

Reforming the State

- A taster

Preface

"We've spent half a century arguing over management methods. If there are solutions to our confusions over government, they lie in democratic not management processes"

JR Saul (1992)

Organisations - we love them and hate them....They have both their formal purposes and, thanks to their self-interests and complacency, their informal side and malfunctions. Most people spend their time quietly "serving" their organisation's interests - generally with some ambivalence if not contempt.

I'm one of the small number of people who've had (or been allowed to take) a license to be open and critical about the malfunctions of the organisations I've served - for the first 25 years as a strategic politician in the West of Scotland in first a typical municipality and then one of Europe's largest Regions; in the subsequent 25 years in post-communist countries - as a consultant in institutional development.

When I started to work in local government in the late 60s, there was no such subject as administrative reform. Now my bookshelves groan under the weight of books containing descriptions and assessments of the experience of what, in the 80s and 90s, was called "public administration reform" but is now called "good governance"

In the 1970s and early 1980s I lectured on public administration in the UK while at the same time being an active local and regional politician - and using that opportunity and experience to publish material in professional journals and books. An institutional base gives legitimacy and profile. Since 1991 I have lived and worked in central Europe and Asia as a free-lance consultant - thereby losing a bit of visibility but gaining so much more in experience....

And the mix of academia, politics and individual consultancy has given me the freedom for almost 50 years to "[do it my way](#)" - to write and publish in a fairly carefree manner, even if most of is self-published these days.

This book reflects a life (and perhaps attitude) shaped by -

- working from an early age (26) with an unusually wide range of people (professionals, politicians, community activists - and a much smaller number of academics) who shared an aspiration to improve social conditions;
- having a job in a Polytechnic (and also a planning school) in the 1970s and first half of the 1980s which gave me the licence to talk and write about the issues relating to this work
- achieving a position of influence which helped develop a more inclusive style of government in the West of Scotland for 20 years

- reengineering myself as a consultant, working and living for 25 years in central Europe and Central Asia - in the pursuit of what the turgid academic literature has come to call "good governance" or "capacity development"
- all the while trying - through wide reading and writing - to try to make sense of what the masthead on my blog calls our "social endeavours", ie efforts to make the world a better place...

In 1999 I had the time to write a book which attempted to summarise, for a central European and Asian audience, the huge organisational changes in the public sector which had been (and still were) taking place in the UK between 1968 and 1998.[In Transit - notes on good governance](#) which has chapters on -

- transitology
- administrative reform 1975-2000
- a European Region's first effort at social inclusion
- the literature of managing change
- policy analysis
- the third sector

Almost 20 years on, the text may now be of more historical than substantive significancebut still, for me at any rate, reverberates. Here is its introduction.....

The book is about the search for effectiveness and equity in government in a new era of immense change and growing expectations. It is aimed at -

- *those both inside and outside the machinery of government - both local and national - who, however reluctantly, have realised that they need to get involved in the minutiae of administrative change*
- *people in both West and central Europe.*

A lot has been written in the past decade about development endeavours at various levels - but there are several problems about such literature -

- *it is written generally by academics who have not themselves had the responsibility of making things happen: who have rarely, for example, been involved in the early, messy stages of taking initiatives they believed in, or in working with people who feel threatened and confused.*
- *its very volume and diversity (let alone language and accessibility) makes it impossible for busy policy-makers and advisers to read : a guide is needed.*
- *such texts are (obviously) not sensitive to the Central European context - let alone the changing nature of politics in places like Belgium and Scotland.*

*The analysis and argument of this book very much build on my **practical experience as a "change-agent" in Scotland during 1970-1990**, trying to "reinvent" the machinery of local government and to construct effective development policies and structures to deal with economic collapse.*

*The actual text **reflects a dialogue with a particular Central European audience between 1994 and 1998**: the focus - and content - being shaped by the questions and issues which seemed to be at the forefront of the minds of the people I was working with in such programmes as*

- *the development of Local Government in Romania, the Czech and Slovak Republics*
- *the establishment of 2 Regional Development Agencies - and 2 Development Funds - in North East Hungary:*
 - *Administrative Decentralisation in Slovakia:*
 - *Public administration reform in Latvia*
 - *TAIEX*

- *injection of policy coherence into coalition government in Romania*

*And the **Annotated Bibliographies** give some of the key points from books I have found useful in my own search for better policy-making. It's a salutary experience to write a book on reforming government in a far-away land - far away from the crises, confrontations and hype which seem to pass these days for government in developed countries. Without these, you have the time and space to read; to begin to make some connections between other experiences of reform and your own. And to rediscover the importance of having some "theoretical" frameworks to help make such links.*

Living and conversing with those undergoing the "transitional" experiences here equally makes you look at things in a different way and be more sensitive to the meanings hidden in words. Slowly I realised that my emerging thoughts were equally relevant for those in West European now trying to make sense of the various nostrums to which the public sector has been subject in the past two decades.

The book asks whether our policy framework for "transition" (inasmuch as one exists) adequately reflects new thinking about the respective roles of government, the market and of social development processes which has been developing during the decade in our own countries. It also suggests that, both in West and Central Europe, these important debates are hampered by their compartmentalisation. And, further, that one of the (many) problems of the "technical assistance" given by Western Europeans during the 90s to the countries of Central Europe has been the fuzziness of the basic concepts of reform - such as "democracy", "market" and "civil society", let alone "transition" - used by us in our work.

This has had at least three causes -

- *the experts have been practitioners in the practice of specialised aspects of their own national system - with little background in comparative European studies.*
- *Few of us had any understanding of the (Central European) context into which we were thrown. We have, after all, been professional specialists and project managers rather than experts in systems change. We have therefore too easily assumed that the meaning of the basic concepts behind our work were clear, relevant and shared.*
- *Few have, as practical people, been deeply involved in the debates which have been raging in the West about the role of government, of the market and of the "third" or "voluntary" sector - let alone to the specialised literatures (and sub-literatures) on development or "transitology" (Holmes)!*

***Central European** readers will generally share three sentiments -*

- *frustration with the pace of change in your country and with your feeling of individual powerlessness*
- *an acceptance that things only improve when enough ordinary people get together and act*
- *a feeling, however, that the exhortations (and texts) you get from foreigners about "taking initiatives" are too simplistic for the incredible difficulties people face at a local level - often in basic survival issues.*

A lot of that material on such things as communicating; planning and working together can, actually, with suitable adjustments, assist people here who want to speed up the process of social improvement. Some of these are mentioned in the reading list at the end - and you should take encouragement from the fact that the West has produced this sort of material only very recently (particularly in the field of social action). We are not as advanced as you think!

This book does not replicate that material - but is rather written on the assumption that people are more inclined to take action if they feel that their understanding of what is happening and the realistic options for change is reasonably credible

2. MOTIVES for REFORM

Motives for administrative reform vary immensely; the mechanisms selected need to be appropriate to the purpose. It is therefore important to clarify these different concerns - to discuss them and to design strategy on the basis of consciously-selected objectives.

2.1 to reduce public spending (or number of civil servants)

This has been recognised to be simplistic (and the head-counting somewhat specious since, whether people were called civil servants or not, their salary came from the public budget). The issue is **rather reallocation of spending**.

This requires **political willingness** to take decisions about priorities and willingness to stick with them; and **administrative capacity** to implement them.

2.2 to give citizens better services and treatment;

eg reduce red-tape, ie the number of forms or offices they have to deal with for an application ; increased information on rights and services.

2.3 to increase public confidence

Trust is the lifeblood of a healthy society and economy. Its absence makes social and economic transactions difficult. Investment and the social fabric suffer as a result. Public servants who supply the continuity (or institutional memory) and need to be seen to have integrity and an ethic of service. This is particularly true for foreign investment.

2.4 to ensure effective implementation of international obligations and standards

Access to the European Union, for example, requires that laws are properly prepared and implemented - this means such things as prior co-ordination between Ministries, social partners and Parliament; assessing the impact of these laws; and ensuring that those with new responsibilities for enforcing the law are ready for the task - in terms of institutions, skills and resources.

2.5 to ensure cost-effective use of limited resources

We have become increasingly aware that there are real choices for governments about the role of the State in ensuring an acceptable level of public infrastructure and services. The disadvantages of government being both policy-maker and supplier have become increasingly recognised - as have the benefits of pluralistic provision.

Exactly how the delivery of services is organised will depend on such factors as - the degree of competition ; ease of output measurement ; administrative capacity to engage in contract management ; the scale of transaction costs ; and political attitudes.

2.6 to activate the energies and ideas of the officials

Senior civil servants are highly educated; they have ideas and ideals are often themselves frustrated by the way the system works. The priority they have to give to the task of policy advice and legal drafting (particularly in Central Europe) means that they have little time to manage the delivery of services for which they have nominal responsibility (particular the structures and staff). And in Central Europe they lack the experience and skills of man management.

These six motives may seem obvious - but they have rather different organisational implications. Some suggest a tightening of central control; others a loosening. For example while the last two motives - although very different - do appear to lead in the same policy direction - of breaking Ministries into Agencies - the mechanisms are rather different. One emphasises structural change; the other, managerial style

3. DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Most reform efforts start with a determination to "get the bureaucracy under control" - in terms of resources, staffing or influence.

There are, however, very different approaches and starting points to this question -

- Some people assume that it is a matter of **better laws and regulations** since that is what bureaucrats need to authorise and prioritise their activities
- others assume that **financial information and appraisal** is the key - that once the costs of activities are known, the information will speak for itself
- others again will argue that it is all a **question of management (and personnel) structures and skills** - to have, for example, a system which encourage bureaucrats to take more responsibility for decisions and their consequences, within, of course, clear policy guidelines
- the more courageous suggest that one needs to begin with the government agenda - and the **process by which policy priorities are set and implemented**. Once that is clear, other things follow.

The approach selected will be largely determined by two factors in particular-

(i) organisational cultures

The administrative systems of countries have traditions which constrain policy-makers' freedom of action. Anglo-Saxon practices - whether that of the powerful Prime Minister or the US "checks and balances" model do not easily transplant to the formal legalistic Central Europe model.

(ii) the extent of support from key actors in the system.

No much has been written about this crucial aspect - one writer (Lovell) divides people into allies, bed-fellows, fence-sitters, opponents and adversaries. Who falls into what category will depend, to an extent, on the methods chosen.

4 THE FERMENT of CHANGE

The life-cycle, pragmatism and attention-span of Ministers and local government leaders cause them generally to adopt what might be called a "blunderbuss" approach to change : that is they assume that desirable change is achieved by a mixture of the following approaches -

- existing programmes being given more money
- policy change : issuing new policy guidelines - ending previous policies and programmes
- creating new agencies
- making new appointments

Once such resources, guidelines or agencies have been set running, politicians will move quickly on to the other issues that are queuing up for their attention.

Of course, they will wish some sort of guarantee that the actual policies and people selected will actually enable the resources and structures used to achieve the desired state. But that is seen as a simple implementation issue. Politicians tend to think in simple "command" terms: and therefore find it difficult to realise that the departments might be structured in a way that denies them the relevant information, support, understanding and/or authority to achieve desired outcomes.

Increasingly, however, people have realised that large "hierarchic" organisations - such as Ministries - have serious deficiencies which can undermine good policies eg

- their multiplicity of levels seriously interfere with, indeed pervert, information and communications flows - particularly from the consumer or client.
- they discourage co-operation and initiative - and therefore good staff. And inertia, apathy and cynicism are not the preconditions for effective, let alone creative, work!

