

Public Management and Departments: Contemporary Themes – Future Agendas

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The purpose of this article is to review themes in recent academic research on public management at the national level and to see how it aligns with emerging agendas within the Australian public service. This provides an opportunity to identify strengths and gaps and to explore options for research.

The field of public management can be defined narrowly in terms of specific management processes or more broadly in terms of a range of features that might also be associated with public administration. We can take as one guide two somewhat different types of text on public management, one pitched at an international audience (Hughes 2003), the other Australian-centred (Corbett 1996; O'Faircheallaigh, Wanna, and Weller 1999; Aulich, Halligan and Nutley 2001). A combination of their themes yields a core set of management processes (strategic, financial, human resources, performance); institutional and organisational questions (including departments and public enterprise); policy and service delivery (including e-government); accountability and ethics; and broader questions about the role of government and nature of the public sector.

A different formulation distinguishes arenas (Self 1978) – such as, the social, political and bureaucratic – each associated with an agenda. The first two focus on relationships between a bureaucracy and its environment; the third is internal (Halligan 2003a). These categories provide a basis for examining public management change in terms of the reformulation of external relationships and the internal constitution of the public service.

Main Contours of Contemporary Research

To make the task manageable, and the coverage complementary to other articles, the survey focuses on six aspects of Commonwealth public management over the last five years (for a longer view see Wanna 2003, and earlier Aitkin 1985).¹

Patterns of Reform

The subject of public sector reform has been worked through in numerous studies over the last two decades. However, the system keeps renewing, thereby offering prospects for further analysis, and the Howard period has yet to be fully evaluated for its impact and implications. Reform phases have been examined in terms of the standard categories of administration, management, networks and governance with some studies seeking to be more ambitious with the incorporation of analysis of models and pathways (Davis and Rhodes 2000; Considine 2001b; Wanna, Jensen and de Vries 2003). (Compare the original overview by Hess and Adams (2002) of the ontological and epistemological change in public administration over time.) New angles on reform – e.g. paradoxes and values – have been explored recently (Halligan 2003c, 2003d; Holland and Fleming 2003), and fundamental traditional issues have been revisited, such as the prospective role of the public sector (Quiggin 1999; Keating and Weller 2001).

Types of Management

Financial management has been the reigning management process since the 1980s, eclipsing the others in shaping change. Budgeting and financial management have appropriately received the most comprehensive attention (Wanna, Kelly and Forster 2000; also English, Guthrie and Parker 2003). The full impact of the most recent developments, including the output/outcome framework, has been less extensively analysed (outside debate about the efficacy of the accrual dimension, a particular interest of accountants (Barton 2003; Carlin and Guthrie 2003).

The performance aspects of human resource management have attracted sustained interest because of the fundamental issues raised by the transformation of employment relations and the shift to individual performance management. Under the *Public Service Act 1999*, the employment powers were devolved to heads of agencies, including remuneration policies and classification structures. Agency-level bargaining has produced individualisation of employment relations and a range of questions including government and union roles in a contradictory environment (O'Brien and O'Donnell 1999). A prominent issue has been the subjectivity of management assessment of performance (O'Brien and O'Donnell 2002). The use of performance management has had significant implications for public servant motivation where remuneration is based on performance. The efficacy of the 'paradigm' has been questioned in a number of studies (O'Donnell and O'Brien 2000; O'Donnell and Shields 2002).

Different dimensions of management change have received attention. Change management processes have been systematically analysed in a study of six federal agencies that offers insights about the relevance of the four elements of strategic approach, implementation, organisational culture and leadership (Stewart and Kringas 2003). There are also cases of management of organisational knowledge under change (Stokes and Clegg 2002), and the entrepreneurial role of bureaucrats in influencing reform programs (Howard 2001).

