

Searching for success

The starting point for my research is my view that both the public administration view and the prevailing narratives of civil service decline are partial, often misleading and fail to capture the cumulative and transformational impact of 65 years of reforms.

Discerning the impact of managerial reforms is a tough task that faces almost insurmountable barriers (Pollitt, 2013a). These barriers partly explain the lack of evaluation and the often-unsatisfactory findings of those few evaluations that are undertaken.

It seems unpromising to try to attribute causality for improvements to civil service effectiveness to elements of specific reforms. That endeavour would be founded on the quicksand of weakly based, ambiguous and contradictory descriptors of civil service effectiveness and government effectiveness. Then, each link in any causal chain is contested: buffeted by context, culture, power, stakeholders and a complex array of variables.

Hopes for an objective view on whole of government and or civil service effectiveness are likely to be misplaced. Most academic efforts draw on administrative data (data collected and published by government organizations themselves and scores issued by government inspectors). Less often they draw on survey data which may also be set by political superiors, for example mandatory surveys of consumer satisfaction, but are often based on primary data collected by researchers' surveys of public officials' views of the performance of their organizations. A meta review of 92 studies of public service performance concluded:

Organizational performance, perhaps especially in the public sector, is open to a variety of interpretations and is politically contestable. The multiple stakeholders that judge performance include political principals, funders (usually higher levels of government) and service recipients (and non-recipients) outside the organization, and professionals, managers and front-line staff inside public agencies. These stakeholders may disagree about the most important dimensions of performance, the indicators used to measure them and the scores on these indicators that constitute success or failure. Administrative indicators of performance are selected by governments and their agents, so their composition reflects the priorities of powerful groups within the State. ... This means that their coverage is likely to vary across nations and over time. (Andrews et al., 2011)

A related but highly influential branch outside academic research is the thriving global industry assembling and promoting indices purporting to rank the effectiveness of governments and in some cases civil services. Some are long established, World Bank (Worldwide Governance Index) and the Bertelsman Stiftung's Transformation Index (Governance in international comparison).

They are subject to criticism:

The WGI claim to measure governance; as yet no evidence has been offered that this is true. The WGI represent a complex atheoretical and as yet poorly articulated hypothesis for which no evidence has been advanced. (Thomas, 2010)

Indices tend to reflect the dominant paradigms of public management and democracy at the time of their creation. And they are inevitably skewed to what can be measured, and the existence of some roughly comparable datasets offering a time series. They tend to fall back on some questionable surveys to fill data gaps or shore up the credibility of their index. Their claim to make meaningful comparisons is suspect given they cannot possibly account for culture, context and antecedents which are critical to the evolution and effectiveness of governments. It is a massive leap of faith to think these indices adequately capture effectiveness of civil services and government. If they are used as ways to identify countries with interesting practice and variations from which you might learn they have some value.

A cynic might observe that two relatively recent indices each found that the country of their commissioner/sponsor came out top of their respective league tables (Blavatnik's InCiSe index of civil service effectiveness, and Oxford Insights Human Centred Public Services Index). At best the results reflect the influence of the sponsoring entity over what measures are chosen for inclusion or exclusion. Both rely heavily on data from the longer established indices supplemented by modest surveys.

Beyond this meta challenge of describing what government effectiveness looks like, there are substantial difficulties in identifying the impact of individual reforms even in terms of their stated aims.

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).

Efforts by researchers to focus on bundles of reforms and test whether they met their intended outcomes provide a mixed picture on the impact of reforms.

NPM reforms in the UK are found to have failed in terms of the most consistently articulated NPM reform intention – efficiency (Hood & Dixon, 2013). For the classic period of NPM from 1980-1990 they found little evidence of real running cost reductions. The largest reduction within the entire period (1980-2008) was around 10% in the later years of the Major government. Unsurprisingly they concluded that NPM does not offer a model for cutting costs of the scale desired by the coalition in the first of several periods of austerity (2010-14).