- they are structured around historical missions (such as the provision of education, law and order etc) whose achievement now requires different skills and inter-agency work.

To move, however, to serious administrative reform is to challenge the powerful interests of bureaucracy itself - on which political leaders depend for advice and implementation.

This seemed to require an eccentric mixture of policy conviction, single-mindedness and political security which few leaders possess.

Whatever the appearance of unity and coherence at election time, a Government is a collection of individually ambitious politicians whose career path demands making friends and clients rather than the upsetting of established interests which any real organisational reform demands.

The machinery of government consists of a powerful set of "baronies" (Ministries/ Departments), each with their own (and client) interests to protect or favour. And Governments can - and do - always blame other people for "failure": and distract the public with new games - and faces.

What one might call the "constituency of reform" seemed, therefore, simply too small for major reforms even to be worth attempting. For politicians, the name of the game is reputation and survival.

Increasingly in the last two decades leaders have known that something was wrong - although the nature of the problem and solution eluded them.

To some it was poor quality advice - or management. To others it was lack of inter-Ministerial co-operation: or over-centralisation.

So a variety of reforms got underway from the late 1960s; and were accelerated when it was clear later in the 1970s that no new resources were available for government spending and, indeed, that there would have to be significant cutbacks.

Some leaders got their fingers burned in the 1960s during the first wave of over-optimistic attempts in America and Britain to apply management techniques from business to the affairs of government.

But the mood of caution has now changed. Encouraged by the examples set by countries such as Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Finland, government reform has become all the rage throughout the world in the past ten years. Initially this involved governments selling off industries such as Steel, Gas and Telecommunications.

The reform of government has, however, now spread deep into the thinking about how the basic system of government and of social services should be managed - and what that means for the role of government.

In the 90s the talk was of the "ENABLING" state - of government no longer trying itself to produce things and to run services but rather focusing on strategic purposes and trying to achieve them by giving independent public agencies - national and local - budgets and guidelines in contractual form. Then relying on a mixture of independent regulation, audit, quasi-market forces and arm-twisting to keep them on target.

Now no self-respecting politician - left or right - wants to be left behind from something that is variously seen as the "march of managerialism" or the "march of the market".

And the changed climate gives more courage to challenge staff interests and traditions of public service - although Germany and France are having their problems currently!

The inevitability of global change, the OECD or the European Union can, however, always be blamed!

The current ferment in and about the machinery of government reflects the enormous advances in the thinking about management and organisational structures over the past 15 years as we have moved away from mass production methods further into a "Post-industrial" era.

Technical change has killed off the slow-moving dinosaurs, given consumers new choices and powers: and small, lean structures a competitive advantage.

The very speed and scale of the change, however, pose issues for the political system which need to be confronted -

- do political leaders really understand the reasons for the changes in the machinery of government? Are they clear about the "limits of managerialism" - in other words about the defining features of public services "which seldom face market competition, rarely sell their services, cannot usually decide on their own to enter markets, are not dependent on making a profit and have multiple goals other than efficiency" (Goldsmith)*
- do they have the determination and skills to manage a change programme in a coherent way : dealing with the resistance they will encounter ?*
- as activities are delegated and decentralised (if not passed to the market), how will this affect the role of the politician ?*

All of this requires new management skills in the public service: and strategic skills in our politicians.

Central Europe faces two particular challenges which has been well expressed by Balcerowitz - "The state has only limited resources of time, administrative capacity and money: and, secondly, the capacity of the state to deal with different problems varies, mainly because of varying informational requirements. State resources in transition economies are much more limited; while the fundamental tasks of systematic transformation and monetary stabilisation are far greater than in any developed market economy".

Separated geographically by then for a decade from that anglo-saxon world, I could perhaps aspire to a measure of objectivity....."Managing Change" may have been at the height of fashion back home but the projects funded by Europe (and America) in the countries emerging from communism were not in the business of "catalysing" change but rather "imposing" it...."This is the way it is to be!!" I vividly remembering the ticking off I got from the German company which employed me when, as Director of an Energy Centre in Prague, I offered some ideas for how the centre's work might better fit the Czecho-Slovak context (it was 1992)

"We do not pay you to think - we pay you to obey"

And it became obvious to me that these centres (funded by the European Commission) which purported to be helping countries of the ex-soviet bloc adjust to new ways of energy conservation were in fact little more than fronts for the selling of western technology...I resigned - and, perhaps naively, took my analysis to friends in the European Parliament....

Because I'm a bit of a geek, I've long followed the discussion about Public Admin Reform and PMR.....trying to make sense of it all - initially for myself....but also for those I was working with....For the past 40 years I have been driven to draft and publish - after every "project" or intervention - a reflective piece.....

In recent years I have been trying to make sense of all this experience - which culminated last spring with a draft of almost 200 pages bearing the title [Crafting Effective Public Management](#). That book's core consisted of (i) surveys of the literature of admin reform 1975-2000; (ii) my critical assessment of the approach and tools used by international bodies and consultants in the challenge of institutional development in "transition countries"; and (iii) my blogposts on admin reform

Early last summer, however, I realised that I had missed some of the more profound learning experiences - the new draft therefore has a very different format and content.

Its sections are chronological and try to do justice to the shape and significance of the various projects. It also includes my sceptic's glossary; and the recent series of posts which used a dozen questions to try to capture the best writing on public management. As a result, it's currently heading for the 300 page mark!

Its present title [No Man's Land](#) reflects the reminder which the summer interview gave me of the importance of what Hirschmann called "intellectual trespassing" to creative thinking....Too many academics are trapped in their disciplinary silos....

These pages are a taster for the book itself - whose recent draft can be accessed at the link.....

They are posts from my blog www.nomadron.blogspot.com - mainly from the past year or so which try to answer some questions about the performance of the state and to identify some of the more thoughtful literature.....

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Carpathian Mountains
January 2018

Cultural Change - not PC!

Two issues have dominated my life - for the first 20 years what we in Scotland initially called (in the early 70s) "multiple deprivation" but which has subsequently become better known as "social justice" and "inequality", Straddling then the worlds of politics and academia, I helped [shape a social strategy](#) which is still at the heart of the Scottish Government's work

In the 1990s, however, I changed both continents and roles - and found myself dealing, as a consultant, with the question of how new public management and governance systems could be built in ex-communist countries which might give ordinary citizens in ex-communist countries a more effective "voice" - against the "powers that be" who rapidly were revealed to bethe reinvented apparachtniki.....

In a [recent pessimistic post about the possibility of the Romanian political culture](#) moving forward, I referred to the theory of "[path dependency](#)" which warns that formal institutions are shaped by informal group behavior which is deeply embedded in wider cultural values; and which easily undermines the rhetoric and good intentions of those who lead the institutions...

Until recently I saw these two strands of my life as very separate - but a conversation with a friend has made me realize that there is a profound cultural link between the 2 fields of work. I start by describing the culture of West of Scotland public agencies as I experienced them in the late 1960s and 1970s; then describe the 2 key organisational innovations some of us introduced to one of the UK's largest public bodies in the mid 70s.

Readers will forgive me for going into some detail since these innovations have been neglected in subsequent social history.....

In the early days people sometimes asked what, as a western consultant, I could bring to the task of crafting state bodies in such countries. **They didn't realise that, in many respects, Scotland was, until the 80s and 90s, culturally and institutionally, more socialist than countries such as Hungary.** The scale of municipal power was particularly comprehensive in Scotland where the local council still owned three quarters of the housing stock, 90% of education and most of the local services - including buses. Only health and social security escaped its control: these were handled by Central Government. Local government simply could not cope with such massive responsibilities (although such a view was rejected at the time).

This was particularly evident in the **larger housing estates** in the West of Scotland which had been built for low-income "slum" dwellers in the immediate post-war period -

- there were few services in these areas
- employment was insecure
- schools in such areas had poor educational achievement and were not attractive to teachers/headmasters
- local government officials were not trained in management : and treated their staff in a dictatorial way
- who in turn treated the public with disdain

The contemptuous treatment given by local council services seemed to squash whatever initiative people from such areas had. They learned to accept second-class services. Behind this lay working and **other conditions so familiar to people in Central Europe**

- the culture was one of waiting for orders from above. There were few small businesses since

the Scots middle class have tended to go into the professions rather than setting up one's own business

- work was in large industrial plants
- for whose products there was declining demand
- rising or insecure unemployment
- monopolistic provision of local public services
- and hence underfunding of services - queues and insensitive provision
- hostility to initiatives, particularly those from outside the official system.
- elements of a "one-party state" (the Labour party has controlled most of local government in Scotland for several decades).

As a young councillor in the late 60s, I made an immediate impact by the way I mobilised tenants about the patronizing way they were being treated by the local municipality, I was lucky because, Labour having lost local power to a group of "liberals", I had the freedom to flay "the system" with all my energies. In a sense I was giving the national liberals a taste of their own medicine since they were just beginning to invent a new form of "pavement politics".....The community groups I worked with were very effective in their various projects concerned with adult education and youth, for example and one of the most powerful lessons I learned was how much many professionals in the system disliked such initiative.

But it was still a bit of a shock to realise how suspicious my own Labour colleagues were of the people they were supposed to support! Instead they echoed the reservations and criticisms of the officials. One of the things I was learning was the subtle and often implicit ways those with power made sure they kept control - whether in the formality of language used or in the layout of meetings.

I drew on this experience when, in 1977 I wrote a major [article about community development](#) - which was reproduced in a book of Readings about the subject in the early 80s

In 1974 I found myself in a lead role as new structures were set up for Europe's largest regional authority; -

At the end of Strathclyde Region's first year of existence in 1976, a major weekend seminar of all the councillors and the new Directors was held to review the experience of the new systems of decision-making. The exhilarating experience a few of us had had of working together across the boundaries of political and professional roles first to set up the new Departments and second on the deprivation strategy was something we wanted to keep. And other councillors wanted that involvement too.

Our answer was "**member-officer groups**". These were working groups of about 15 people (equal number of officials and councillors) given the responsibility to investigate a service or problem area - and to produce, within 12-18 months, an analysis and recommendations for action. Initially social service topics were selected - youth services, mental handicap, pre-school services and the elderly - since the inspiration, on the officer side, was very much from one of the senior Social Work officials.

The council's organisational structure was also treated in this way in the late 1970s (the extent of external assistance sought was that every member of the group was given a copy of a Peter Drucker book as text!) - and a group on Community Development helped pave the way for the first local authority Committee for Community Development. And eventually, in the mid-1980s, even more traditional departments such as Education succumbed to this spirit of inquiry!

The member-officer groups broke from the conventions of municipal decision-making in various ways -

- officials and members were treated as equals
- no one was assumed to have a monopoly of truth : by virtue of ideological or professional status
- the officers nominated to the groups were generally not from Headquarters - but from the field
- evidence was invited from staff and the outside world, in many cases from clients themselves
- it represented a political statement that certain issues had been neglected in the past
- the process invited external bodies (eg voluntary organisations) to give evidence
- the reports were written in frank terms : and concerned more with how existing resources were being used than with demands for more money.
- the reports were seen as the start of a process - rather than the end - with monitoring groups established once decisions had been made.

The achievements of the groups can be measured in such terms as -

- the acceptance, and implementation, of most of the reports : after all, the composition and the openness of the process generates its own momentum of understanding and commitment !
- the subsequent career development of many of their chairmen
- the value given to critical inquiry - instead of traditional party-bickering and over-simplification.
- the quality of relations between the councillors : and with the officials

With this new way of working, we had done two things. First discovered a mechanism for continuing the momentum of innovation which was the feature of the Council's first years. Now more people had the chance to apply their energies and skills in the search for improvement.