Focus on the Public Service

Broader issues about the character of the public service and its constituent elements has received less sustained attention, the most notable exception being the elite (Weller 2001). The role of the burgeoning senior executive service warrants further attention (but see the earlier Renfrow, Hede, and Lamond 1998). The efficacy and implications of the Australian approach to leadership do not appear to have been systematically examined (Halligan 2003b). The tensions inherent in a public service focused on performance and entrepreneurship raises issues about ethics and ethos (Bishop, Connors and Sampford 2003).

The core departments, central agencies, have not been in favour with researchers, with

the exception of the budget agency: Wanna, Jensen and de Vries 2003). The recent augmentation of central agency responsibilities has yet to be reflected in published research. The centenary histories produced several studies of general academic interest on the Australian National Audit Office, the Defence Department and the public service (Wanna, Ryan and Ng 2001; Andrews 2001;² PSPMC 2001). Australia has escaped much of the international fixation with agencification because there has not been much systemic commitment to it, at least at the national level (Wettenhall 2003). The more complex multi-purpose Centrelink variation has attracted wide attention as a delivery model (Scott 1999; Rowlands 2003; Halligan 2004).

The study of the organisation of the outer public sector has received infusions from repackaging and extending old concepts and the continuing reworking of organisational forms that straddle, and relationships that cross, public-private boundaries (Wettenhall 2000, 2001). The intensification of the refocusing of public and private sectors produced a range of studies of outsourcing (Aulich 2000; Bishop and Wanna 2002). The impact of privatisation has been worked through (Walker and Walker 2000; Collyer, McMaster and Wettenhall 2001; Wettenhall 2002; Hodge 2001, 2003), and this agenda is now regarded as having largely waned either because potential targets have become scarce (beyond airports and Telstra) or have been superseded by a broader interest in public-private relationships (Hodge 2002).

Corporate Governance and Accountability

The perennial question of accountability has evolved, with increasing complexity under public sector reforms involving new internal management and external arrangements, and these dimensions have received extensive analysis (Mulgan and Uhr 2001; Mulgan 2003). The accountability ambiguities and shortcomings that were apparent in the 1990s – some the result of a neo-liberal approach to public management – were registered strongly (Uhr 1999; Funnell 2001; Considine 2003).

The related concept of corporate governance, which inter alia encompasses accountability, acquired centrality for public organisations in the late 1990s. The application of this private sector concept to the public sector raised issues about the transfer of principles, the

exercise of governmental control, and how the public interest is served in the corporate governance of public sector bodies where tensions and gaps occur between theory and practice (Edwards 2002; Edwards, Nicholl and Seth-Purdie 2003).

Relationships

Of the three relationships, the societal is most clearly the realm of the article on governance and service delivery. This dimension provides some of the more interesting potential for research (Alford 2002a and 2002b). E-government – the use of information technology for delivering services – has yet to register much published research, although two volumes identified a number of the current and emerging issues in areas such as accessibility, collective accountability, community collaboration and multi-service service delivery (AGIMO/ IPAA 2004).³

In the mid-1990s, the public service was depicted by government as more subservient to the private sector, and arguably less influential within society and government. A government model emerged that viewed the public sector as an adjunct to the private sector. Functions that could be performed outside were inclined to be transferred and internal operations were made more comparable with the private sector. Agencies were required to identify contestable functions that could be transferred to the private sector through market testing. This approach appears to have peaked and a number of developments suggest reassessment of the value of the public domain and a reaffirmation of the public service (including the national commitment to the Australia and New Zealand School of Government and its Executive MPA). Academics too have been re-examining the relative importance of 'public'-'publicness' and how it might assume greater importance (Alford 2001; Considine 2001a).

The heightening of issues in relationships with politicians was in part a culmination of a range of changes over time that covered strengthening ministerial influence and resources; changing the senior public servant's roles and tenure; and the growth in ministerial advisers (Halligan 2001; Maley 2000). The 'children overboard' episode of 2001 triggered greater debate about, and analysis of, roles and relationships (Weller 2002). Interpretations of

levels of politicisation partly reflect whether narrow or broad conceptions are used (Mulgan 1998; Weller and Young 2001), but this question is now entrenched as a perennial issue of Australian public management.

