WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM 30 YEARS OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM?

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Three types of learning

A first point is that there are always at least three kinds of learning – and especially so in the case of public management reform. The first kind is simply (or not so simply) learning *what has happened*. The second is *unlearning* – that is learning what errors there were in some of the views that one held oneself – or influential others held – in the past. We could call this correcting false impressions. The third kind of learning is finding explanations – identifying reasons and processes which help us understand *why* things happened as they did.

Public management reform is a difficult area for all three kinds of learning. It is not a scientific laboratory. It is a market place in which several powerful groups compete to tell their stories and sell their programmes. Politicians are obviously one group – they want us (or the electorate) to believe that they can make things better, and that they have the right answers. In some ways contemporary politics in Western Europe and North America has become ‘technical politics’ – less and less about launching ambitious new policies and more and more about presenting one’s own party as better able to manage current problems than the opposition. Top civil servants are another group. They often have reform ideas of their own, and in any case they will be the ones required to lead the change, so they certainly have strong interests in getting their voices heard. Consultants are a third important group – much more important in some countries than in others, but a growing force in many (St Martin, 2005). In the early 2000s the UK government spent more on management consultants than did the private sector (National Audit Office, 2006). For consultancies reforms mean more business and higher profits – they have a vested interest in on-going change and the constant invention or re-invention of new reform ‘products’. Academics (like me) are a fourth group – in most cases much less influential than the first three groups just mentioned, but nevertheless having some importance in particular countries, such as the Netherlands or Sweden. Some act as advisers and some act as critics - both nationally and internationally - but either way they are one of the groups trying to establish their own interpretations and stories as the best ones.

Given such a crowded and competitive market place it is inevitable that some tall stories will be told. Some oversimplifications will be made. A good deal of special pleading is likely to occur. For example, students need to learn that most government reports on organizational reforms are not the unvarnished truth – rather they are often highly selective and optimistic versions of reality. Therefore - like our students - we have a considerable task in front of us if we want to sort out what has really happened from what some self-interested party *says* has happened, or is about to happen.
Ten key observations

As time is short I will now jump straight to 10 key observations about the character of public management reform (hereafter PMR):

1. **PMR has gone from being a dusty, technical, backroom activity 50 years ago to being a fashion accessory.** In some countries 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. But we should not assume that PMR will remain an object of such political and media attention. What goes up can go down again, and in some countries there are signs of ‘reform fatigue’.

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, ex-public servants and political advisers (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Saint Martin, 2005). This creates something of a self-serving international community of ‘continuous reformers’, focused partly on the now ubiquitous national reform units, aided and abetted by the World Bank, OECD, UN etc. It is this competitive marketplace of ideas - an increasingly international marketplace - that I referred to in my introduction

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 (Kettl et al, 2004). 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 relatively few constraints on re-organization (Pollitt, 2007). In some countries the media have actually become significant reform advocates themselves, calling for particular types of solutions, and fiercely attacking types of reform they do not approve of (e.g. Jacobsson and Sundström, 2009)

4. **As Christopher Hood, among others, has pointed out, there is a semi-religious quality to much reform thinking** (Hood, 2005). 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 (see, e.g. Pollitt, 1995). The field is prone to waves of fashion, as new theologies are spawned by individuals and groups anxious to make their reputations. One unfortunate consequence of this is that implementing a reform can become as much about getting a theologically correct interpretation as about solving the original problems the reform was meant to deal with.

5. **Often the central ideas of a new reform technique are good, but in the selling of them they become overblown and oversold.** For example - 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 (Hammer and Champy, 1995). Or again, Total Quality Management (TQM) carried the important idea that quality
should ultimately be decided by consumers rather than producers, but in some hands it became a doctrine that everything in the organization had to be uprooted and changed. ‘Total’ became, in effect, ‘Totalitarian’ (see, e.g. McGowan, 1995 but then compare with the realism of Zbaracki, 1997)

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. So we have had ‘partnerships’, ‘network approaches’, ‘Lean’, ‘benchmarking’, ‘performance contracting’, ‘relational contracting’, ‘collaborative management’ and a host of other techniques and approaches, each of which may work under certain circumstances but not under others.