We had, however, done more - we had stumbled on far more fruitful ways of structuring local government than the traditional one (the Committee system) which focuses on one "Service" - eg Education which defines the world in terms of the client group: of one professional group and is producer-led. And whose deliberations are very sterile - as the various actors play their allotted roles (expert, leader, oppositionist, fool etc).

As politicians representing people who lived in families and communities, we knew that the agendas of the Committees we spent our time in were not really dealing with the concerns of the public: were too narrowly conceived; and frustrated creative exchange. For this, we needed structures which had an "area-focus" and "problem focus". We were in fact developing them -

- in the neighbourhood structures which allowed officers, residents and councillors to take a comprehensive view of the needs of their area and the operation of local services:
- and in the member-officer groups.

But they were running in parallel with the traditional system.

The structures we developed gave those involved (not least the officials) a great deal of satisfaction. The challenge, however, was to make those with the conventional positions of power (the Chairmen and Directors) feel comfortable with the challenges raised by the new structures. We were aware that our basic messages to professional staff about -

- the need to work across the boundaries of departments
- the need for consultative structures in the designated priority areas
- the capacity of people in these areas

represented a fundamental challenge to everything professional staff stood for. This was expressed eloquently in an article in the early 1980s - "Insisting on a more co-ordinated approach from local government to the problems of these areas, trying to open up the processes of decision-making and to apply "positive discrimination" in favour of specific (poorer) areas challenge fundamental organising beliefs about

urban government - viz the belief that services should be applied uniformly, be organised on a departmental basis; and hierarchically"

What we were doing was in fact running two separate systems - a traditional one and a more innovative one which defied traditional lines of authority. The latter was more challenging - but, paradoxically, left with the younger officials and politicians to handle. And, during the Eighties, more "alternative" systems were developed - such as 6 Divisional Deprivation Groups which to whom the Policy sub-Committee passed the responsibility for managing the urban programme budget in their area.

For 20 years - long before "cultural change" became fashionable - I was therefore in the middle of efforts to change organisational cultures. That helped me not only to see the world from other people's standpoints but also to learn new skills of networking.

It was for this reason that the Head of Europe's WHO's Health Prevention Division commissioned me in 1990 to represent her on missions to the Health Ministries of the newly-liberated countries of Central and Eastern Europe (inc Russia).

So, when the EC started its programme of Technical Assistance (PHARE), I was one of its earliest and most experienced consultants - indeed, for the paranoic Poles, too experienced (all candidates were faulted for one of 2 reasons - knowing too little about Poland or knowing too much - or rather too many of the wrong people - after my work for WHO I was seen as falling into the second category!).

The question is why the issue of cultural change has not been taken more seriously in central Europe.....

Here I argue that -

- People were overly optimistic in 1990/91 when they talked of one or two generations being necessary for a democratic culture to take hold in central europe
- most locals in Bulgaria and Romania are fatalistic about the glacial pace of reform
- but know exactly where the blockages are
- and few external academic or consultants have even bothered to explore what progress (if any) has been made in improving state capacity in this part of the world - in the ten years during which billions of euros of European Structural Funds has been under local control. I

Ralf Dahrendorf was a famous German sociologist/statesman who wrote in 1990 an extended public letter first published under the title "Reflections on the Revolution in Europe" and then expanded as [Reflections on the Revolution of our Time](#). In it he made the comment that it would take one or two years to create new institutions of political democracy in the recently liberated countries of central Europe; maybe five to 10 years to reform the economy and make a market economy; and 15 to 20 years to create the rule of law. But it would take maybe two generations to create a functioning civil society there. A former adviser to Vaslev Havel, [Jiri Pehe, referred a few years ago to that prediction](#) and suggested that

"what we see now is that we have completed the first two stages, the transformation of the institutions, of the framework of political democracy on the institutional level, there is a functioning market economy, which of course has certain problems, but when you take a look at the third area, the rule of the law, there is still a long way to go, and civil society is still weak and in many ways not very efficient."

He then went on to make the useful distinction between "democracy understood as institutions and democracy understood as culture"

"It's been much easier to create a democratic regime, a democratic system as a set of institutions and procedures and mechanism, than to create democracy as a kind of culture - that is, an environment in which people are actually democrats".

These are salutary comments for those with too mechanistic an approach to institution-building. Notwithstanding the tons of books on organisational cultures and cultural change, political cultures cannot be engineered. Above all, they will not be reformed from a project approach based on using bodyshops, cowboy companies, short-term funding from the EC Structural Funds and [the logframe](#). The European Commission made a decision in 1997 which shocked me to the core - that EC technical assistance to central European and Balkan countries would no longer be governed by "developmental" objectives but rather by their ability to meet the formal legal requirement of the Acquis Commaunitaire (AC).....ie of EU membership

In the mid 90s, the Head of the European Delegation to Romania ([Karen Fogg 1993-98](#)) used to give [every visiting consultant](#) a summary of Robert Putnam's [Making Democracy Work - civic traditions in modern Italy](#) (1993). This suggested that the "[amoral familism](#)" of southern Italian Regions (well caught in a [1958 book of Edward Banfield's](#)) effectively placed them 300 years behind the northern regions.

Romania, for its part, had some 200 years under the Ottoman and the Phanariot thumbs - but then had 50 years of autonomy during which it developed all the indications of modernity (if plunging latterly into Fascism). The subsequent experience of Romanian communism, however, created a society in which, paradoxically, deep distrust became the norm - with villagers forcibly moved to urban areas to drive industrialisation; the medical profession enrolled to check that women were not using contraceptives or abortion; and Securitate spies numbering one in every three citizens. The institutions of the Romanian state collapsed at Xmas 1989 and were subsequently held together simply by the informal pre-existing networks - not least those of the old Communist party and of the Securitate. Tom Gallagher's "[Theft of a Nation](#)" superbly documented the process in 2005.

These were the days when a body of literature called "[path dependency](#)" was raising important questions about how free we are to shake off cultural values.... Authors such as de Hofstede; Ronald [Inglehart](#); Frans [Trompenaars](#); and Richard Lewis (in his [When Cultures Collide](#)) were telling us how such values affect our everyday behaviour.

Sorin Ionitsa's booklet on [Poor Policy Making in Weak States](#) (2006) captured brilliantly the profound influence of the different layers of cultural values on political and administrative behavior in Romania which continue to this day. His focus was on Romania but the explanations he offers for the poor governance in that country has resonance for many other countries and therefore warrant reproduction -

- "The focus of the political parties is on winning and retaining power to the exclusion of any interest in policy - or implementation process"

- "Political figures fail to recognise and build on the programmes of previous regimes – and simply don't understand the need for "trade-offs" in government. There is a (technocratic/academic) belief that perfect solutions exist; and that failure to achieve them is due to incompetence or bad intent".
- "Policymaking is centred on the drafting and passing of legislation. "A policy is good or legitimate when it follows the letter of the law – and vice versa. Judgments in terms of social costs and benefits are very rare".

"This legalistic view leaves little room for feasibility assessments in terms of social outcomes, collecting feedback or making a study of implementation mechanisms. What little memory exists regarding past policy experiences is never made explicit (in the form of books, working papers, public lectures, university courses, etc); it survives as a tacit knowledge of public servants who happened to be involved in the process at some point or other. And as central government agencies are notably numerous and unstable – i.e. appearing, changing their structure and falling into oblivion every few years – institutional memory is not something that can be perpetuated"

The booklet adds other "pre-modern" aspects of the civil service – such as unwillingness to share information and experiences across various organisational boundaries. And refers to the existence of a "dual system" of poorly paid lower and middle level people in frustrating jobs headed by younger, Western-educated elite which talks the language of reform but treats its position as a temporary placement on the way to better things.

"Entrenched bureaucracies have learned from experience that they can always prevail in the long run by paying lip service to reforms while resisting them in a tacit way. They do not like coherent strategies, transparent regulations and written laws – they prefer the status quo, and daily instructions received by phone from above. This was how the communist regime worked; and after its collapse the old chain of command fell apart, though a deep contempt for law and transparency of action remained a 'constant' in involved persons' daily activities.

Such an institutional culture is self-perpetuating in the civil service, the political class and in society at large". "A change of generations is not going to alter the rules of the game as long as recruitment and socialization follow the same old pattern: graduates from universities with low standards are hired through clientelistic mechanisms; performance when on the job is not measured; tenure and promotion are gained via power struggles.

"In general, the average Romanian minister has little understanding of the difficulty and complexity of the tasks he or she faces, or he/she simply judges them impossible to accomplish. Thus they focus less on getting things done, and more on developing supportive networks, because having collaborators one can trust with absolute loyalty is the obsession of all local politicians – and this is the reason why they avoid formal institutional cooperation or independent expertise. In other words, policymaking is reduced to nothing more than politics by other means. And when politics becomes very personalized or personality-based, fragmented and pre-modern, turf wars becomes the rule all across the public sector."

Ionitsa's booklet was, of course, written more than a decade ago but I see nothing to suggest that much has changed in Romania in the intervening period. Since 2007, of course, it has been Romanian experts who have been employed as consultants but they have essentially been singing from the same song-sheet as western consultants

I've used the phrase "[impervious regimes](#)" to cover the mixture of autocracies, kleptocracies and incipient democracies with which I have become all too familiar in the last 27 years; have faulted the [toolkits and Guides which the European Commission offers](#) consultants; and proposed some ideas for a different, more incremental and "learning" approach.

I'm glad to say that just such a new approach began to surface a few years ago - known variously as "[doing development differently](#)", or the [iterative](#) or [political analysis](#).....it was presaged almost 10 years ago by the World Bank's [Governance Reforms under real world conditions](#) written around the sorts of questions we consultants deal with on a daily basis - one paper in particular (by Matthew Andrews which starts part 2 of the book) weaves a very good theory around 3 words - acceptance, authority and ability. I [enthused about the approach in a 2010 post](#)

But there is a strange apartheid in consultancy and scholastic circles between those engaged in "development", on the one hand, and those in "organisational reform" in the developed world, on the other.....The newer EU member states are now assumed to be fully-fledged systems (apart from a bit of tinkering still needed in their judicial systems - oh.... and Hungary and Poland have gone back on some fundamental elements of liberal democracy.....!). But they all remain sovereign states - subject only to their own laws plus those enshrined in EC Directives.... Structural Funds grant billions of euros to the new member states which are managed by each country's local consultants who use the "best practice" tools - which anyone with any familiarity with "path dependency" or "cultural" or even anthropological theory would be able to tell them are totally inappropriate to local conditions.....

But the local consultants are working to a highly rationalistic managerial framework imposed on them by the European Commission; are, for the most part, young and trained to western thought. They know that the brief projects on which they work have little sustainability but - heh - look at the hundreds of millions of euros which will continue to roll in as far as the eye can see.....!!! Someone in central Europe needs to be brave enough to shout out that "the Emperor has no clothes!!" To challenge the apartheid in scholastic circles....and to draw to attention the relevance of Ionitsa's 10- year old booklet and [Governance Reforms under real world conditions](#)

The Continental Divide in Public Admin Studies

For some time, it's been obvious to me that "public administration reform" efforts are analysed in very different ways in "developed" and "developing" countries respectively....I would go so far indeed as to suggest there was **a state of apartheid between two bodies of literature** which are perhaps best exemplified by using the words "managerial" and "economic" for the literature which has come in the last 25 years from the OECD (using largely the [concepts of New Public Management](#)) whereas the UNDP and The World Bank use the language of "capacity development" and "politics" ([the WB in the last decade certainly](#)) in the advisory documents they have produced for what we used to call the "developing" world (mainly Africa).

