

A Review of Public Sector Reform[†]

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Resumo

Na década de 1980, as reformas administrativas tornaram-se numa política por direito próprio. O autor apresenta a sua interpretação sobre a forma como o pensamento académico sobre estas políticas evoluiu e foi implementado. Os padrões de reforma ficaram conhecidos como Nova Gestão Pública (NGP), mas também eram conhecidos como “gerencialismo” ou “reinvenção do governo”. O autor reconhece que a definição de gestão pública é ambígua e problemática. Acresce que as mesmas técnicas e instrumentos de gestão, tanto na cultura anglo-saxónica quanto nas culturas do continente europeu, são muitas vezes percebidos pelos governos e pelas populações com significados opostos, como é o caso por exemplo do conceito de “agência”.

O artigo inclui uma discussão sobre um modelo de reformas de gestão e uma revisão do estado do conhecimento comparativo no que diz respeito à NGP. O autor sugere que as reformas individuais devem ser agrupadas de acordo com a sua “lógica dominante” em vez de se olhar para um “modelo genérico”.

Palavras-chave: Nova Gestão Pública, Reformas Administrativas, Estudos Comparados, Modelos ou menus de reforma.

Abstract

In the 1980s, public management reform became a policy in its own right. The author offers his interpretation of how academic thinking about the policy has evolved and been implemented. Patterns of reform were known as New Public Management (NPM), but also known as “managerialism” or “re-inventing the government”. The author recognizes that the definition of public management is ambiguous and problematic. In addition, the same techniques and management tools are perceived by Governments and populations in both Anglo-Saxon and Continental European cultures, often through opposing semantics as is the case for example with the concept of “agency”.

The article includes a discussion on a model of management reforms as well as a review of the state of comparative knowledge concerning NPM. The author suggests that individual reforms should be grouped according to their “dominant logics” rather than looking for a “generic model”.

Keywords: *New Public Management, Administrative Reforms, Comparative Studies, Models or menus of Reform.*

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1. The evolution of public management thinking

During the 1980s, public management reform became a policy in its own right. Since then, academic thinking about it has evolved considerably. In this talk I want to offer you my interpretation of this (ongoing) evolution. From my perspective, academic thinking has become more discriminating, more nuanced and more tolerant, with an understanding of the need for diversity.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was recognized that there was a certain pattern to be seen in the reforms taking place in the UK, New Zealand and the USA. This pattern was termed ‘managerialism’ by some (Pollitt, 1990), the New Public Management (NPM) by others (Hood, 1991), and ‘re-inventing government’ by the American authors of the best-selling book of that title (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Osborne and Gaebler took the view that the whole world was moving towards ‘re-invention’, and that this trend was inevitable. Others believed them, or appeared to. In the mid 1990s the public management section of the OECD (PUMA) produced a number of influential publications that appeared to assume that NPM was the ‘way forward’ for all governments. So did the World Bank and the IMF, which began attaching NPM-like reform conditions to aid packages for developing countries.

Since then, however, scholarship has thrown more and more doubt on this vision of what is happening. The idea that there was a global trend to NPM, and that countries could be ranked ‘leaders’ or ‘laggards’, according to how far they were down the NPM path, has been fairly comprehensively demolished. The main ‘findings’ or understandings which have led to a far more diverse and nuanced set of approaches include the following:

1. Analysis has shown that the NPM is not a particularly coherent set of ideas. There are tensions and ambiguities within the NPM model itself.
2. Experience has shown that NPM reforms often don’t work well, and that even where they do work, they may have unexpected and sometimes undesirable side effects. The most radical reform countries, such as New Zealand and the UK, have retreated from some parts of their reforms.
3. NPM seems to fit some tasks better than others. The best fit tends to be with standardized, simple outputs (issuing licenses, making grants, collecting garbage). NPM has more problems with complex human services such as healthcare or education.

4. Comparative scholarship has shown that NPM is not a global trend. Some countries have been reluctant to try NPM-type reforms (e.g. Germany at the federal level; Japan until the late 1990s). Others have selected a few elements from the package but avoided others (e.g. France; Norway). Only a few have implemented NPM in a reasonably comprehensive way.
5. More recently some scholars have suggested that there are other reform models in play, often more implicit than explicit. So the NPM may not be ‘the only show in town’. There may also be a ‘Neo-Weberian State’ (NWS) model or, in southern Europe, a set of issues particular to the ‘post-Napoleonic’ states (Ongaro, 2009; Pollitt, 2008a; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004)
6. Yet other scholars have suggested that focusing principally on big, generic ‘models’ may in any case be a mistake. We may build a better understanding of what is happening if we look at individual components of reform – at the ‘menus’ of concepts and techniques which are being applied in a given national or local context. We can then ask how far the logic of a particular reform package is coherent or discordant, and how far it fits its particular context.

