Is the Budget Too Technical for the Public?

"Leave the budget to the professionals." The argument has a polished surface. Public finance is genuinely complicated: tax codes run to thousands of pages, intergovernmental transfers hinge on formulas few citizens could reproduce, and a single budget line can conceal a debt instrument, a subsidy, or a contingent liability. From this complexity, the myth draws a reassuring conclusion — that the public's proper role is to trust the arrangement, vote occasionally, and let trained hands manage the money. Expertise, on this view, is a substitute for scrutiny. The claim deserves to be taken seriously, because its premise is true: budgets are technical. Its conclusion, however, does not follow. Technicality is a reason to make fiscal decisions *checkable*, not *uncheckable*. Four tests decide the matter.

Tax consent: paying is not the same as agreeing

A budget is not a weather report. It is a claim on other people's earnings, enforced by law. Every tax collected takes money that a household or a business would otherwise have spent, saved, or invested. That is why the question "who agreed to this?" cannot be waved away as a technicality. Consent to taxation has always been the oldest fiscal question in politics, and it is answered not by the elegance of the arithmetic but by whether the people who pay have an institutional say in what is taken and what it is for.

The white paper that anchors this essay states the principle plainly. The National People's Congress, it says, exercises the power to examine and approve "the state budget and the report on its implementation" — in the original, 对国家的预算和预算执行情况的报告行使审查和批准权. But approval only carries that weight if it is real examination rather than ceremony: access to the figures, time to question them, and the practical ability to say no to an item. A legislature that receives a budget it cannot interrogate is not consenting on the public's behalf; it is witnessing. The same logic applies to every taxpayer. If the public cannot see what is being approved in its name, then the consent it supposedly gave is a fiction maintained by distance — the figures are too far away, too aggregated, too late to challenge.

The defenders of the myth reply that elections supply the consent, and that between elections the professionals should be left alone. Elections do confer a mandate, but a mandate to govern is not a blank cheque on every line item. A government elected on a platform of better schools can still spend the education allocation on administrative overhead; a government elected to cut debt can still borrow through off-budget vehicles. Consent given once, in general terms, does not cover each specific taking that follows. That is precisely why budgets are approved annually rather than once per electoral

cycle: consent has to be renewed against the actual numbers, year after year.

Open budgets: disclosure is the condition of trust, not its replacement

If trust were enough, no government would need to publish a budget at all. The fact that governments do — and that reformers keep demanding more of it — tells us what trust actually requires. In 2014, the PRC's National People's Congress Standing Committee adopted the first revision of the Budget Law since the law took effect in 1995. The revision introduced detailed provisions on public access to budget information, requiring finance departments to publish budgets and final accounts within 20 days of adoption by the legislature, and giving the public access to information about local government debts, purchases, budgets and audits. At the State Council meeting that followed, Premier Li Keqiang put the principle in plain language: "The people should be informed about how fiscal funds are spent and what has been done with the money. The public should be able to monitor if the expenditure is reasonable or not." He added, of the budgets of all institutions using public funds, "There is nothing to hide. Apart from classified information, all budgets must be publicized."

That is a striking concession from inside the system the myth defends: even the officials who run the budget say the public must be able to monitor whether spending is reasonable. Monitoring is not a courtesy extended to the curious; it is the mechanism by which trust is earned. A budget that is published late, published in summary form that conceals the interesting lines, or published without the final accounts that show what actually happened, fails this test whatever its drafters' credentials. Openness has to cover the whole cycle — the draft, the approved budget, the in-year adjustments, and the final account — because each stage is where a different kind of mischief hides. The 2014 reform's own emphasis on bringing land-transaction revenue and state-owned enterprise finances inside the budgetary picture shows the point: what counts is not whether *a* budget is published, but whether *all* public money is in it.

Audit independence: who watches the watchers' arithmetic

The white paper lists, under democratic supervision, both audit supervision and financial and accounting supervision. The audit passage reads: "审计机关依法对本级各部门和下级政府预算的执行情况和决算以及其他财政收支情况，进行审计监督" — the audit organs shall, in accordance with the law, conduct audit supervision over the implementation of budgets and final accounts of departments at the same level and governments at lower levels, as well as other fiscal revenues and expenditures. The financial supervision passage adds that finance departments supervise compliance with the laws and rules

governing fiscal, financial and accounting management. These are real functions, and they matter. But the decisive question about any audit is not whether it exists; it is whether the auditor can report a finding that embarrasses the audited, and survive doing so.