In fact four (if not five) bodies of literature should be distinguished - which can be grouped to a certain extent by a mixture of language and culture. I offer this table with some trepidation - it's what I call "impressionistic" and raises more questions than it answers -

The Different Types of commentary on state reform efforts

Source	Culture	Occupational bias of writers	overviews which give a good sense of status of reform
Anglo-saxon;	adversarial	Academic Eg Chris Pollitt; Chris Hood, Mark Moore, Colin Talbot, Stephen Osborne	The New Public Governance? ; Stephen Osborne (2010) International Public Administration Reform - implications for Russia Nick Manning and Neil Parison (World Bank 2004)
West European;	consensual	Lawyers, sociologists Eg Thoenig; Wollman	State and Local Government Reforms in France and Germany (2006) Public and Social Services in Europe ed Wollman, Kopric and Marcou (2016)
Africa and Asia	clientelist	Foreign consultants Eg Tom Carothers, Matt Andrews	Governance Reform under Real-World Conditions - citizens, stakeholders and Voice (World Bank 2008) People, Politics and Change - building communications strategy for governance reform (World Bank 2011)
Central and East European	clientelist	Local consultants	Public Administration in the Balkans - overview (SIGMA 2004) Poor Policy Making in Weak States ; Sorin Ionita (2006) Administrative Capacity in the new EU Member States - the Limits of Innovation? Tony Verheijen (World Bank 2007) The Sustainability of Civil Service Reforms in ECE ; Meyer-Sayling (OECD 2009) Democracy's Plight in the European Neighbourhood: Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties (2009) A House of Cards? Building the rule of law in ECE ; Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2010)
South European?	clientelist	Local consultants	Where are the greek and Italian scholars?

People in Central Europe wanting to get a sense of how a system of government might actually be changed for the better are best advised to go to the theories of change which have been developed in the literature on international development eg the World Bank's 2008 [Governance Reform under Real-World Conditions - citizens, stakeholders and Voice](#) and its [People, Politics and Change - building communications strategy for governance reform](#) (2011). The paper by Matthew Andrews which starts part 2 of the first book weaves an interesting theory around 3 words - "acceptance", "authority" and "ability".

Is there **acceptance** of the need for change and reform?

- of the specific reform idea?
- of the monetary costs for reform?
- of the social costs for reformers?

within the incentive fabric of the organization (not just with individuals)?

Is there **authority**:

- does legislation allow people to challenge the status quo and initiate reform?
- do formal organizational structures and rules allow reformers to do what is needed?
- do informal organizational norms allow reformers to do what needs to be done?

Is there **ability**: are there enough people, with appropriate skills,

- to conceptualize and implement the reform?
- is technology sufficient?
- are there appropriate information sources to help conceptualize, plan, implement, and institutionalize the reform?

My previous post had quoted extensively from Sorin Ionita's [Poor Policy Making in Weak States](#). Ionitsa had clearly read Matt Andrew's work since he writes about Romania that

*"constraints on improving of policy management are to be found firstly in **low** (political) **acceptance** (of the legitimacy of new approaches and transparency); secondly, in **low authority** (meaning that nobody, for example, knows who exactly is in charge of prioritization across sectors) and only thirdly in low technical **ability** in institutions"*

A diagram in that World Bank paper shows that each of these three elements plays a different role at what are four stages - namely conceptualisation, initiation, transition and institutionalisation. However the short para headed "Individual champions matter less than networks" - was the one that hit a nerve for me.

*"The individual who connects nodes is the key to the network but is often not the one who has the technical idea or who is called the reform champion. His or her skill lies in the ability to bridge relational boundaries and to bring people together. **Development is fostered in the presence of robust networks with skilled connectors acting at their heart.**"*

My mind was taken back more than 30 years when, as the guy in charge of Strathclyde Region's strategy to combat deprivation but, using my combined political and academic roles, established an "urban change network" to bring together once a month a diverse collection of officials and councillors of different municipalities in the West of Scotland, academics and NGO people to explore how we could extend our understanding of what we were dealing with - and how our policies might make more impact. Notes were written up and circulated.....and fed into a process of a more official evaluation of a deprivation strategy which had been formulated 5 years earlier.

The central core of that review (in 1981) consisted of 5 huge Community Conferences and produced a little red book called "Social Strategy for the 80s" which was of the first things a newly-elected Council approved in 1982. It was, for me, [a powerful example of "embedding" change](#).

It is a truism in the training world that it is almost impossible to get senior executives on training courses since they think they have nothing to learn - and this is particularly true of the political class. **Not only do politicians (generally) think they have nothing to learn but they have managed very successfully to ensure that noone ever carries out critical assessments of their world.** They commission or preside over countless inquiries into all the other systems of society - but rarely does their world come under proper scrutiny. Elections are assumed to give legitimacy to

anything. Media exposure is assumed to keep politicians on their toes - but a combination of economics, patterns of media ownership and journalistic laziness has meant an end to investigative journalism and its replacement with cheap attacks on politicians which simply breeds public cynicism and indifference. And public cynicism and indifference is the oxygen in which "impervious power" thrives!

The last of the assessments for central Europe I have in my files is Mungiu-Pippidi's [A House of Cards? Building the rule of law in ECE](#); from 2010 (!!) and most of the papers in that box of my table talks of the need to force the politicians in this part of the world to grow up and stop behaving like petulant schoolboys and girls. Manning and Ionitsa both emphasise the need for transparency and external pressures. Verheijen talks of the establishment of structures bringing politicians, officials, academics etc together to develop a consensus. But Ionitsa puts it most succinctly - *"If a strong requirement is present - and the first openings must be made at the political level - the supply can be generated fairly rapidly, especially in ex-communist countries, with their well-educated manpower. But if the demand is lacking, then the supply will be irrelevant".*

Curiously, however, only a tiny number of people¹ seem to have tried to make sense of the efforts at "good governance" in central and east Europe and Asia. Certainly those who write about administrative efforts in central Europe and the Balkans do so from a commitment to the neo-liberal values which underpin New Public Management (NPM)²

A few years ago, Tom Carrothers - one of the Carnegie Foundation's best writers - [produced a paper](#) which echoes the [concerns I have been articulating](#) since the mid 90s of the assumptions international agencies have been bringing to their well-endowed programmes.

Carrothers gives us eight injunctions -

- recognise that governance deficiencies are primarily political
- give attention to the demand for governance, not just the supply
- go local
- strive for best fit - rather than best practice
- take informal institutions into account
- mainstream governance (ie don't just run it as an add-on)
- don't ignore the international dimensions
- reform thyself

In 2007 and 2011 I presented my critique³ to a network of Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe ([NISPAcee](#)) but have been disappointed by the way the members of the network have simply aped "best practice" nonsense from the west....

Leaders are supposed to be promoters of their protégés; and clan-based loyalties take precedence over public duties for salaried public officials. Such behaviour can be found not only in the central government but also in local administration, the political opposition, academia and social life in general, i.e. so it

¹ Tony Verheijen's [Administrative Capacity in the new EU Member States - the Limits of Innovation](#) (2006) and Nick Manning's [International Public Administration Reform - implications for the Russian Federation](#) (2006) were two - and in 2009 a collection of papers was published about [Democracy's Plight in the European Neighbourhood: Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties](#)

² http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/21366/12/12_chapter2.pdf

³ <http://www.mappingthecommonground.com/the-long-game>

permeates most of the country's elites. Classic studies of Mezzogiorno in Italy call this complex of attitudes "amoral familism": when extended kin-based associations form close networks of interests and develop a particularistic ethics centered solely upon the group's survival. This central objective of perpetuity and enrichment of the in-group supersedes any other general value or norm the society may have, which then become non-applicable to such a group's members. At best, they may be only used temporarily, as instruments for advancing the family's goals – as happens sometimes with the anti-corruption measures.

Since Romanian society, like others in the Balkans, still holds onto such pre-modern traits, its members are neither very keen to compete openly nor are they accustomed to the pro-growth dynamics of modernity. Social transactions are regarded as a zero-sum game; a group's gain must have been brought about at the expense of others. This may be a rational attitude for traditional, static societies, where resources are limited and the only questions of public interest have to do with redistribution.

The authors are part of an increasing number of people who want, like me, to "[do development differently](#)" – a few years back it was called.... [political analysis](#)..... [From Political Economy to Political Analysis](#) (2014) is an excellent overview of the thinking process

Although I would express the ideas a bit more simply -

- Fixing on an issue widely seen as problematic
- Getting people to admit that it can't be solved by the usual top-down approach
- Getting wide "buy-in" to this
- Bringing people together from all sectors which are touched by the issue
- Starting from an analysis of where we find ourselves (reminds me of a philosophical colleague known for his phrase "We are where we are"!)
- Avoiding polarisation
- Working patiently to seek a feasible and acceptable solution

Fairly simple steps - which, however, conflict with prevailing political cultures - and not just in Central Europe!!

Further Reading

Organ culture in cEE http://193.231.19.17/kozgazdaszforum.ro/admin/upload/3_2014_6_cikk2.pdf

Is corruption understood differently in different cultures? Anthropology meets political science;

Bo Rothstein and David Torsello (2013)

http://www.qog.pol.gu.se/digitalAssets/1443/1443545_2013_5_rothstein_torsello.pdf

<http://www.tlu.ee/stss/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/kollmorgen.pdf>

<http://consirt.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/CONSIRT-Working-Papers-Series-7-Sarracino-Mikucka.pdf>

<https://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/The%20Nature%20of%20Policy%20Change%20and%20Implementation.pdf>

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/tools-and-methods-series-concept-paper-n%C2%B01-public-sector-reform-introduction_en

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/tools-and-methods-series-reference-document-no-4-analysing-and-addressing-governance-sector_en

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/tools-and-methods-series-reference-document-no-6-toolkit-capacity-development-2010_en

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/tools-and-methods-series-reference-document-no-8-engaging-and-supporting-parliaments-worldwide_en

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/tools-and-methods-series-reference-document-no-9-support-justice-reform-acp-countries_en

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/tools-and-methods-series-concept-paper-n%C2%B02-supporting-anti-corruption-reform-partner-countries_en

<http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/mn-bb-16-005-en-n.pdf> no 23

Close Encounters of the...bureaucratic kind

Next year will mark 50 years for me of "close encounters" with "state structures" (or more emotively - "bureaucracy"). Except that I am a political "scientist" - trained in the 1960s in the Weberian tradition - and therefore tend to think "[the exercise of rational-legal authority](#)" when I hear that pejorative term.

Weber - like most classical philosophers and sociologists - was intrigued a hundred years ago by the source of social obedience. Why do people obey the rulers? And he produced the most satisfactory answer - with a famous three-fold classification - traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority.....

By 1945 the world had had its fill of charismatic authority and settled amicably in the 1950s, for the most part, for "rational-legal" authority - although, by the 1960s, clever people such as JK Galbraith started to mock it and such as Ivan Illich and Paole Freire to critique it.

Toffler's "Future Shock" (1970) was probably the first real warning shot that the old certainties were gone - and organizational change has become non-stop since then.