Comparative research in public management has become more apparent with the growing number of studies that locate Australian experience within broader frames of reference (Wanna 1999; Considine 2001b; Rhodes and Weller 2001; Wanna, Jensen and de Vries 2003; Halligan 2003a). The need now is for more extended analysis of the major issues.

Future Research Agendas

A number of potential research agendas are suggested by this review of recent themes in the academic literature. The future agendas should also reflect issues that are emergent within a public sector, given that the system continues to be subject to major reform, and its openness to environmental influences and constant change. The Australian public service is going through a phase of heightened self-review that has yielded several significant reports that offer both insights and material for this task.

A dramatic reminder of the role of the environment has been the impact of international events on Australian public management. As Peter Shergold, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, noted in reviewing the year 2002–03 (DPMC 2003), challenges were counter-terrorism, protection of borders and security. 'Those issues, typically 'non-routine', will test bureaucratic structures. Ensuring effective coordination of intelligence, analysis and strategic policy responses will test public administration'.

In many respects, recent developments are interrelated. Complex policy issues require strategic and integrated government responses involving multiple agencies and levels of government. There is now an emphasis on horizontal as well as vertical structures and processes. Ultimately these questions are about enhancing capacity and rebalancing the mix of system features. They have implications for the relative roles of central agencies and line departments because they involve countering the limitations of a highly devolved system through somewhat stronger central guidance. A particular lever for change has been government's concern that political priorities

were not being sufficiently reflected in policy directions, program implementation and reporting.

This is also a time when movement within the public management reform cycle became more apparent: from an intense reform agenda in the first five years of the Howard government, reflection on the results were producing refinements and some revaluation of the worth of the public service under a new leadership of the central agencies that suited new agendas (Halligan and Adams 2004).

1. Strategic Steering from the Centre

The first potential agenda focuses on central agencies and their evolving roles with regard to several key areas: the budget, public service values and performance and the implementation of government policy. The overriding trend for more than a decade has been to devolve responsibilities to agencies. This remains a key feature of the Australian federal level. However, there have been modifications to this direction: the whole-of-government agenda and the refinement of some public management features. This has recently taken the form of a rather more prominent role for central agencies in espousing and enforcing principles, monitoring performance and providing guidance.

These developments have two consequences. First, they shift the focus from the vertical to the horizontal, and from the individual agency to a greater concern with cross-agency programs and relationships. Second, the whole-of-government agenda has something of a 'centralising' element in so far as central agencies are driving policy directions or principles, either systemically or across several agencies. The result has been the tempering of devolution in some respects and a rebalancing of the centre and line agencies. Three examples illustrate the trends.

First is the budget framework. The framework introduced in 1999 included budgeting on a full accrual basis; implementation of outputs and outcomes reporting; and the extension of agency devolution to inter alia budget estimates and financial management. A number of the expected benefits were not however forthcoming (in part because the combination

of a highly centralised budgetary process and highly devolved agencies was problematic). The Department of Finance and Administration 2002 Budget Estimates and Framework Review raised questions about accuracy, effectiveness and responsiveness and in meeting government's needs (Watt 2002). One outcome has been the enhancement of Finance's role and capacity to oversight financial management and information, as indicated by the recent expansion of staff capacity (in a previously shrunken department) to provide the advice expected by government.

Second is monitoring performance and values. The 1999 public service legislation resulted from a long-term shift from relying on controls to principles. The Australian Public Service Commission has moved to a new stage following initial implementation of the legislation that involves a stronger evaluative element and capacity. The Commission has extended evaluation in its annual *State of the Service Report* to include surveying both employees and agencies. The Commission has sought to scrutinise more closely the institutionalisation of values across public service organisations as part of the greater focus on evaluation and quality assurance (APSC 2004).