2. The NPM: definitions

Despite the recent evolution of thought away from a principal focus on NPM, it may still be useful to illustrate this evolution of thought by beginning with that model. And here we may begin by asking what the NPM actually is? In fact it turns out that, even in its English mother-tongue, there have been considerable definitional disputes and ambiguities. As Dunleavy et al. put it: ‘There is now a substantial branch industry in defining how NPM should be conceptualised and how NPM has changed’ (Dunleavy et al., 2006, p. 96; see also Hood and Peters, 2004). One of the best recent discussions was that of Dunleavy et al. (2006, pp. 96-105) and I will also refer to my own earlier and simpler discussion (Pollitt, 2003a, chapter 2). Taking these together, I will here assume that the NPM is a two level phenomenon: at the higher level it is a general theory or doctrine that the public sector can be improved by the importation of business concepts, techniques and values, while at the more mundane level it is a bundle of specific concepts and practices, including:

- Greater emphasis on ‘performance’, especially through the measurement of outputs.
- A preference for lean, flat, small, specialized (disaggregated) organizational forms over large, multi-functional forms.
- A widespread substitution of contracts for hierarchical relations as the principal coordinating device.
- A widespread injection of market-type mechanisms (MTMs) including competitive tendering, public sector league tables and performance-related pay.
- An emphasis on treating service users as ‘customers’ and on the application of generic quality improvement techniques such as TQM.

Dunleavy et al. have usefully summarized this as ‘disaggregation + competition + incentivization’ (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

This means, incidentally, that, for today’s purposes at least, NPM is not certain other things which are occasionally thrown into its portmanteau. Thus, for example, in my terms, it is *not* partnerships, or networked governance, or joined-up government. My objections to including these forms within NPM are principally twofold. First, some of these ideas originally emerged in key jurisdictions precisely as a reaction *against* the excesses of NPM as defined above. Second, if we put all these dissimilar things into the same conceptual bag we steadily diminish our scope for making important distinctions and for noticing alternative agendas and change. If NPM means almost everything then it means almost nothing.

3. The NPM: translations

Thanks to the work of scholars like Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson (2001) and Amanda Smullen (2004; 2007) it is now more widely understood that when NPM ideas cross national or even sectoral boundaries, they are usually ‘translated’ into the local dialect (Pollitt, 2003b). These translations are not a minor matter, since they frequently involve not merely the editing of sacred texts, but also the subtraction of old meanings and the addition of new ones. Thus in one place the NPM may be portrayed as being mainly about freeing individual managers to be ‘professional’ and ‘modern’ while in another it may be all about serving the citizen-customer and in a third it might be about cutting expenditure and lowering taxes. In one country ‘agencies’ are the sym-

bol of a new degree of freedom from central ministerial control, in another they represent a taking-back of ministerial control (Smullen, 2004; Pollitt et al., 2007a). The differing emphases may help to select and prioritize different practices and, equally, may engender different expectations against which the results of the reforms are judged.

What has not been so often commented upon is that it is not only NPM as a package of doctrines that gets translated in this way, but also some of the individual instruments and techniques. Thus TQM, for example, is realized in vastly different ways in different contexts, sometimes even within the same service (Joss and Kogan, 1995; Zbaracki, 1998). Similarly, performance budgeting can and does take on a tremendous variety of forms (Pollitt, 1999).

4. The NPM: rhetorical and implementation ‘gaps’

The ‘translations’ sub-literature is focused on words and texts. Not everyone believes that it is possible for scholars to get beyond that — to get to practices and concrete results — but many of us still do. In so far as we may be successful in this empirical quest, we will encounter further issues concerning the slipperiness of ‘NPM’. In several of my works I have used a simple stage model of management reforms, which goes like this:

- Stage 1: *talk*. A particular approach or technique gets onto the agenda. It is discussed in workshops, conferences, briefing papers and so on – it is ‘in the air’.
- Stage 2: *decisions*. Formal decisions, by managers or politicians are made to ‘have’ technique X or new organizational form Y.
- Stage 3: *practice*. The new form or technique is adopted in practice. It becomes the new ‘standard operating procedure’ across the relevant organizational domains.
- Stage 4: *results*. The new form or technique begins to generate results which can confidently be attributed to it (rather than any other contemporary developments) (Pollitt, 2002).