I've operated at the community, municipal, Regional and national levels of public management - in some ten countries in Europe and Central Asia and have tried, over this half-century, to keep track of the more important of the texts with which we have been deluged (in the English language) about the efforts of administrative reform.

I do realize that I am a bit naïve in the faith I still pin on the written word - in my continual search for the holy grail. After all, it was as long ago as 1975 - when I wrote my own first little book - when I first realized that few writers of books are seriously in the business of helping the public understand an issue - the motive is generally to make a reputation or sell a particular world view....

Still I persist in believing that the next book on the reading list will help the scales fall from my eyes! So it's taken me a long time to develop this little table about patterns of writing about admin reform.....

Communicating administrative reform

Source	Numbers Active in the field	Who they write for	In what format	With what "Tone"
Academics	Too many!	One another - and students	Academic journal articles; and books	Aloof, qualified and opaque
Journalists	Fair number	The public - and professionals	PR handouts generally; more rarely an article	Breathless; More rarely critical
Politicians	A few	The electorate	PR handouts; more rarely a pamphlet	Critical of past; optimistic of the future
Think-Tankers	A lot	Opinion-makers	Booklets; and PR material	Ditto
Consultants	Even more!	Senior civil servants	Confidential reports; very rarely booklets and even a few books	Celebrating their "product"
Senior civil servants	Few	One another; OECD wonks	Descriptive papers and reports	Ditto
Global organs (eg World Bank, ADB, WHO)	More than we think	A global network inc Cabinet Offices, Ministers, think-tanks; journalists;	well-researched, well-produced reports and websites	Omniscient, dry
Mugwumps - sitting on fences	Very few	The poor middle-ranking official who is expected to achieve the required change	Toolkits; manuals; roadmaps; notebooks	Open, humorous

The fads and fashions of organizational "reform" include "reengineering", "transformation"even "revolution" and we no longer know who to believe or trust - let alone obey.....

Sometimes I try to make sense of this avalanche of material eg the early part of the [In Transit - notes on good governance](#) (1999) tries to explain and summarise the key development from the 70s for young Central European reformers - or [The Long Game - not the log-frame](#) (2011) where I tried to give a sense of the various organisational models with which consultants were trying to entice central European policy-makers.

19 September 2017

How the attack on the State Harms us all

We're all ambivalent about "the State"....We slag it off with pejorative terms...and often profess to anarchistic and libertarian tendencies....In my formative period in the early 70s I was very taken with the concept of [The Local State](#) whose corporatist tentacles we saw strangling everything in Scotland. Cynthia Cockburn's 1977 book on the subject and the products of the [national CDP Project](#) were the most powerful expression of this critique - although Newcastle sociologists such as John Davies and Norman Dennis had led the way with their books on "The Evangelical Bureaucrat" and "Public Participation and Planner's Blight".

Local planners had status in those days - I actually taught them for quite a few years - using texts such as [Critical Reading in Planning Theory](#)

I was an active social democrat, consciously using the levers of (local) state power open to me to push the boundaries of opportunity for people [I saw as marginalized and disenfranchised](#)

That period of my life lasted from 1974-90 and is captured in [From Multiple Deprivation to Social Exclusion](#)

Since then, my focus has been more single-mindedly on *the development of institutional capacity in the state bodies* of ex-communist countries. The World Bank reflected the prevailing opinion of the early 90s in asserting that the state should simply be allowed to crumble..... and only came to its senses (partly due to Japanese pressure) with its 1997 Report - [the State in a Changing World](#)

By the time of my exodus from Britain, the country had already had a full decade of Thatcher - and of privatisation. I confess that part of me felt that a bit of a shake-up had been necessary.....but it was George Monbiot's [The Captive State](#) (2000) - 3 years after New Labour's stunning victory - which alerted me to the full scale of the corporate capture of our institutions and elites regardless of political affiliation ...And why did this capture take place? Simply because of a set of insidious ideas about freedom which I felt as I grew up and have seen weld itself into the almost irresistible force we now call "neoliberalism".....But it is a word we should be very careful of using....partly because it is not easy to explain but mainly because it carries that implication of being beyond human resistance....

The sociologists talk of "reification" when our use of abstract nouns gives away such power - abstracting us as human agents out of the picture. [Don't Think of an Elephant - know your values and frame the debate](#) is apparently quite a famous book published in 2004 by American psychologist George Lakoff - which gives a wonderful insight into how words and phrases can gain this sort of power - and can be used deliberately in the sorts of campaigns which are now being waged all around us...

Amidst all the causes which vie for our attention, it has become clear to me that the central one must be for the **integrity of the State** - whether local or national....I know all the counter-arguments - I am still a huge fan of community power and social enterprise. And the state's increasingly militaristic profile threatens to undermine what's left of our trust. But those profiled in "[Dismembered - how the attack on the State harms us all](#)" are the millions who work in public services which are our lifeblood - not just the teachers and health workers but all the others on whom we depend, even the much maligned inspectorates - all suffering from cutbacks, monstrous organizational upheavals and structures....

I am amazed that more books like this one have not been forthcoming...

Coincidentally, I have also been reading the [confessions of a few political scientists](#) who argue that it lost its way in the 70s and, for decades, has not been dealing with real issues. I do remember Gerry Stoker saying this to the American professional body in 2010 and am delighted that [more have now joined him in a quest for relevance](#)

And I'm looking forward to the publication in a few weeks of [The Next Public Administration - debates and dilemmas](#); by Guy Peters (and Jon Pierre) who is one of the best political scientists of his generation.

For too long, "the State" has been the focus of irrelevant academic scribbling....at last there are some stirrings of change!

1 October

We need to talk about..... "The State"

We need to talk about....the State. Or at least about the "machinery of government" about whose operations I am most familiar - in local and regional government in Scotland from 1968-90 and then in local and national systems of government in some 10 countries of central Europe and central Asia from 1991-2012.

Terminology is admittedly confusing....my first love, for example, was "public administration" since, at one fell swoop in 1968 I became both a Lecturer (officially in Economics) and a locally-elected reformist politician. From the start, I saw a lot wrong with how "public services" impacted on people in the West of Scotland - and I strongly associated with the national reform efforts which got underway from 1966, targeting both local and national systems of government and administration.

Major reforms of the "Civil Service" and of English and Scottish systems of local government were duly enacted - and I duly found myself in a powerful position from the mid 1970s to 1990 to influence [strategic change in Europe's largest Regional authority](#)

But, by the late 70s, national debate focused on "**state overload**" and on "**ungovernability**" and the discourse of private sector management was beginning to take over government.

The 80s may have seen a debate in UK left-wing circles about both the nature of "the local state" and the nature and power of "The State" generally but it was privatization which was driving the agenda by then. "Public Administration" quickly became "public management" and then "New Public Management"....

Indeed by the 90s the debate was about the respective roles of state, market and society. Come 1997 and even the World Bank recognized that the undermining of the role of the State had gone too far.

But it has taken a long time for voices such as Ha-Joon Chang and Marianna Mazzucato to get leverage.....and the space to be given for talk about a positive role for the "public sector".

In the meantime talk of "platform capitalism", the P2P "commons" and automation confuses most of us... and the last remnants of European social democratic parties have, with a couple of exceptions, totally collapsed. **So do we simply give up on the idea of constructing a State which has some chance of working for the average Joe and Jill?**

Because I'm a bit of a geek, I've long followed the discussion about Public Admin Reform and PMR.....trying to make sense of it all - initially for myself....but also for those I was working with....For the past 40 years I have been driven to draft and publish - after every "project" or intervention - a reflective piece.....the more interesting of which are collected in a draft which currently bears the title [No Man's Land - journeys across disputed borders](#)

A British book about "[the attack on the state](#)" provoked me into identifying some questions about this huge literature which academics hog to themselves - but which need to be put out in the public domain. I found myself putting the questions in a table and drafting answers in the style required by the fascinating series such as "A Very Short Introduction" or "A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably priced book about....",

The State (at both local and national levels) is a constellation of diverse **interests** and power - to which we can give (rather arbitrarily) such terms as "public", "professional", "party", "commercial" or "security". But, the questions begin.....

- In what sense can we say that something called the state exists?
- What can realistically be said about the interests which find expression in "the state"?
- How does each particular public service (**eg health, education**) work?
- How satisfied are citizens with the outcomes of state activities?
- Why is the state such a contested idea?
- Where can we find out about the efficiency and effectiveness of public services?
- Where can we find rigorous assessments of how well the "machinery of government" works?
- What Lessons have people drawn from all the "reform" experience?
- How do countries compare internationally in the performance of their public services ?
- Has privatisation lived up to its hype?
- what alternatives are there to state and private provision
- why do governments still spend mega bucks on consultants?
- do Think Tanks have anything useful to contribute to the debate?
- whose voices are worth listening to?
- What challenges does the State face?
- If we want to improve the way a public service operates, are there any "golden rules"?

The next post will try to present a table which addresses these questions - with all the hyperlinks which my readers now expect.....

Miniatures and Matrices – 4th in series

I've been reflecting a lot this year on my working experience of organizational change - now equally divided between the UK (the first 25 years) and central Europe and central Asia (the last 25 years). I do so in a coat of many colours - scholar, community activist, politician, consultant, straddler of various worlds (not least academic disciplines), writer and....blogger.

I have always been a fan of tables, axes and matrices - by which I mean the reduction of ideas and text to the simple format of a 2x2 or 6x3 (or whatever) table. It forces you to whittle text down to the bare essentials. Perhaps that's why I love these Central Asian and Russian miniatures so much

So I put the questions posed in the previous post (now 15 in number) into such a table with just 2 columns for responses - "how I felt each question has been dealt within the literature" and "where the clearest answers can be found". Of course, the literature is predominantly anglo-saxon - although the experience covered is global.



This proved to be an extraordinarily useful discipline - leading to quite a bit of adjustment to the original questions. It's a long table - so I'll make a start with the first five questions -

- How does each particular public service (**eg health, education**) work?
- What can realistically be said about the interests which find expression in "the state"?
- How satisfied are citizens with the outcomes of state activities?
- Why is the state such a contested idea?
- Where can we find out about the efficiency and effectiveness of public services?

