.' More specifically, they are few incentives on the part of the potential architect of more stringent accountability measures to exercise caution. Imparted inefficiencies and transaction costs are likely to fall most heavily upon those from whom an account is demanded; while pushing back and resisting the imposition of additional accountabilities is likely to be interpreted as evidence that the accountee has something to hide (see Box 4.1, above).

Tetlock uses subjective expected utility theory and signal-detection theory to help identify the causal drivers for accountability punitiveness. The former focuses attention on your base-rate belief about the trustworthiness of an individual or organisation; in short, the more suspicious you are, the tighter accountability net or web you would want to put around them (limited discretion, high penalties, etc.). Signal detection theory, by contrast, focuses on political values that are enacted within an accountability framework. Signal sensitivity means that system-designers need to be aware of the risk of *false-positive attribution errors* (in which they hold role incumbents responsible for outcomes beyond their control) and *false-negative attribution errors* (in which they fail to hold role incumbents responsible for outcomes that they could have controlled). 'All else equal' Tetlock notes 'the less you care about avoiding false positive attribution errors and the more you care about false-negative errors, the greater the likelihood of your endorsing a system that transfers risk to, and places onerous demands on, role incumbents.' This two-dimensional approach facilitates the creation of a grid-based *hypo-* to *hyper*-accountability continuum.

Diagram 4.1 Hypo- and Hyper-Accountability Continuum



At least four issues, emerge out of Diagram 4.1. First, in a political context defined by aggressive competition (i.e. for votes, for party funding, for viewing audiences, control of the agenda, etc.) a systemic incentive-system emerges – or form of bounded rationality – around *hyper*-accountability. This is because (secondly) levels of default societal distrust has increased in many countries over the last decade (discussed below) while the costs of 'false negatives' is not necessarily 'negative' in the sense that account-demanders will very often receive credit for keeping potential miscreants 'on their toes', and the announcement of an investigation, inquiry or court case provides valuable agenda-setting and policy-framing influence. (In a low-trust, high-blame environment 'false negatives' are also likely to be interpreted or perceived as 'unproven positives' through recourse to the (in)famous adage that 'there is no smoke without fire'.) A fourth and related issue relates to the 'social psychological problem of competitive self-righteousness' (Tetlock 2011, 700) whereby those who argue for tighter accountability and new scrutiny safeguards adopt the moral high ground ('better safe than sorry'). While those arguing in favour of proportionality and balance are

vulnerable to accusations of political weakness, regulatory capture, undue influence or being hopelessly naïve: promoting 'obfuscationalist rhetoric that gives far too much wiggle room to untrustworthy actors' (Tetlock 2011, 702).

The need to acknowledge the existence of a theoretical inflection point where the costs of over-correcting for accountability outweigh the likely benefits, let alone arguments about the 'dark side' of accountability, are simply too 'academic' to cut through and influence contemporary politics and policy. 'Cut through' not because politicians and policy-makers don't understand the basic accountability argument (i.e. 'too much can be as bad as too little'); quite the opposite, they deploy a form of motivated reasoning involving cognitive dissonance on the basis of their ideological disposition towards distrust. And yet arguably the key issue that Diagram 4.1 attempts to illustrate is that there are very few incentives for accountability agencies of any kind to moderate their scrutiny. The existence of perverse incentives to be hyper-vigilant increase as actors or organisations become enmeshed within or in someway responsible for complex networks that are rife with co-dependencies (the system goes 'MAD' to reintroduce Koppell's work on multiple-accountabilities disorder). This is exactly why Tetlock argues that irrespective of the theoretical or practical value of Flinders' arguments, 'pleas for proportionality and invocations of integrity/efficiency trade-offs will often fall on deaf ears' for the simple reason that 'accountability zealots do not see themselves as zealots. They see themselves as thoughtful rational actors responding to a social problem that others have – for far too long- pretended does not exist (Tetlock 2011, 702).'