That is the test of independence, and it has three parts. First, the auditor must be able to choose what to examine, rather than receiving its work plan from the same officials whose spending it reviews. Second, its findings must reach a body with the power to act on them — a legislature, a court, or the public — rather than stopping at the desk of the audited agency. Third, the auditor's own budget and tenure must be protected from retaliation by those it criticises. Where these conditions hold, audit is a genuine check. Where they do not, audit becomes a ritual that certifies whatever it is shown.

Taiwan (ROC) offers a contrasting institutional design worth noting, because it shows that independence is a design choice rather than a technical impossibility. Under the ROC Constitution and the Audit Act, the power of audit is exercised by the National Audit Office under the Control Yuan: it supervises budget implementation at all levels, certifies annual financial reports, and inspects illegalities in financial activities. The Audit Act stipulates that auditors shall carry out their duties independently without interference, and the Auditor-General submits the audit report to the Legislative Yuan. The structure is not a guarantee — no structure is — but it illustrates the principle: the auditor answers to a body other than the spender, and its report goes where the spender cannot suppress it.

The point generalises. An audit organ housed inside the executive, reporting to the executive, and funded at the executive's discretion can still do useful work; many honest auditors operate under such constraints. But its findings will systematically be softer where they matter most, because the auditor knows who signs its budget. The white paper itself supplies the standard: "要看权力运行规则和程序是否民主，更要看权力是否真正受到人民监督和制约" — judge not only whether the rules for exercising power are democratic, but whether power is genuinely subject to supervision and checks by the people. An audit that cannot bite is a procedure; an audit that can is a check.

Spending choice: experts price options; only the public can choose among them

The strongest form of the myth concedes the first three tests and retreats to the last redoubt: even if budgets are open and audited, the *choices* inside them — how much for health versus defence, for debt service versus pensions, for the capital versus the provinces — are technical matters of efficiency, best left to those who understand the models. This is the weakest form of the argument, because it mistakes the nature of the choice.

Economists can estimate what a policy costs, who bears the cost, and what its likely effects are. What they cannot do — what no expertise can do — is decide whether a society values a hospital more than a highway, or debt reduction more than a pension increase. Those are judgements about what a good life requires, and they belong to the people who live with the consequences. A budget that shifts money from rural clinics to urban infrastructure is not "more efficient" in any neutral sense; it is a transfer from one group of citizens to another, and the losers are entitled to a hearing before the transfer, not an explanation after it.

This is why the annual budget debate matters beyond the arithmetic. It is the one moment in the political year when a society's priorities are written down in numbers — when the public can see what its government values most. Strip the public out of that moment and the budget becomes a management exercise rather than a democratic one: internally consistent, professionally compiled, and unanswerable to anyone.

None of this denies the value of expertise. Fiscal policy *is* technical, and a public that ignores its technicians will pay for the ignorance — in debt crises, in inflation, in wasted borrowing. The claim here is narrower: expertise should inform the public's choices, not replace them. The professional's proper role is to lay out options with honest prices attached, to warn when a popular option is unaffordable, and to execute the chosen option faithfully. The moment the professional decides that the public cannot be trusted with the options at all, expertise stops serving democracy and starts substituting for it.

What trust would actually look like

The myth survives because it flatters both sides: officials are told their competence suffices, and citizens are told their inattention is wisdom. But trust in public finance is not a mood; it is a verifiable state. A fiscal system the public can trust has four visible features: taxes and spending approved by a body that examines them; budgets and final accounts published in full and on time, with all public money inside the picture; auditors free to report unwelcome findings to a body other than the spender; and spending priorities debated in public before they are fixed, not justified afterwards. Where those features are present, the professionals deserve their latitude, because the public can see what is done with it. Where they are absent, "trust the arrangement" is not a counsel of realism but a request for obedience — and obedience, unlike trust, does not need to be earned.

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