Basic Question	How extensively has it been explored	Some Good answers
<p>1. How does each particular public service (eg health, education) work?</p> <p>How does it define and deal with challenges?</p>	<p>Each country has its own legal and cultural histories which affect the shape and funding of services. Globalisation and Europeanisation have posed state bodies with profound challenges since the 1980s - with functions transferring from state to private and third sector sectors (and, in some cases, back again) and an increasing emphasis on mixed provision and "partnerships" Thousands of books give analytical treatment of each of our public services - some with a focus on policy, some on management.</p> <p>Measurement and comparison of performance - at both national and international level - have become dominant themes</p> <p>Less emphasis since 2010 on Capacity building and strategic thinking - seen as luxuries for services under</p>	<p>Public and Social Services in Europe ed Wollman, Kopric and Marcou (2016)</p> <p>The New Public Governance - emerging perspectives on the theory and practice of public governance; ed Stephen Osborne (2010)</p> <p>What are Public Services Good At?; Demmke (2008) Parliaments and Think</p> <p>Tanks occasionally report</p>

	severe pressure because of cuts and austerity...	on strategic work
2. What can realistically be said about the <u>interests</u> which find expression in "the state"?	<p>The 1970s and 80s saw an active debate in political science and sociology about the nature of The State (national and local) - and the public, professional, political, commercial and other interests one could find represented there.</p> <p>As the state has "hollowed out" in the past 30 years - with privatisation and "contracting out" - political scientists became more interested in identifying the narratives which justified the remaining structures (see 8 and 9 below).</p> <p>It has been left to journalists such as Jones and Monbiot to look at the issue of interests - particularly commercial and ideational - of the new constellation of the state.</p>	<p>The State of Power 2016 (TNI)</p> <p>The Establishment - and how they get away with it; Owen Jones (2014)</p> <p>Democracy Incorporated - managed democracy and the spectre of inverted totalitarianism; Sheldon Wolin (2008)</p> <p>The Captive State; George Monbiot (2000)</p>
3. How <u>satisfied are citizens</u> with the outcomes of state activities?	Despite the constant political and media attacks on public services, the general level of satisfaction of the British public remains high - particularly for local institutions	<p>Opinion polls - Gallup, European Union</p> <p>Parliamentary Select Committee on PA eg this 2008 report on citizen entitlements</p>
4. Why is the state such a <u>contested idea</u> ?	<p>In the 1970s a new school of thinking called "public choice theory" developed a very strong critique not so much of the public sector but of the motives of those who managed it. The argument was not a pragmatic one about performance - but rather that politicians and bureaucrats had private interests which they always put ahead of any notion of public interest; and that private sector provision (through competition) would therefore always be superior to that of public provision.</p> <p>Although it was initially treated with derision, it was the basic logic behind Margaret Thatcher's push for privatisation which became global after the fall of the Berlin Wall</p>	<p>Reinventing Government (by Osborne and Ted Gaebler) popularised the new approach in 1992</p> <p>Public Choice Primer (IEA 2012) is the clearest justification of this powerful school of thinking</p>
5. Where can we find <u>reliable analyses of the efficiency and effectiveness</u> of public services?	<p>In the UK a powerful National Audit Office (with more than 600 staff) investigate Departments of State (inc Hospitals). It is overseen by Parliament's most powerful Select Committee - the Public Accounts Select Committee.</p> <p>For 25 years local authority budgets in England and Wales were overseen by an Audit Commission which was, very curiously, abolished</p> <p>Attack on public spending "waste" has long been a favourite subject for the media - with quite a few books devoted to the subject.</p>	<p>National Audit Office Public Accounts Select Committee</p> <p>Global league tables for health and education sectors</p> <p>The Blunders of our Governments (2013) The most accessible and comprehensive treatment</p>

7 October

The State of the State – part 5

It's strange that "Public Bureaucracy" seems to be of so little interest to the public – since one state alone (eg the UK) can spend no less than 800 billion pounds a year to give its citizens services....

A month ago in [one of this series of posts](#), I actually identified 8 very distinct groups of people (academics, consultants, think tankers, journalists etc) who write about public services – from a variety of standpoints – using a variety of styles (or tones) and formats of writing. We could call them "the commentariat".

It has to be said that little of their material is easy to read – it has too much jargon; it takes 10 pages to say what could be said in 1. Those who write the material do not write for the general public – they write for one another in academia and global institutions. On the few occasions they write snappily, they are selling stuff to governments.

The media do give a lot of coverage to various scandals in particularly the welfare and health services – but rarely give us an article which sheds any real light on what is being done with these hundreds of billions of euros.... We are treated, instead, as morons who respond, in Pavlovian style, to slogans.

I am, of course, being unfair to journalists. They write what they are allowed to by newspaper and journal editors and owners – who generally have their own agenda. And who wants to read about the dilemmas of running public services or arguing about their "functions" being "transferred"? Just looking at these words makes one's eyes glaze over!!

It seems that only journals like "The New Yorker" who can get away with articles such as [The Lie Factory](#) – about the origins, for example, of the consultancy industry.

And yet there is clearly a public thirst for well-written material about serious and difficult topics.

Take a book I am just finishing – journalist Owen Jones' [The Establishment – and how they get away with it](#) (Penguin 2014) can boast sales approaching 250,000. For only 9 euros I got one of the best critiques of British society of the past decade.....

I remember being in New York in 1992 and finding a copy of [Reinventing Government](#) (by Osborne and Ted Graeber) in one of its famous bookstores – which went on to become the world's bestseller on government (with the exception perhaps of Machiavelli's The Prince?). I simply don't understand why someone can't do that again with all that's happened in the past 25 years....

In 2015 Penguin Books made an effort in this direction with a couple of titlesMichael Barber's [How to Run a Government so that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers don't go Crazy](#) (2015) and [The Fourth Revolution – the global race to reinvent the state](#); by John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge (2015). I've refused so far to buy the second since it is so obviously a right-wing tome – and the first suffers for me in too obviously being the special pleading of someone who was Tony Blair's Head of Delivery in the British Cabinet and has now reinvented himself as a Deliverology Guru.

Over my lifetime, I've read/dipped into thousands of books about managing public services and organisations generally. About a dozen have made a lasting impression on me – I'll reveal them in a future post...Let me, for the moment, continue some of the questions I think we should be asking about the state – and our public services –

Question	How has "the commentariat" dealt with the question?	Recommended Reading
<p>6. Has <u>privatisation</u> lived up to its hype?</p>	<p>There is now quite a strong backlash against the performance of privatised facilities - particularly in the field of water and communal services - with the Germans in particular mounting strong campaigns to return them to public ownership....</p> <p>A lot of such services remain monopolies - occupying the worst of all worlds since privatisation creates "transaction costs" (both in the initial sale process and subsequent regulatory bodies) and boosts executive salaries and shareholders' profits - thereby adding significant additional costs. The only advantage is an artificial one - in the removal of the investment cap.</p>	<p>Reclaiming Public Services; TNI (2017)</p> <p>Our Public Water Future (2015 Public services international research unit)</p> <p>Private Island - why Britain now belongs to someone else; James Meek (2014)</p>
<p>7. What are the realistic <u>alternatives to state and private</u> provision of Public Services?</p>	<p>A hundred years ago, a lot of public services (even in the education and health field) were charitable. That changed in the 40s - but the 80s saw the welfare state being challenged throughout Europe. In the UK, government started to fund social enterprises working with disadvantaged groups - new Labour strengthened that work.</p> <p>The 2010 Coalition government started to encourage mutual structures for public services</p>	<p>Social Enterprise - a new phenomenon? (2014)</p> <p>The Three Sector Solution; (2016)</p> <p>Becoming a Public Service Mutual (Oxford 2013)</p>
<p>8. Where can we find rigorous assessments of how <u>well the "machinery of the state" works?</u></p>	<p>The process of changing the way the British "machinery of government" started in the 1970s and has been never-ending. Although the emphasis during the Conservative period from 1979-97 was transfer of functions to the private sector, a lot of regulatory bodies were set up to control what became private monopolies - in fields such as rail and, in England, water.</p> <p>And, in an effort to mimic real markets, the health service was also the subject of a major division between purchasers and suppliers.</p> <p>Such innovations were eagerly marketed by international consultants - and copied globally</p> <p>New Labour was in power between 1997 and 2010. Its Modernising Government programme was developed with a strong emphasis on sticks and carrots - eg naming and shaming.</p> <p>Curiously, there are far more books describing the intentions and activities of specific programmes of change than assessments of the actual impact on organisations.</p> <p>A Government that worked better and cost Less?; Hood and Dixon (2015) is one of the few attempts to assess the effects of the British changes of the past 40 years.</p> <p>This OECD paper looks at the earlier period</p>	<p>The two clearest and most exhaustive UK books analysing in detail the reasons for and the shape and consequences of the large number of change programmes between 1970 and 2005 were written by someone who was both an academic and practitioner - Chris Foster author (with F Plowden) of "The State Under Stress - can the hollow state be good?" (1996); and British Government in Crisis (2005)</p> <p>Transforming British Government - roles and relationships ed R Rhodes (2000) is a good if outdated collection</p> <p>An International Comparison of UK Public</p>

		Administration (National Audit Office 2008)
<p>9. <u>What Lessons have people drawn</u> from all this experience of changing the way public services are structured and delivered?</p>	<p>We have now almost 50 years of efforts to reform systems of delivering public services - and the last 20 years has seen a huge and global literature on the lessons.....</p> <p>Academics contribute the bulk of the publicly available material on the subject - with Think Tankers and staff of global institutions (World Bank; OECD; EC) the rest. Consultants' material is private and rarely surfaces - apart from their marketing stuff.</p> <p>Michael Barber was Head of New Labour's Delivery Unit in the early 2000s and has now become a "deliverology" consultant to governments around the world. He shares his advice here - How to Run a Government so that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers don't go Crazy (2015)</p> <p>Chris Pollitt and Rod Rhodes are 2 of the top political scientists studying the changes in the structure of the state who can actually write well (!) - see Rethinking policy and politics - reflections on contemporary debates in policy studies). Their basic message seems to be that a lot of civil servant positions were disposed of; new jargon was learned; management positions strengthened - but "stuff" (ie crises) continued to happen!</p> <p>The Fourth Revolution - the global race to reinvent the state; John Micklewaithe and Adrian Woolridge (Penguin 2015) is a rare journalistic entry into the field (to compare with Toynbee and Walker; and Barber).</p>	<p>Although the OECD work is funded by the tax receipts of member bodies, their published material is generally behind a paywall.</p> <p>International Public Administration Reform by Nick Manning and Neil Parison (World Bank 2004) had some good case studies of the early wave of efforts.</p> <p>Two of the best collections of overviews are - Public and Social Services in Europe ed Wollman, Kopric and Marcou (2016) AND The New Public Governance - emerging perspectives on the theory and practice of public governance; ed Stephen Osborne (2010)</p>
<p>10. Is anyone <u>defending the state</u> these days?</p>	<p>We have become very sceptical these days of writing which strikes too positive a tone. "Where's the beef?" our inner voice is always asking - ie what interests is this writer pushing?</p> <p>Paul du Gay is a rare academic who has been prepared over the years to speak up for the much-maligned "bureaucrat" and his is the opening chapter of a 2003 collection of very useful articles</p> <p>The Toynbee and Walker book is another rare defence....this time from journalists</p>	<p>Dismembered - the ideological attack on the state; by Polly Toynbee and D Walker (Guardian Books 2017)</p> <p>"The Values of Bureaucracy"; ed P du Gay (2003) - googling the title should give you a complete download)</p>

8 October

Why are Academics Blind-siding us?

This is the last part of my tabular presentation of what the commentariat have been saying in the past 50 years about the management and delivery of public services - although it's certainly not my last word on the subject!

This is a subject to which I've devoted most of my life but I have to say that the result of this particular exercise leaves me with the powerful feeling that tens of thousands of academics have been wasting their lives - and the time of their students and of others hoping to get some enlightenment from the writing on the subject

"New public management", "governance", "public value", "new public governance" - the terms, strategies and debates are endless - and little wonder since the discussion is rarely about a concrete organization but, rather, about the system (of thousands of organisations) which makes up the entire public sector.

In the 1990s "the management of change" became a huge new subject in management literature - chapter 6 of my book [In Transit - notes on good governance](#) (1999) discussed the literature on management in both sectors - and the earliest book quoted is from 1987.