The third is delivery effectiveness. The recent creation of a Cabinet Implementation Unit was designed to seek effectiveness in program delivery by ensuring government policies and services are timely and responsive. Unlike the UK Delivery Unit, the Unit is staffed by public servants, not political advisers, is integrated into the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and is not intended to focus on targets and statistical measurement of agency performance. It is designed to emphasise critical policy developments where implementation is likely to be complex and may require whole-of-government approaches, both across federal agencies and other jurisdictions.

There are many research options here including analysis of the array of Commonwealth public bodies, now comprehensively typed and mapped by the Department of Finance and Administration (2004). One approach to interpreting the overall developments is raised at the end of this section.

2. Horizontal Integration: Whole-of-Government and Cross-Boundary Questions

Australia has been generally slower to address whole-of-government issues than either Canada or the UK. The devolved environment created by these reforms emphasised devolution of responsibility to agency heads with direct agency accountability through them, and emphasised the importance of each agency pursuing its own business and policy agenda encouraging organisational stovepipes. In recent years the need to temper devolution with a broader, whole-of-government perspective has come on the agenda and permeates much of government activity.

The Prime Minister committed to a series of whole-of-government priorities for new policy-making that included national security, defence and counter terrorism and other generally defined priorities such as sustainable environment, rural and regional affairs and work and family life. The priorities are being pursued through a range of traditional coordinating and new whole-of-government processes. The attention given by the Management Advisory Committee indicates the shift in emphasis, in particular the report examining how the Commonwealth can address a series of issues about whole-of-government processes and structures, cultures, managing information and budgetary frameworks. The whole-of-government challenge is seen to cover the different levels of policy advice, program management and integrating service delivery (MAC 2004).⁴

One significant area is e-government where an important question is whether it has the potential to be a transformative force in public management. The case has been made that a combination of whole-of-government approaches and information communication technology is essential for achieving gains in delivery and providing seamless service (MAC 2002; AGIMO/IPAA 2004). The arguments for the transformative capabilities of e-government need to be tested by research in Australian jurisdictions.

One broader cross-boundary area requiring greater attention is the public-private dimension. There are a number of questions to be asked about the reconfiguring of the Australian state as a result of the changing public-private

interface. Many aspects of public-private relationships have not been mapped or analysed and some of the less well-documented dimensions of change, including partnerships and the growth of not-for profits on the margins of the public sector, remain poorly researched.

3. Public Service Capability

While policy and management capacity has continued to attract academic attention (e.g. Davis 2000), capability has emerged as a preoccupation of the public service.⁵ A Management Advisory Committee report focused on APS-wide workforce planning issues, the challenges of attracting and retaining graduates, and the ageing workforce. The report calls for a focus on organisational renewal with a more systematic and integrated approach to workforce planning and the building of organisational capability across the APS (MAC 2003). A major issue in capability-building, performance management, is discussed below (APSC 2004).

A review of the Senior Executive Leadership Capability Framework, used to select SES staff has been conducted by the APS Commission (Podger 2004). It aims to identify the particular qualities of senior staff at different levels of seniority and to plan for more integrated leadership career development. The Integrated Leadership System seeks to recognise the management skills and technical expertise needed at senior levels and to develop the weakest skills—relationship building and strategic thinking. The importance of the ‘hard’ management skills, such as financial, project and risk management, is recognised in order to pursue a balance between leadership, management and technical skills and to work with agencies to develop appropriate and tailored professional development.

One other field has been the heightened interest in the role of knowledge (presumably reflecting both the loss of the knowledge capacity of agencies under constant change and the more general emergence of knowledge management). The importance of knowledge has been recognised as ‘a key to cultural change’ (Shergold in MAC 2004: vi) as have the skills required to handle knowledge frames (Hess and Adams 2002).