The other ambitions of NPM beyond efficiency were performance improvement and responsiveness to service users (Pollitt & Dan, 2013). A large review of 519 studies of NPM impact across Europe (Pollitt & Dan, 2013) found a mixed 'hit or miss picture'. Whilst around half reported a positive impact, 47% of those looking at outputs found they did not improve, and 56% of those looking at outcomes reported no improvement. This European comparative review concluded that whilst NPM interventions could not be called a failure, the political, structural and cultural context was crucial to the success of NPM interventions. They compared NPM interventions to *'a delicate plant [that] requires the right soil and care, more orchid than potato'*. As well as being intrinsically hard to evaluate, the importance of the context to each intervention complicates the attribution of the causes of any outputs and impacts (Pollitt & Dan, 2013).

So discerning the impact of managerial reforms is a tough task that faces several almost insurmountable barriers (Pollitt, 2013b) (Pollitt, 2013a):

- The long term, incremental nature of major organisational change.
- Stated goals may not match the aims of a programme in practice, or they may be woolly at the outset only becoming clearer as design and implementation proceeds.
- ‘Many reforms are, in effect, redesigned during implementation because new aspects or difficulties are discovered ‘on the ground’.
- The context in which the reform is taking shape may change dramatically.
- The exceptional difficulty of attributing outcomes or effectiveness to specific techniques, processes or structures in any organisation let alone an institution like the Civil service.

These barriers partly explain the lack of evaluation and the often-unsatisfactory findings of those few evaluations that are undertaken. In the face of this evaluation void the confidence of those taking a positive view of the benefits of managerial reform efforts has become almost ideological (Hood, 2009). Equally the wistful certainty of those who articulate a narrative of decline can appear as an ideological distaste for the notion of business and management in public administration (Chapman & O’Toole, 2010), (O’Toole, 2004). There is a persistent negative tone to much of the research on the development and impact of NPM which colours the story told of its impact (Funck & Karlsson, 2020).

An increasing number of researchers have sought to address the theoretical limitations of the public administration tradition by drawing on theories from other fields. They have used theories from strategy process, strategy as practice, institutional work, sense-making and dynamic capability- often in combination - to understand change and its impact in public sector institutions (see for example: (Burgelman et al., 2018), (Cloutier et al., 2016), (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), (Kattel & Mazzucato, 2018), (Loureiro et al., 2021), (Lozeau et al., 2002), (Pablo et al., 2007), (Pettigrew et al., 1992), (Poister et al., 2010), (Poister et al., 2010), (Piening, 2013)). Within these research fields there are calls for greater efforts to bridge, connect and even combine theories – so as to benefit from their respective strengths and mitigate some of their limitations when applied in isolation (see for example: (Vaara & Whittington, 2012), (Suddaby et al., 2013), (Burgelman et al., 2018), (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), (Kohtamäki et al., 2022)).

My research programme will explore whether the concept of dynamical capabilities- specifically knowledge based capabilities - may provide a tangible way to identify the impact of civil service reforms. It could be possible to gauge this intermediate reform outcome and connect it directly to the scope and practice of a series of reforms. I would rely on a growing body research which is establishing a plausible case for the impact of these intermediate outcomes on organisational effectiveness and longevity.

My subsequent research would focus on understanding the design and practice of reforms which seemed to build these key dynamic capabilities.

My approach to research would be shaped by the conclusions of a review by Joullie and Gould (2023) into the limitations of management research:

Rather than seek causality management researchers would better aim to ‘understand and explain deliberate actions, situational choices, ambiguities and constraints’ accepting that the actions of agents are not deterministically constrained. Such

understanding needs to be rooted in the context of values, opportunities, and an imperfect pool of ideas and experience that are drawn on as choices are made and paths pursued.

I will be exploring these themes further in articles due later in 2024.

Peter Thomas 9-4-2024

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