In the private sector, change was handled according to the perceptions of each Chief Executive and his team. **But not so in the public sector - where reform was determined at the highest political level and its shape uniformly laid down.**

Academics were slow to get involved - effectively as historians and classifiers.....at a very high level of abstraction....as will be seen from my summary of chapter 4 of [In Transit - notes on good governance](#)

Question	How it's dealt with by the commentariat	Typical Products
11. How do states <u>compare in quality of public services?</u>	<p>"Benchmarking" national policy systems has become an important activity of bodies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) - until 2000 The Commonwealth Fund is now the main source for a global assessment of Health systems. The OECD does a global education survey.</p> <p>Occasionally efforts are made to benchmark entire systems of public admin</p> <p>"Peer Review" is also a widespread activity within the EC eg this recent one on the Polish educational system</p>	<p>Health systems overview article</p> <p>An International Comparison of UK Public Administration (National Audit Office 2008)</p>
12. Why do governments still <u>continue to pay consultants</u> vast sums of money?	<p>Private consultants now run a global industry dispensing advice to governments which is worth at least 50 billion euros a year. Statistics are not easy to find - but the UK alone spends 1.3 billion pounds a year - see Use of consultants and temporary staff (NAO 2016) - which is actually about half of the figure ten years ago!</p> <p>Some will argue that this is a small sum to pay for good, independent advice to help ensure that public services are</p>	<p>Michael Barber How to Run a Government so that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers don't go Crazy (2015)</p> <p>Ed Straw's Stand and Deliver - a design for successful government</p>

	<p>kept up to date.</p> <p>The trouble is that no one really knows whether it is good advice. It is a highly secretive industry - with reports seen only by senior civil servants and the odd Minister.</p> <p>Management consultancy in the private sector has been the subject of at least two highly critical studies (Hucynszki; Micklewait and Woolridge) - which suggest a world of senior executives subject to fads and fashions and given to imposing their will on the work force in an autocratic way. This is even more likely to happen in public bureaucracies which have the additional problem of a political layer on top.</p>	<p>(2014)</p> <p>John Seddon's Systems Thinking in the Public Sector - the failure of the Reform regime and a manifesto for a better way (2008)</p>
13. Role of <u>Think-Tanks?</u>	<p>A few Think Tanks have a reasonable track record in this field - generally those who draw on retired civil servants for their insights... eg The Institute of Government</p> <p>The Demos Think Tank was a favourite with New Labour in its early years of the ambitious Modernising Government programme.</p> <p>The Centre for Public Impact is a new body which promises great things from its use of Big Data -We will see.....</p>	<p>Policy-making in the Real World (Institute of Government 2011)</p> <p>Professionalising the Civil Service (Demos 2017)</p> <p>eg The Public Impact Gap (2017)</p>
14. What <u>challenges and choices</u> does the state face in the future?	<p>The focus of these questions has been organisational - there are a couple of important elephants in the room namely finance and technology which are dealt with in other bodies of literature</p>	<p>Governance in the Twenty First Century (OECD 2001) is one of the rare books which tries to deal with future challenges</p>
15. What are the best Toolkits, manuals, roadmaps etc for people to use who want to engage in reform efforts?	<p>Change Here! Managing change to improve local services (Audit Commission 2001)</p> <p>Supporting small steps - a rough guide for developmental professionals (Manning; OECD 2015)</p> <p>A Governance Practitioner's Notebook - alternative ideas and approaches (Whaites et al OECD 2015)</p> <p>OECD Public Governance Reports - Slovakia (2015)</p> <p>I am not a fan of deliverology but.....</p> <p>Michael Barber's How to Run a Government so that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers don't go Crazy (2015)</p> <p>To Serve and to Preserve; improving public administration in a competitive world (Asian Development Bank 2000)</p>	<p>The Essential Public Manager; by Chris Pollitt (2003) is, by far and away, the best book to help the intelligent citizen make sense of this field</p> <p>Although I'm no fan of the World Bank, 2 titles (from the Development field!) offer the best insights - People, Politics and Change - building communications strategy for governance reform (World Bank 2011)</p> <p>Governance Reform under Real-World Conditions - citizens, stakeholders and Voice (World Bank 2008)</p>

Those who went before....

For the past 3 weeks I've been trying to compress the thoughts I (and many others!!) have had over the past few decades about administrative reform into a table whose columns identify core questions; narratives; and key texts....It was all sparked off by the book published earlier this year on [Dismembering \(the State\)](#) - although the subject has been a lot in my thoughts this year

There may now be hundreds of thousands of academics and consultants in this field but, when I started to challenge the local bureaucracy in Scotland in the late 60s there was a mere handful of **writers challenging public bureaucracy** - basically in the UK and the US.

In the US they were following (or part of) Johnston's Anti-Poverty programme and included people such as Peter Marris and Martin Rein whose [Dilemmas of Social Reform](#) (1967) was one of the first narratives to make an impact - **although Illich (Deschooling Society 1971) and Freire (Pedagogy 1968).**

In the UK it was those associated with the 1964-66 Fulton Royal Commission on the Civil Service; with the Redcliffe-Maud and Wheatley Royal Commissions on Local Government; and, those such as Kay Carmichael who, as a member of the Kilbrandon Committee, was the inspiration for the Scottish Social Work system set up in 1969.

In the 70s, people like John Stewart of INLOGOV inspired a new vision of local government...and my ex-tutor John MacIntosh with a focus on devolution;even the conservative politician Michael Heseltine had a vision of a new metropolitan politics.....**Colin Ward (Tony Gibson)**

It was people like this that set the ball of organizational change rolling in the public sector.... tracked by such British academics as Chris Hood, Chris Pollitt and Rod Rhodes - and which have supplied a living first for thousands of European academics who started to follow the various reforms of the 1970s in the civil service and local government; and then the privatization and "agencification" of the 1980s. Consultants then got on the bandwagon when British administrative reform took off globally in the 1990s.

Working on the tables incorporated in the past few posts has involved a lot of googling - and shuffling of books from the shelves of my glorious oak bookcase here in the Carpathian mountains to the generous oak table which looks out on the snow which now caps those mountains.....

Hundreds of books on public management reform (if you count the virtual ones in the library) - but, for me, there are only a handful of names whose writing makes the effort worthwhile. They are the 2 Chris's - Chris Hood and Chris Pollitt; Guy Peters; and Rod Rhodes. With Chris Pollitt way out in front.....Here's a brief selection of his most recent writing -

There have been many failures in the history of public management reform - even in what might be thought of as the best-equipped countries. Six of the most common seems to have been:

- **Prescription before diagnosis.** No good doctor would ever do this, but politicians, civil servants and management consultants do it frequently. A proper diagnosis means much more than just having a general impression of inefficiency or ineffectiveness (or whatever). It means a thorough analysis of what mechanisms, processes and attitudes are producing the undesirable features of the status quo and an identification of how these mechanisms can be altered or replaced. Such an analysis constitutes a model of the problem. This kind of modelling is probably far more useful to practical reformers than the highly abstract discussions of alternative models of governance with which some academics have been more

concerned (e.g. Osborne, 2010). [For a full exposition of this realist approach to programme logic, see Pawson, 2013. For an explanation of why very general models of governance, are of limited value in practical analysis see Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011, pp11-25 and 208-221]

- **Failure to build a sufficient coalition for reform, so that the reform is seen as just the project of a small elite.** This is particularly dangerous in countries where governments change rapidly, as in some parts of the CEE. Once a government falls or an elite is ousted, the reform has no roots and dies.

- **Launching reforms without ensuring sufficient implementation capacity.** For example, it is very risky to launch a programme of contracting out public services unless and until there exists a cadre of civil servants who are trained and skilled in contract design, negotiation and monitoring. Equally, it is dangerous to impose a sophisticated performance management regime upon an organization which has little or no previous experience of performance measurement. And it is also hazardous to run down the government's in-house IT capacity and rely too much on external expertise (Dunleavy et al, 2006). In each of these cases in-house capacity can be improved, but not overnight.

- **Haste and lack of sustained application.** Most major management reforms take years fully to be implemented. Laws must be passed, regulations rewritten, staff re-trained, new organizational structures set up, appointments made, new procedures run and refined, and so on. This extended implementation may seem frustrating to politicians who want action (or at least announcements) now, but without proper preparation reforms will more likely fail. Endless reforms or 'continuous revolution' is not a recipe for a well-functioning administration

- **Over-reliance on external experts rather than experienced locals.** As management reform has become an international business, international bodies such as the OECD or the major management consultancies have become major players. A fashion has developed in some countries to 'call in the external experts', as both a badge of legitimacy and a quick way of accessing international 'best practice' Equally, there is perhaps a tendency to ignore local, less clearly articulated knowledge and experience. Yet the locals usually know much more about contextual factors than the visiting (and temporary) experts. .

- **Ignoring local cultural factors.** For example, a reform that will work in a relatively high trust and low corruption culture such as, say, Denmark's, is far less likely to succeed in a low trust/higher corruption environment such as prevails in, say, some parts of the Italian public sector. In the EU there are quite large cultural variations between different countries and sectors.....

I would suggest a number of 'lessons' which could be drawn from the foregoing analysis:

1. *Big models, such as NPM or 'good governance' or 'partnership working', often do not take one very far. **The art of reform lies in their adaptation (often very extensive) to fit local contexts.** And anyway, these models are seldom entirely well-defined or consistent in themselves. Applying the big models or even standardized techniques (benchmarking, business process re-engineering, lean) in a formulaic, tick-box manner can be highly counterproductive*

2. *As many scholars and some practitioners have been observing for decades, there is no 'one best way'. The whole exercise of reform should begin with a careful diagnosis of the local situation, not with the proclamation of a model (or technique) which is to be applied, top down. 'No prescription without careful diagnosis' is not a bad motto for reformers.*

3. *Another, related point is that task differences really do matter. A market-type mechanism may work quite well when applied to refuse collection but not when applied to hospital care. Sectoral and task differences are important, and reformers should be wary of situations where their advisory team lacks substantial expertise in the particular tasks and activities that are the targets for reform.*

4. *Public Management Reform (PMR) is always political as well as managerial/organizational. Any prescription or diagnosis which does not take into account the 'way politics works around here' is inadequate and incomplete. Some kernel of active support from among the political elite is usually indispensable.*
5. *PMR is usually saturated with vested interests, including those of the consultants/advisors, and the existing public service staff. To conceptualise it as a purely technical exercise would be naïve.*
6. *Successful PMR is frequently an iterative exercise, over considerable periods of time. Reformers must adapt and also take advantage of 'windows of opportunity'. This implies a locally knowledgeable presence over time, not a one-shot 'quick fix' by visiting consultants.*
7. *It does work sometimes! But, as indicated at the outset, humility is not a bad starting point.*

12 October

What If???

As I suspected, I'm still worrying away at some of the issues raised by the series of posts about the massive changes to our public services in recent decades - and how they have been covered in "the literature". I realize that I left out an important strand of thinking - and that the series leaves the impression of inevitability....

The last post paid tribute to some of the people who, in the 1960s, most clearly articulated the demand for a major shake-up of Britain's public institutions - the "modernization" agenda which initially brought us huge local authorities and merged Ministries with well-paid managers operating with performance targets.

"Scale" and "management" were key words - and I readily confess to being one of the cheerleaders for this. The small municipalities I knew were "parochial" and lacked any strategic sense but - of course - they could easily have developed it.....



Were the changes inevitable?

I have a feeling that quite a few of the early voices who argued for "reform" might now have major reservations about where their institutional critique has taken us all - although it was a global discontent which was being channeled in those days.....