Three points about these stages. First, each transition to the next stage may involve ‘translations’ (see above). Second, each stage may also result in partial or total loss of the original concept and purpose. In public management it is not particularly unusual for decisions to be announced but very little change in operational practice to follow. In Finland legislation enabling PRP for the public sector was introduced in the early 1990s, but by the end of that decade

only a small proportion of public agencies had taken up the opportunity to use it, and resistance was widespread. The OECD ticked boxes that Finland was one of the countries that ‘had’ PRP, but this was a misleading impression. Third, each stage calls for somewhat different research techniques. Generally speaking research becomes more difficult, time-consuming and expensive as one moves from stages 1 and 2 to stages 3 and 4. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a lot of published research relates mainly to the first two stages. This is fine, as long as it is not used as a basis for making claims about stages 3 and 4, but of course, sometimes it is. The kind of detailed, longitudinal empirical research that is desirable to investigate practice and results is still relatively rare, but is very valuable when we do have it (Johnson, 2002; Kelman, 2006; Sundström, 2006).

5. So, the NPM in comparative perspective...

In the light of the above considerations we can now review our state of comparative knowledge concerning NPM. Taken together, NPM concepts and techniques have produced a mix of ‘results’. Undoubtedly there have been some measurable efficiency gains. There are also plenty of cases of genuine service quality improvement, and of cost-saving. Equally, however, there are well-documented concerns about organizational fragmentation and loss of the capacity to implement integrated policies, about inappropriate applications to complex human services, and the widespread gaming of performance measurement regimes, and about probable damage to traditional public service values.

I would select the following as key points:

- The *rhetorical spread (talk)* of NPM has been impressive, though by no means total. There have always been other, parallel or competing discourses, but they have remained under-rated and largely unnamed in the Anglophone public management literature, creating the impression that for a long time there was ‘only one show in town’ (Kickert, 2008; Ongaro, 2009; Pollitt et al., 2007a).
- The NPM is definitely NOT just a neo-liberal and still less a neo-conservative political doctrine (as has occasionally been claimed). Its intellectual roots are more diverse and certainly its adoption has occurred in many countries with centre or centre-left governments, as well as by centre-right and right

wing regimes. In fact it has been widely recognised that there are tensions within the NPM package, especially as between some assumptions which are low-trust, principal and agent-type assumptions, and other contrasting, much more optimistic assumptions about leadership, managerial creativity and the large scope for cultural change.

- In terms of *decisions-to-adopt*, the penetration of NPM has varied enormously from country to country, and sector to sector, and over time. The period of most aggressive implementation was from the late 1980s until the turn of the century. Some countries have gone a long way with NPM. They have embraced all the ingredients set out in the foregoing definition and have implemented them over a period of more than two decades. These ‘core NPM’ countries tend to be unitarian democracies with majoritarian political systems, and they are ex-members of the old British Empire. The UK and New Zealand are the most obvious examples, with Australia not far behind (although that, of course, is a federal state). The USA has also been a vigorous reformer, especially at state and local levels, but at the federal level its strong legislature has prevented the kind of synoptic, top-down reform drives which have been witnessed in the three core NPM states (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).
- Also in terms of *decisions-to-adopt*, perhaps one of the more impressive features of the NPM has been not its triumph in the UK and New Zealand, but the extent to which it has been selectively borrowed by many countries that do not buy into the broader ‘business-is-best’ doctrine. These would include the Nordic group, France, Italy and Spain. In these cases, however, the ‘translations’ have usually been substantial and significant, and the borrowings have been inserted into systems whose overall character is not NPM-ish at all.
- Our map of the *operational spread* of NPM is patchy, but, though considerably less than some of the rhetoric would lead one to believe, it does nevertheless seem to have been widespread. In some places NPM forms and techniques are still spreading, but in others they are being partly reversed (Chap-

man and Duncan, 2007; Dunleavy et al., 2006, pp. 96-105; Johnson and Talbot, 2007). A tentative generalisation would be that the areas in which NPM has worked least well, and where some stepping-back is now in progress, include:

