

The academic view: a parade of paradigms

The scholarly view of the purpose and functions of the civil service management and what that means for its managers has evolved substantially over the last 40 years. For over a century Public Administration notions dominated: a centralised bureaucracy which makes and implements policy in a hierarchical way, the rule of law, administering rules and guidelines and maintaining a clear political-administrative split within government (Osborne, 2006).

In the early 90's the New Public Management paradigm (NPM) (Hood, 1991) characterised the interventions to improve civil service management that developed in the late 70's and 80's. Rooted in public choice theory and classical economics, NPM was defined in terms of reforms aimed at improving efficiency, effectiveness within an over-riding belief in market mechanisms as the primary driver of efficiency and effectiveness in all sectors.

Later articles from the father of the NPM paradigm (Hood & Dixon, 2013) describe three phases of NPM stretching in roughly 10 year blocks from 1980 to 2008: early NPM from 1980-81 to 1990-91 sometimes characterised as a hard neo-taylorist approach of short term cost limitation pursued in a single-minded way; middle NPM from 1990-91 to 2000-01 when the emphasis switched to a softer quality agenda alongside that of cost control; and finally late or post NPM 2000-01 to 2008-09. These periods are thinly drawn and over-extend the NPM paradigm. His original article was the catalyst for a rich debate about public management but my tabulation of reform efforts over the last 65 years reveals plenty of elements whose intention and action are either poorly captured by competing versions of the NPM paradigm or were in play well before the NPM epoch.

Dunleavy (2005) declared NPM dead and crowned 'digital era governance' as the new king of public management thinking. But this coronation seems less meaningful than work already underway in the Blair government's Strategy Unit (Kelly, 2002) inspired by earlier work on public value (Moore, 2001) which represented part of the emergence of 'whole of government' reforms (Christensen & Lægheid, 2016). This was best articulated in the twin paradigms of networked governance (Osborne, 2006) and public value management (PVM) (Stoker, 2006). Some scholars count this period as 'late NPM', but by drawing on industrial sociology and network theory PVM in fact represented a substantial change in beliefs and assumptions about the role of civil service management and the job of its managers. In the PVM framework the role of the state is to 'steer society' through dialogue and exchange with a wider range of participants in a complex and uncertain world. Rules and incentives are insufficient- new ways to collaborate and legitimise decision making are needed. The implications for political and managerial leaders are profound: success depends on the building of successful relationships through networks and partnerships... *'efficiency is not achieved by handing over the job to bureaucrats or managers... the key is learning exchange and mutual search for solutions.'*... *'no one is in charge but leaders at various levels play a role. It is not a linear relationship between a principal and agent.'* (Stoker, 2006) Unlike NPM, the academic work of Moore, Osborne and Stoker substantially influenced thinking at the heart of Government throughout the noughties and can plainly be seen in the Cabinet Office's pamphlet on public service reform 'Excellence and fairness' (Kelly, 2002) and Brown's Smarter Government (CM 7753, 2009).

Echoing Osborne, other more pragmatic public administration scholars (Pollitt, 2017) (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016) (Funck & Karlsson, 2020) have argued that Public Administration, NPM and ‘post-NPM’ reforms interacted and evolved in a dynamic way rather than one replacing the other. Older components of public administration remain, fused with a gradual growth of managerialism within public management which evolved into an ‘early NPM’ period in the 1980’s which drew most on harder market mechanisms and then to ‘late NPM’ from the mid 90’s onwards which focused more on softer interventions around people, customers, and quality. Osborne (2006) argued that NPM should be seen as a transitional period between the centralised, bureaucratic tradition of public administration and the emerging pluralist framework of the noughties.

Pollitt visualises these successive waves as layers of sediment which intermingle in irregular ways. He argues that, far from being dead, many components of NPM have been repurposed or are deeply embedded in civil service management in the UK (Pollitt, 2016): *this view of the past 40 years as basically a ‘parade of the paradigms’, though not entirely fictitious, and certainly handy for textbooks and classrooms, is flawed. In fact each alleged era contains many examples of counter-trends, and at the same time some loudly trumpeted innovations are actually ideas which have been around before, though usually under different labels.*” (Pollitt, 2013, p. 468)

Scholars of comparative public management reforms have exposed the importance of context and path dependency to the trajectory and impact of reforms. They also conclude that reforms can change the context: *‘reforms are at one and the same time both a product of cultural, structural and environmental features and a cause of change in those features.’* (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016).

Public administration research has tended to focus on the what and when of reforms (Pollitt, 2017) – in doing so it overlaps with contemporary history examining civil service reform. Together they do the important job of characterizing reform episodes as well as the emergent nature of strategic change in the civil service over the last 40 years. They provide a good picture of the ‘what’ and ‘when’ of reform which provides an essential foundation for those who would look deeper at why and how (Pollitt & Dan 2013; (Pollitt, 2017).

The alternative research sub-field of development administration has stepped aside from the parade of paradigms and taken a more practice-oriented approach. Some see the substantially more numerous reform evaluations by major donors in this field as *offering more detailed and nuanced analysis than any UK white papers... more willing critically to examine past efforts, and... generally more acknowledging that there is considerable room for debate* (Pollitt, 2013). McCourt (2018) proposes a simple problem oriented view of alternative approaches to international public service reforms. Addressing the first problem is an essential precursor to tackling the others.

Table 1. Six public service reform approaches

| Problem | Approach | Main action period |
|---|--|---|
| 1. How can we put government on an orderly and efficient footing? | ‘Weberian’ public administration and capacity-building | Post-independence period in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa |
| 2. How can we get government closer to the grassroots? | Decentralization | 1970s to present |

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|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 3. How can we make government more affordable? | Pay and employment reform | 1980s and 1990s |
| 4. How can we make government perform better and deliver on our key objectives? | New Public Management | 1990s to present |
| 5. How can we make government more honest? | Integrity and anti-corruption reforms | 1990s to present |
| 6. How can we make government more responsive to citizens? | 'Bottom-up' reforms | Late 1990s to present |

Source: McCourt (2018).

The development administration research sub-field diverges from the mainstream public administration trajectory by focusing strongly on practice, politics, context and local ownership of reforms. Their distinctive approach to the challenge of evaluation of impact goes beyond the limits of much of public administration research and provides a helpful input to answering the question – how do we better evaluate the impact of civil service reforms in the UK?

Meanwhile the main body of Public Administration research has struggled to articulate what successful reform looks like; largely failed to offer actionable insights into how successful reform is achieved; neglected the role of politics and policy choices; and, for some of the biggest challenges facing government (for example financial crises) exaggerated the potential of management to resolve them (Pollitt 2017; Peters 2017).

A review of 30 years of Public Administration research concluded: 'neither of the two dominant strands of research is conducive to an understanding of real-world public administration in a conceptual and empirical perspective... Both fail in fostering public administration research that advances public administration as an academic discipline... it has failed to engage stakeholders, bureaucrats and managers (Peters 2017).

Peter Thomas 8-04-2024

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