Dubnick: We Need Some 'Accountability Space'

'It is not accountability that is undermining our aspirations for an effective democracy' Dubnick (2011, 705) argues 'but the reformist aspiration for an effective democracy that is undermining accountability.' What Dubnick proceeds to offer is a more cautious approach to accountability-based reforms based on the existence of what he labels the 'reformist-paradox'. 'This paradox holds that any effort to improve accountability through reforms generates consequences that in fact alters and often undermines existing forms of accountability already in place' (706). The rationale for presenting this paradox is to be found in Dubnick's (2005) rhetoric-focused study of 'accountability and the promise of performance' which uncovered a set of common but theoretically vacuous and untested assumptions or 'promises' about what the imposition of higher levels of accountability could and would achieve. 'This brings me to my current view of the accountability problem and the conclusion that what we are dealing with is an ontological issue from which all other problems – analytic, conceptual, and theoretical – flow. Perhaps the problem is the way we view accountability and the role it plays in our governance universe (707).'

The mistake Dubnick suggested Flinders had made in his argument about the *pathology of politicised accountability* was to adopt an overly narrow and conventional view of accountability as consisting of three basic and nested attributes: macro-level structures (e.g. constitutional frameworks including checks and balances); meso or mid-range processes (e.g. investigations, review, etc.) and micro-level tools or mechanisms (e.g. reports, sanction, etc.). Seen through this lens – this 'ontological world' as Dubnick (2011, 708) claims - accountability is defined as an instrument of governance, management and reform which Dubnick claims 'blinds us to an even more significant place for accountability in our lives.'

> The 'alternative reality', I would argue for, is not one in which accountability relationships (as institutions, mechanisms, and processes) play a secondary or corrective role in governance, but

> rather where they (i.e. account-demanding and account-giving relationships) constitute the very essence of social arrangements that comprise governance.

What Flinders had implicitly adopted and presented was, according to Dubnick, an argument born of a substantialist or foundational view of governance whereby observable empirical objects and structures formed the primary interest. What Dubnick sought to promote was a relational view with accountability acting almost as the glue which builds and binds the social order within which the structures, processes and tools operate. Instead of viewing the architecture of accountability in mechanical or machine-like terms, accountability becomes the oil or lubricant that facilitates the human interactions on which governance arrangements depend. 'Conceptually, from a relationalist perspective, accountability constitutes what sociologists and social geographers would call a "social space"—a milieu of account-giving and account-demanding human relationships that constitute what, for our purposes, would be more appropriately "accountability space" (2011, 709).'

This shift in ontological approach mattered according to Dubnick because the 'promise' of accountability was forged on a substantialist narrative which links *pre factum/ex ante* accountability as they key to 'good governance' which was increasingly operationalised through performance management and measurement regimes. In a phrase that resonate with Tetlock's focus on 'accountability zealots', Dubnick suggested that the ever-expanding reach of reformers who believe in and promote such narratives 'borders on a fundamentalist faith that is intolerant of sceptics (2011, 710).' From Dubnick's perspective Flinders emphasis on 'too much' accountability does not go far enough because although it questions the excessive demands of reformers it fails to expose and question the very notions that underpin such 'promises' (i.e. underlying substantialist narratives). Flinders was, in essence, buying into the reformist mind-set.

In emphasising the relational dimensions of accountability Dubnick focused on morality, sentiment, social capital and trust over structures, processes and tools. In doing so he drew on Sinclair's (1995) emphasis on the social construction of accountability, Hall's *et al.* (2007) focus on the accountability 'lens' in society, and how contributions by Fairclough (2011), Hochwarter, *et al.* (2005) and others focused on the role that 'affective' or 'felt' accountability played in shaping everyday social interactions. The 'reformist narrative' that all problems relating to public governance can be solved through the application of new, more and tighter accountability *structures* needed, from this perspective, to appreciate the inevitable unintended consequences this reform agenda was likely to have on the more informal and less visible bonds of trust-based social and professional accountability that may already exist.

What do we know about the pathologies of accountability ten years on?

The first part of this chapter set out Flinders' simple suggestion that 'too much accountability can be as bad as too little'. This is an argument that had been made before but to which Flinders sought to draw greater attention due to concerns about *the pathologies of politicised accountability* in the twenty-first century. His core concern was that an excess of aggressive, sensationalist and very often partisan blame-driven accountability risked undermining public trust in democracy. The second section reviewed how this strong statement of concern was originally received: Papadopoulos suggested Flinders had overstated the influence of the media and the penetration of monitory democracy, Tetlock explained why Flinders 'plea for proportionality and balance' was essentially doomed, and Dubnick emphasised a relationalist

perspective in order to reveal the full 'accountability space'. This section: (i) explores whether if Flinders' warnings about 'the dark side of accountability' became more-or-less relevant during the last decade; (ii) what subsequent research has revealed about some of those issue raised in the initial responses, and (iii) how this debate resonates with the broader 'questions of accountability' raised in this collection.