1. The application of market-type mechanisms to complex human services such as health care and education.
 2. The wholesale contracting out of government IT.
 3. On the other hand, there is plenty of local evidence of achievements of quicker processing times, staff savings, and higher productivity in particular organizations. NPM techniques appear to have had some of their most indisputable successes in what Wilson (1989) would have termed 'production organizations' — those where a defined and reasonably standardized product (a license, grant, benefit payment) is being produced through reasonably well-understood processes.
- Others states, especially in the developing world and, to a lesser but still significant extent in Eastern Europe, had NPM ideas imposed or strongly urged on them by western-dominated IGOs. The operational experience with this has been educative. It appears that the NPM works best when it is built on the secure foundations of a stable Weberian bureaucracy. It can have very negative effects when injected into situations where the civil service is highly politicized, the 'public service ethic' is unknown, budgets are unstable and accountability is weak (e.g. Pollitt, 2004; 2008). The paradox, then, is that the NPM needs its enemy — traditional bureaucracy — in order to succeed.
 - The evaluation of the results of NPM has been very patchy indeed. This is partly because of the inherent difficulties of assessing a complex, multi-instrument, long term reform programme. But it is also because a number of governments have, either deliberately or by omission, failed to set up any systematic provision for evaluation (most famously, the Thatcher government with its huge and radical experiment introducing an internal market to the UK National Health Service). Even where evaluation as a process has been embraced the condi-

tions for its success have often been undermined by further, premature policy changes (Pollitt, 2007b; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2003; Walker, 2001). In one or two instances where large scale evaluations were carried out, it proved remarkably difficult to confirm even the most basic claims for efficiency gains (Pollitt, 1995).

- As time has gone by a number of paradoxes or contradictions associated with NPM have emerged (Hood and Peters, 2004; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004, chapter 7). These may be unintended consequences, such as the way in which measures intended to de-politicize and ‘business-ify’ public activities have actually increased politicization. Or they may be cultural puzzles, such as the oft-observed fact that the best administered countries seem to have seized on NPM much faster and more enthusiastically than the countries which, theoretically, most ‘need’ it (Wright, 1997). Or they may be system discontinuities, such as the way in which performance measurement, a core element within NPM and designed to turn public organizations away from old fashioned bureaucracy, reaches a threshold where it spawns a bureaucracy every bit as inhibiting and heavy as that which it has (supposedly) displaced.

So, to sum up, the NPM is not dead or even comatose. The tide has stopped coming in, and may be on the turn on some parts of the beach, but NPM has left extensive deposits, more thickly in some countries than others (Dunleavy et al., p. 218). Elements of NPM have been absorbed as the normal way of thinking by a generation of public officials in the core states. Many NPM-ish organizational structures remain firmly standing. Management consultancies have secured their place as regular participants in governance at many levels of government — at least in the core NPM states (Saint-Martin, 2005). By the standards of previous administrative fashions — even by comparison with the spread of Weberian bureaucracy itself — NPM must be accounted a winning species in terms of its international propagation and spread. Whether it has been *successful* — even by its own terms — is quite another question, and one to which we may never have an entirely satisfactory answer. Certainly it seems to have little relevance to the problems which sit at the top of the public sector agenda today — global warming, population movements, the regulation of

international capital, corruption or terrorism. The management of such issues call for quite different ways of thinking about public sector management.

6. From models to menus

The closer we look at actual reform programmes in individual countries the more we see that hardly any of them are theoretical expressions of a single model. On the contrary, they are typically untidy packages of different kinds of reform, aimed at different problems over different timescales. Regulations are relaxed there but tightened up here. This function is decentralized but that one is centralized. Competitive mechanisms are strengthened for one service and reduced for another. Our big models — NPM, NWS, governance and partnerships — do not seem to fit the actual detail of change very well. And that may be because we are operating at the wrong level of analysis. Instead of looking for one generic model, perhaps we should be examining individual reforms and grouping them according to their dominant logics – what they are aimed at and how they intend to achieve that aim?

This is not a new idea at all. But if we apply it to recent reforms internationally we can see a number of strands:

- Strengthening political control over policy-making and implementation. In a number of countries ministers have tried to increase the number of political advisers they have, and to gain more control over top civil service appointments (e.g. Germany, Italy, the UK).
- Strengthening traditional (Weberian) bureaucracy in order to achieve propriety, impartiality, continuity and expertise. This can be done in a variety of ways. In Eastern Europe for example there have been new statutes aimed at strengthening the recruitment and training programmes for civil servants, and at raising their low levels of pay. Anti-corruption measures have also been widespread, including internal audit (which has grown considerably in the EU Commission) and procedures aimed at reducing patronage.
- Devolving and decentralizing both political authority and administrative functions. This has notably happened in France, Italy, Sweden and the UK.
- Expanding public participation in order to enhance legitimacy and trust (Pollitt, 2003a, chapter 4). Again, this has been popu-

lar in many countries, including Finland, the Netherlands and the UK.

- Improving the quality of public services as delivered to citizens. Citizens' charters have been tried out in (*inter alia*) Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and the UK. Many European countries make use of EFQM or CAF or other quality improvement techniques.
- Saving money. Economy and efficiency are almost always concerns, and will certainly constitute an acute challenge in the near future. Many reforms which are presented as improving or streamlining public services actually have an underlying agenda focused on economy.