4. Analysis of Public Management

Australia has been more committed to performance management than most OECD countries. The Management Advisory Committee has played its role in reviewing performance management with the application of a strategic framework (MAC 2001). More recently there is the Australian National Audit Office analysis (ANAO 2004) and the Australian Public Service Commission's survey (2004), which rely substantially on the MAC report.

Given the prominence of performance management, the area remains under-researched compared to other types of management. A specific problem that persists is the credibility of performance management systems (APSC 2004), but note the attention of the studies of individual performance management mentioned earlier. The testing of propositions about the efficacy of management nostrums, the growing use of balanced scorecard and the Australia variant of performance management deserve fuller academic research.

There are anecdotal indications of substantial variations between Australian jurisdictions, which comparisons of public management would illuminate. Australian and New Zealand comparisons also warrant in-depth analysis, preferably with other comparable countries included (e.g. institutional studies such as a comparison of the tax office in different jurisdictions; research on distinctive features such as the outcomes focus and approaches to performance management).

5. Institutional Development and Values

The public service has been according greater centrality to values and to exploring the difficult area of relations between public servants and ministerial offices (APSC 2004). There is also the rediscovery of the public sector as a realm with deeply etched and clearly identifiable attributes as reflected in the recent preference for 'public sector governance' in a handbook by the Australian National Audit Office (and which appears to relegate corporate governance from a central position: ANAO 2003), and a compendium of principles and practice (Bartos 2004).

The renewed international interest in core values that define the publicness of services, how to counter declining public trust (surprisingly not a major issue in Australia)⁶ and the role of leaders in promoting public service values are particularly relevant. There are opportunities here for testing propositions about the efficacy of initiatives being undertaken, and the type of public service appropriate for handling the complexities of the modern state.

6. A New Paradigm?

There are several indications of a move towards a new paradigm. Successive studies have identified the familiar trends from public administration to public management and then towards network and governance models (e.g. Considine 2003). The question is whether the evidence of a turning point in the dominant trends of the reform era, represents a movement of more enduring significance.

The paradigm 'reformist' change of the 1980s and 1990s may now be giving way and being succeeded. The salient features of the new public management paradigm, such as disaggregation, devolution, outsourcing, multiple services providers, have encouraged fragmentation and reinforced silos. The extensions into networks and governance (in the sense of a greater reliance on non-government, actors) added new dimensions. But the dominant trends of the mid-2000s are designed to moderate some of these features or represent agenda that do not align closely with those of the immediate past.

The new strengthening of political control over policy direction and implementation reflects continuities, but this has been accompanied by a resurgence of central mechanisms for coordination and oversight (Halligan and Adams 2004). The post-Uhrig agenda is for ministerial departments to have tighter and more direct control over public agencies (Review 2003). There are international echoes of these trends with, for example, the United Kingdom pattern represented as a focus on the effectiveness of outcomes (Richards 2001: 61). Do these developments represent system rebalancing or foreshadow a new model?

Conclusion

The research agenda of the mid-2000s combines continuing public management themes from the 1990s with emergent issues associated with a new phase of change. There is a need for a series of systematic in-depth studies based on good empirical analysis and which are theoretically grounded (such as the relationship between the theory underlying reform and the impact). They also need to be accessible and relevant, and provide lessons about performance and institutional strengths.

Notes

- ¹ This treatment of the federal level leaves administrative history, policy, governance and delivery, including intergovernmental questions, and sub-national public management to other articles in this issue.
- ² One of a seven-volume series of the Australian Centenary History of Defence.
- ³ See papers from the Electronic Governance conference at the Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne: <http://www.public-policy.unimelb.edu.au/egovernance/> (2004).
- ⁴ Another example is the MAC (2002) report on information communication technology.
- ⁵ The terms 'capacity' and 'capability' appear to have been used interchangeably by the Australian Public Service Commission and Management Advisory Committee: MAC 2003; APSC 2003.
- ⁶ There is a lack of Australian data on citizen attitudes to public administration compared to other countries (Halligan 2003a; Van de Walle 2004).

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