The main argument of this section is that developments in the second decade of the twenty-first century have resonated with Flinders' basic argument about *the pathology of politicised accountability*. The well-documented emergence of populism in many parts of the world has generally been fuelled by an explicit, carefully crafted and three-dimensional set of accountability arguments. At the first level are a set of generic accusations about the existence of an unaccountable and morally suspect 'elite', which is attached to an antagonistic logic concerning 'them-and-us' (see, for example, Mudde, 2010; Moffitt, 2016); at the second level are a set of more focused accusations concerning the failure and corruption of exactly those horizontal accountability actors (watchdogs, court systems, central banks, audit institutions, independent commissions, etc.) that are supposed to protect 'us' from 'them' (see, for example, Ruth, 2018; Guasti, 2020); and the third element is a relational dimension bound to faith in a 'strong leader model' that generally emphasises direct, vertical or plebiscitary accountability (see Körösényi, 2019; Subedi and Scott, 2021).

Enacting accountability under populist pressures, as Wood *et al.* (2021) demonstrate in great detail, is based on a moral or emotionalised form of blame-attribution which is systemic in nature, arguably nihilistic in nature, highly mediatised and sensationalist, designed to fuel and funnel democratic distrust and anti-political sentiment, and linked to evidence of democratic backsliding which resonates with Flinders' original pre- 'populist signal' (Chwalisz, 2015) concerns about the potential manipulation and politicisation of accountability. In the context of populist pressures, Orhan (2022) finds that the global growth in affective polarisation and electoral hostility is highly correlated with *less accountability*. Put very simply, populism represents a very extreme version of exactly the *pathologies of politicised accountability* that Flinders sought to warn against. As such the central argument of this section is that his warnings about 'the dark side of accountability' have become more relevant during the last decade.

The politics of populism also facilitates a link back to Pappadopoulos' concerns that Flinders over-estimated the influence of the media, and the reach of monitory democracy. In terms of the media, while not uncontested, increasing evidence has supported the 'malaise theory' and found evidence of 'sleeper effects' (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof and Oegema, 2006) whereby negative news *does* appear to stimulate political distrust (see, for example, Borah, 2014; Klein and Robison, 2020; Zoizner, 2021; Jones-Jang, Kim and Kenski, 2021). The effects are interwoven with relatively recent concerns regarding social media and the socio-political implications of fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theories and 'post-truth'/'alt-truth' framings. In short, and not withstanding Pappadopoulos' caveat about the exceptionality of an overly 'Americanized' emphasis (see Suiter and Fletcher, 2020), the current evidence base would broadly seem to support Flinders' initial concerns about negative news fuelling political distrust, with the emergence of populism adding a distinctive and generally anti-democratic dynamic.

Pappadopoulos' emphasis on the failure of 'monitory democracy' to penetrate the 'off-stage' dynamics of elite politics provides another link to what might be termed *the politics of populism*. Pappadopoulos suggests Flinders over-stated the influence and scrutiny capacity of horizontal accountability actors, especially at the international level and within transnational

networks (the focus of Chapter Eleven, below). This is a position that would indirectly chime with populist arguments concerning the existence of unaccountable technocrats, complicit politicians and non-majoritarian institutions (on this see De Cleen *et al.* 2020). What's interesting, however, is that as Wood *et al.* (2022, 311; see also Rooduijn, 2018) note, 'there has been limited cross-fertilization between research on populism and research on public accountability.'