Notice that these aims, each with its own logic, can very easily conflict with one another. Increasing participation may weaken rather than strengthen political control. Fighting corruption may run against decentralization. Improving the quality of public services may require an increase in public expenditure just at a time when ministers are trying to cut back. Decentralization and participation may lower efficiency, especially by making decision procedures more complex and time-consuming.

Notice also that specific innovations and instruments may be used to serve more than one of these purposes, so that to say "we are using X" does not necessarily tell you exactly what is going on. E-government, for example, can be used to centralize or decentralize, to save money or to improve quality. Performance indicators can be used as the basis for a system that hands out centralized rewards and punishments, or as the basis for a decentralized system that encourages professional debate and participation. Civil service competency schemes can be used to focus on narrow technical qualifications or broad management capabilities, and they can be operated in ways which either broaden the civil service intake or confine it to particular elites.

7. Final reflections: the study of public management

The story told above is one of the developments of a subject that seems to be in constant danger of lapsing into simplistic generalizations and fashions, or swinging between incompatible aims (Hood, 2005; Hood and Jackson, 1991). Our models often do not seem to be a sufficiently accurate representation of reality to serve as a basis for decisions which affect public service jobs and citi-

zens' lives. Our chosen techniques frequently produce effects other than those we intended. Our consultants sell governments new systems and then disappear in mergers, 'market re-positionings' or scandals. What is worse, perhaps, is that old lessons and insights are quickly forgotten, and governments repeat the same old mistakes again (Pollitt, 2008b). The field of public administration/public management has changed enormously over the past 30 to 40 years, and not entirely for the better (see ANNEX A).

One old-fashioned but still potent remedy for some of these disappointments and disillusionments is rigorous, independent scholarship – theoretically informed but deeply empirically based. From such scholarship useful advice to practitioners can often be offered, but without indulging in the worship of false gods or the raising of Utopian hopes (Pollitt, 2006). The study of public management can continue to build bridges between practice and academia, but only if it practices both independence and humility. Both the academic providers of advice and the practitioners who consume it need to develop a common understanding of this subtle relationship, and to observe its requirements. After a quarter of a century of intensive public management reform, we are still somewhere near the beginning of the learning curve.

ANNEX A

TEN GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM (PMR)

1. PMR has gone from being a dusty, technical, backroom activity 50 years ago to being a fashion accessory. Every political party now has to have a programme for public service reform. 'Better management' is seen as the answer to a much wider range of problems than used to be the case — it has become a policy in its own right.
2. Alongside this shift has come a huge growth in the 'reform industry'. There is now a considerable community that makes its living from promoting and advising on further reforms — especially the international management consultancies, but also academics and ex-public servants. This creates something of a self-serving international of 'continuous reformers', focused partly on the now ubiquitous national reform units, aided and abetted by the World Bank, OECD, UN etc.
3. There are also more media and they are more aggressive/less respectful of governments than 50 years ago. Short term media and popular pressures on politicians to 'do something' are even more acute than previously. In the short term a re-organization may be the only thing, or at any rate, the least difficult thing that a minister can do — especially in the UK, where there are so few constraints on re-organization.
4. As Christopher Hood has pointed out, there is a semi-religious quality to much reform thinking. The amount of hard, attributable evidence we have of reforms working — and of *how* things work in particular contexts — is small in comparison to the claims which are frequently made. Reforms are often built more on faith and reputation than on proven past good works.
5. Often the central ideas of a new reform technique are good, but in the selling of them they become overblown and oversold. Example of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) — the essential insight that processes are a useful unit of analysis — was a powerful one, but look at the apocalyptic claims then made in the best-selling "*Re-engineering the corporation*".
6. Contextual factors are still regularly and seriously underestimated (especially culture, time, place and task). Too many politicians, consultants and even academics are looking for the 'next big thing', instead of looking for particular solutions to particular, well-researched problems *in specific contexts*.
7. Following from 6, there is an often unfortunate tendency increasingly to believe that reform ideas will be found *outside* not *inside* one's organization and that the answer is to bring in experts and 'best practice' from somewhere 'out there'.
8. There are huge differences between countries and even between sectors. These are not all problems to be eliminated — they represent different histories, different choices, different priorities.
9. Exporting/importing management reforms between countries is a subtle and complex process of translation. One is not taking some standardized device and simply plugging it in to another socket. Devices are not standardized and neither are sockets.
[E.g., fierce debates over what *is* TQM or benchmarking or 'evidence-based policymaking']
10. 'Every house has many builders, and is never finished' (Paavo Haavikko – Finnish poet).

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