7. 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. The idea that everyone will or should converge on one particular model of ‘good governance’ or one set of ‘best practices’ is both wrong and dangerous (see, e.g. Andrews, 2010; Bartoli, 2008; Manning, 2001; Painter and Peters, 2010; Pollitt, 2010b; Schendler and Proeller, 2007). The story that all public sectors used to be large traditional bureaucracies, then they were all swept by the wave of New Public Management, and now they are all shifting to regimes of New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010) is actually a fairy story. It was never like that (see Kickert, 2008; Lynn, 2006; Ongaro, 2009; Pollitt et al, 2007; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).

8. There is an unfortunate tendency to believe that reform ideas will be found outside not inside one’s organization. To believe that the answer is to bring in experts and ‘best practice’ from somewhere ‘out there’. But what is ‘enlightened practice’ for one’s own organization may well not be ‘best practice’ elsewhere (Lynn et al, 2001, chapter 8). Indeed, the best practice approach itself ‘can seldom claim to produce the consummate causal understandings necessary to justify its application in other settings, particularly where variables omitted from the research may be influential’ (Lynn et al, 2001, p156). Yet often the people who know best how to improve an organization are already in that organization. They are the ones who need to be identified and listened to.

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 (the ‘plugs’) are not standardized e.g. fierce debates over what is TQM or benchmarking or ‘evidence-based policymaking’. Reforms are never just neutral technical instruments. Neither are the contexts (‘sockets’) standard. So what may have worked well in one country (or even sector) may work badly or not at all in another (Manning, 2001; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2009). So we need to look closely at the context: what is the local organizational culture? Has this organization had any experience with this kind of reform before? Who are the opinion-formers in this organization? What is the current state of morale? Who are the key external stakeholders? What has been the recent history?
10. The explanation for why things happened (or didn’t happen) is usually complex, and is likely to evolve over time. So we need to dig into the particulars to find out why this programme or technique worked in this place and time, but not in that one (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Indeed, time itself is often an important factor – reforms are frequently changed or dropped before there has been enough time to get a clear and stable view of their longer term benefits and limitations. The hectic pace of modern politics, fuelled by the short attention span of the mass media, tends to amplify this volatility. Often ideas go round in circles, with the same basic idea coming back a few years or even decades later, now being presented under a new, fashionable name (Light, 1997; Pollitt, 2008). Often the proponents don’t even realize that it has been tried before - organizational memories have in some ways been getting shorter. For example, we could ask how far governments currently engaged in large reductions in public spending are learning from previous big cuts exercises (Pollitt, 2010a)? All this is regrettable, because some reforms take three, five or even ten years to reach their full potential, and the past is full of interesting insights about what may happen if one does X or Y (Pollitt, 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2009).

So what can we learn?

What can be learned from a retrospective of 30 years or more of PMR in the developed countries? I will suggest seven main lessons:

1. Distrust anyone who claims to have the answer before there has been a detailed diagnosis of the particular problems of the particular organization. In particular, distrust those who argue that X must be implemented because ‘everyone else’ is doing X. Actually, there are no universal solutions because there are no universal problems. Evidence-based problem solving means just that – you can’t solve your problems until you have gathered your evidence – evidence that should be specific to your organization and its problems, or to broadly similar organizations and/or problems.

2. If a reform is thrust upon you from above, try hard to adapt it to fit the particular history, culture and task of your organization.

3. Maximize your use of the knowledge and wisdom which already exists within your organization, both formal and tacit. Do this even if it is held by people who appear to be resistors or opponents.

4. If you use external consultants, ensure that they serve your purposes and do not begin to act like Gods (or, worse still, managers!). Remember you will soon have to do without them.

5. Work as hard as you can to secure a realistic timeframe for reform. Try to avoid having change squashed into a few weeks or months, so that everyone is rushed and under pressure. Ensure continuous monitoring but try to avoid premature evaluation.

6. Seize opportunities, ‘windows’, chances whenever they present themselves. Many successful reforms, big and small, exist only because reform leaders have jumped through ‘windows of opportunity’
7. Expect some failures. Bounce back from the small ones and take the big ones as indications that either your original diagnosis and/or your prescription was faulty.

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