Where a rich cross-fertilization of theories and approaches has, however, taken place is at the intersection between Tetlock's work on political psychology vis-à-vis accountability and Dubnick's emphasis on relationships and the 'accountability space' (as discussed by Schillemans in Chapter Two, above). This has emerged through the emergence of a seam of scholarship on 'felt accountability' which seeks to acknowledge and understand the position of account-givers and how they feel about the legitimacy and credibility of the accountability expectations placed upon them. 'Felt accountability denotes the expectation that one's decisions and behaviours will be evaluated by an 'able' accountability forum with authority' Schillemans *et al* (2000, 893 note 'Felt accountability has been translated to public administration research from psychology, where its effects on individual decisions and behaviours have been studied in hundreds of experimental studies. Individually felt accountability is conceived as a *response* to the accountability environment in which the individual operates.' Elsewhere Overman and Schillemans (2022) demonstrate that effective accountability mechanisms must acknowledge the beliefs of account-givers about their own professional role, about the perceived authority of the account holders, and about the contents of the accountability demand. It therefore emphasises relational dimensions of credibility, reputation and expertise and how the perceptions of future accountability that account-givers hold are the result of the internalizations of (in)formal norms. In this sense the recent emphasis on 'felt accountability' embraces elements of Dubnick's (2011, 704) call for 'a radical reframing of the accountability space'.

Moving back towards a focus on Flinders' original focus on the dangers of 'too much accountability' a number of subsequent studies have provided substantive empirical data that supports his core concern. The work of Tu and Gong (2022), for example, explores how local government officials in China cope with multiple-accountabilities disorder and conflicting expectations. They reveal that although public officials tend to put more effort into tasks that are aligned with citizens' interests, over-stringent accountability requirements that crowd-out intrinsic public service motivations and incentivise mechanical but sub-optimal behaviour. 'Intensified accountability' they (2022, 1779) conclude 'may not necessarily lead to better policy outcomes'. Wang's (2022) research also explores how intense top-down monitoring tends to reduce the operational efficiency and performance of those subject to such procedures. Wang reveals the existence of a 'chilling effect' which disincentives the use of informal practices by local officials when completing daily tasks. In a conclusion that resonates with Ostrom's arguments about the dangers of 'self-evident truths', Wang (2022, 1807) notes, '[A]lthough scholars of state-building equate low corruption with effective bureaucracy, these findings present a paradox where intensive state-led efforts to lower corruption [via tight accountability structures] may further undermine bureaucrats' productivity.'

Aleksovska, Schillemans and Grimmelikhuijsen (2021) provide a related analysis by exploring how public servants manage multiple accountabilities. What they find is that a hierarchy of considerations exists, with the avoidance of sanctions, particularly material and reputational, taking primacy over all other considerations. However, in a finding that resonates with analyses of felt accountability they also found that account-givers tend to prioritize the

demands of stakeholders that are seen as highly knowledgeable and with which there is a history of positive working relationship. The critical finding, however, is arguably that operating in a context of 'multiple accountabilities' and 'cross-pressures' is neither exceptional for public servants nor necessarily pathological. Its deleterious impact on performance being dependent on the management of relationships which are, in turn, frequently highly dependent on contextual dimensions.

Continuing with this more positive interpretation, Li, Qin and Koppenjan (2022) explore a major experiment in direct public accountability – the ten-thousand citizen review in Nanjing, China. What this demonstrated was the challenge of grafting new bottom-up forms of public accountability onto existing top-down frameworks of political accountability (on this see Chapter Five's discussion of Type I and Type II, bottom-up and top-down structures). 'Our findings show that citizens' involvement initially resulted in a practice in which types of accountability were mixed and resulted in a situation of multiple accountabilities disorder.' However, what the analysis also revealed was the gradual alignment, refinement and recalibration of the overall accountability system towards an integrated balance. Szydlowski, de Boer and Tummers (2022) build upon Flinders' (2011) focus on 'bad accountability' to explore the relationship between 'bureaucrat bashing' and eliciting public compassion. In a major study that is rooted in concerns about the populist politicisation of accountability they find that increasing public understanding around the everyday challenges faced by public servants motivates the public to be more compassionate and less critical. This emphasis on how levels of public understanding can mediate accountability pressures is critical to the overall focus of this collection on balance and proportionality. It is a theme that flows through Lord Blunkett's chapter on 'Accountability from the Inside Out' and Sharon Shoesmiths's contribution on 'positive accountability' (Chapters Twelve and Thirteen respectively, below) and is explored in more detail in the concluding final chapter as Matthew Flinders and Chris Monaghan explore 'Questions Still to be Answered' (Chapter Fifteen). But in order to continue this focus on *framing* 'questions of accountability' the next chapter explores the relationship between executive powers and fuzzy accountability.