However not all voices sang from the same hymn sheet.....**The main complaint may then have been that of "amateurism" but it was by no means accepted that "managerialism" was the answer.** 1968, after all, had been an expression of people power. And the writings of Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich - let alone British activists Colin Ward and Tony Gibson; and sociologists such as Jon Davies and Norman Dennis - were, in the 70s, celebrating citizen voices against bureaucratic power. The therapist [Carl Rogers](#) was at the height of his global influence. And voices such as [Alain Touraine](#)'s were also giving hope in France.....

The managerialism which started to infect the public sector from the 70s expressed hierarchical values which sat badly with the egalitarian spirit which had been released the previous decade....

But, somehow, all that energy and optimism seemed to evaporate fairly quickly - certainly in the British "winter of discontent" and Thatcher rule of the 80s. What started as a simple expression of the need for some (private) "managerial discipline" in the public sector was quickly absorbed into a wider and more malevolent agenda of privatization and contracting out.....And, somehow, in the UK at any rate, progressive forces just rolled over.... Our constitutional system, as Lord Hailsham once starkly put it, is an "elective dictatorship".

The core European systems were, however, different - with legal and constitutional safeguards, PR systems and coalition governments - although the EC technocracy has been chipping away at much of this.

Just why and how the British adopted what came to be called New Public Management is a story which is usually told in a fatalistic way - as if there were no human agency involved. The [story is superbly told here](#) - as the fatal combination of Ministerial frustration with civil service "dynamic conservatism" with a theory (enshrined in Public Choice economics) for that inertia.... **A politico-organisational problem was redefined as an economic one and, heh presto, NPM went global**

In the approach to the New Labour victory of 1997, there was a brief period when elements of the party seemed to remember that [centralist "Morrisonian" bureaucracy had not been the only option](#) - that British socialism had in the 1930s been open to things such as cooperatives and "guild socialism". For just a year or so there was (thanks to people such as [Paul Hirst](#) and [Will Hutton](#)) talk of "[stakeholding](#)". But the bitter memories of the party infighting in the early 80s over [the left-wing's alternative economic strategy](#) were perhaps too close to make that a serious option - and the window quickly closed.....Thatcher's spirit of "dog eat dog" lived on - despite the talk of "Joined Up Government" (JUG), words like "trust" and "cooperation" were suspect to New Labour ears. [Holistic Governance](#) made a brief appearance at the start of the New Labour reign in 1997 but was quickly shown the door a few years later....

"What if? , , , , ,"

The trouble with the massive literature on public management reform (which touches the separate literatures of political science, public administration, development, organizational sociology, management....[even philosophy](#)) is that it is so complicated that only a handful of experts can hope to understand it all - and few of them can or want to explain it to us in simple terms.

I've hinted in this post at what I regard as a couple of junctures when it might have been possible to stop the momentum....

I know the notion of [counterfactual history](#) is treated with some disdain but the victors do sometimes lose and we ignore the discussion about "junctures" at our peril.

The UNDP recently published [a good summary](#) of what it called the three types of public management we have seen in the past half century.

There are different ways of describing the final column but this one gives a sense of how we have been moving..

	Old Public Admin	New Public Management	New Public Service
Theoretical foundation	Political theory	Economic theory	Democratic theory
Model of behaviour	Public interest	self-interest	Citizen interest
Concept of public interest	Political, enshrined in law	Aggregation of individual interests	Dialogue about shared values
To whom civil servants responsive	Client	customer	citizen
Role of government	rowing	steering	Serving, negotiating
Mechanism for achieving policy	programme	incentives	Building coalitions
Approach to accountability	hierarchic	market	Public servants within law, professional ethics, values
Admin discretion	limited	wide	Constrained
Assumed organisational structure	Top down	decentralised	collaborative
Assumed motivation of officials	Conditions of service	Entrepreneurial, drive to reduce scope of government	Public service, desire to contribute

17 October

The regulation state <http://regulation.huji.ac.il/papers/jp39.pdf> 2011

Plain Speech; and the 21st Century Public Manager



Readers will have noticed my growing impatience with the opacity of the "academic turn" to the writings of those who purported to be explaining what has been happening to our public services in the past 30-40 years - about the only writer I exempted was Chris Pollitt whose [The Essential Public Manager](#) (2003) is, by far and away, the best book to help the intelligent citizen make sense of this field. It's friendly; brings in individuals to play roles illustrating contemporary debates;; clearly summarises different schools of thought on the key issues; and leaves the reader with guidance for further reading....

Most authors in this field, however, are writing for other academics (to impress them), for students (to give them copy for passing exams); or for potential customers in senior government positions (to persuade them to offer a contract) - they are never writing for citizens.

As a result, they develop some very bad habits in writing - which is [why this new book](#) should be in their family's Xmas stocking this year. It offers priceless advice, including -

1. Bait the hook

"When you go fishing, you bait the hook with what the fish likes, not with what you like." An obvious principle, easily lost sight of. **Putting yourself in the audience's shoes governs everything from the shape of your argument to the choice of vocabulary. Ask what they do and don't know about the subject, and what they need to; not what you know about it.**

Ask what they are likely to find funny, rather than what you do. What are the shared references that will bring them on board? Where do you need to pitch your language? How much attention are they likely to be paying?

This is what Aristotle, talking about rhetoric, called *ethos*, or the question of how your audience sees you. And the best way for them to see you is either as one of them, or someone on their side. As the speech theorist Kenneth Burke wrote - another line I never tire of quoting - "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, identifying your ways with his."

2. Be clear

A lot of style guides, with good reason, tell their readers to write Plain English. There's even a [Plain English Campaign](#) that does its nut, year-round and vocationally, about examples of baffling officialese, pompous lawyer-speak and soul-shrivelling business jargon.

Plain English (the simplest word that does the job; straightforward sentences; nice active verbs etc) is far from the only style you should have at your command. But if you depart from it, you should have a reason, be it aesthetic or professional. The plainer the language, the easier the reader finds it; and the easier the

reader finds it, the more likely they'll take in what you're saying and continue reading. Surveys of the average reading age of British adults routinely put it between nine and 13. Trim your style accordingly.

[Steven Pinker](#) talks about "classic style" (he borrows the notion from the literary critics Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner). This, as he sees it, is a variation on Plain English that compliments the reader's intelligence and talks to him or her as an equal. He gives a cute example. "The early bird gets the worm" is plain style, he says. "The second mouse gets the cheese" is classic. I half-buy the distinction; though much of what Pinker credits to the classic style is exactly what's asked of any good instance of the plain. And the examples he offers convey quite different thoughts, and (a bit unfairly) attribute a cliché to the plain style and a good joke to the classic.

3. Prefer right-branching sentences

Standard-issue sentences, in English, have subject-verb-object order: dog (subject) bites (verb) man (object). There are any number of elaborations on this, but the spine of your sentence, no matter how many limbs it grows, consists of those three things.

If you have a huge series of modifying clauses before you reach the subject of the sentence, the reader's brain is working harder; likewise, if you have a vast parenthesis between subject and verb or even verb and object. The reader's brain has registered the subject (dog) and it is waiting for a verb so it can make sense of the sentence. Meanwhile, you're distracting it by cramming ever more material into its working memory. *"My dog, which I got last week because I've always wanted a dog and I heard from Fred - you know, Fred who works in the chip shop and had that injury last year three days after coming home from his holidays - that he was getting rid of his because his hours had changed and he couldn't walk it as much as it wanted (very thoughtful, is Fred), bit me ..."*

4. Read it aloud

Reading something aloud is a good way of stress-testing it: you'll notice very abruptly if your sentences are tangled up: that overfilling-the-working-memory thing can be heard in your voice. The American speechwriter Peggy Noonan advises that once you have a draft, "Stand up and speak it aloud. **Where you falter, alter.**"

I was about to write to Chris Pollitt to encourage him to produce a new edition of his book (which is 14 years old) but, magically, came across [The Twenty First Century Public Manager](#) (2017) - a rare book which, like Pollitt's, looks at the complex world facing an individual public manager these days and the skills and outlook they need to help it survive.

Which took me in turn to [The Twenty First Century Public Servant](#) - a short report which came out in 2014.....and reminded me of a book which has been lying on my shelves for all too long - [Public Value - theory and practice](#) ed John Benington and Mark Moore (2011) which is put in context by a very useful article [Appraising public value](#)

In fact, the concept of "public value" was first produced by Moore in 1995 in [Creating Public Value - strategic management in government](#). This celebrated the role of strategic leaders in the public sector and tried to explore how, in a climate which required strong verification of performance, the public sector might be able better to demonstrate its legitimacy.... Here is how [one british agency understood the challenge](#) in 2007 and a [short summary of the debate](#) there has been about the concept. As you can imagine there's at least [one dissertation on the subject](#).... '

I can't say I'm greatly convinced that all the "sound and fury" has produced anything all that substantial...but, if I can keep my eyes open long enough, I will go back to the 2011 book by Benington and Moore (which does include chapters by interesting characters such as Colin Crouch and Gerry Stoker) and let my readers know.....

The debate continues to this day - with a [well-written 2016 symposium here](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14719037.2017.1383783?needAccess=true) about the issue
The craft of Dutch city managers
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14719037.2017.1383783?needAccess=true>

I wrote the following summary 25 years ago.....about a question which exercised some of us then - the difference between managing services in the public sector - and managing them in the private sector? People who have tried to answer this question have focused on such things as -

- on administrative and management practices - and the inferior performance we generally experience in the public sector
- on the institutional and legal environment which seems to explain this.
- More rarely, on the political and ideological question of what activities belong in the public sector⁴.

One set of authors⁵, for example, suggested the following distinctive features for public administration bodies -

- accountability to politicians
- difficulty in establishing goals and priorities
- rarity of competition
- relationship between provision, demand, need and revenue
- processing people
- professionalism and line management
- the legal framework.

But, when you think about it, these features (apart from the first) are true of very many large private companies - where competition can be minimal or "fixed" (ie manipulated).

The definitive book on the subject⁶ points out that MacDonald's - the burger makers - is a bureaucracy par excellence - a uniform product produced in a uniform way.

So what makes a government bureaucracy behave so differently and be seen so differently?

Three reasons - according to Wilson. Government agencies -

- can't lawfully retain monies earned;
- can't allocate resources according to the preferences of its managers;
- must serve goals not of the organisation's choosing, particularly relating to probity and equity.

They therefore become constraint-oriented rather than task-oriented. He goes on to suggest that agencies differ managerially depending on whether their activities and outputs can be observed; and divides them into four categories (production; procedural; craft; and coping agencies).

In the 1980s the term "public management" began to appear - replacing that of "public administration". Behind that lay⁷ a view that private management systems, practices and skills were needed to shake up the system and make it more relevant to the needs of the citizen (more "customer-friendly" in the business language which has become increasingly used).

⁴ The economic literature refers to "public goods" or "natural monopoly".

⁵ Handbook of Public Services Management Pollitt C and Harrison S (Blackwell 1992)

⁶ Wilson JQ Bureaucracy - what Government Agencies do and why they do it (Basic Books 1989)

⁷ Public Management in the Central and Eastern European Transition - concepts and cases by G Wright and J Nemec (NISpace 2002)

A new way of looking at how to operate public services was enshrined in something called "New Public Management" which swept the world ⁸ but which has, in the last few years, received a rather more critical appraisal⁹. Hood¹⁰ spells out in more detail the different elements of NPM -

No.	Doctrine	Meaning	Typical Justification
1	Hands-on professional management of Public Organisations	Visible management at the top; free to manage	Accountability requires clear assignment of responsibility
2.	Explicit standards and measures of performance	Goals and targets defined and measured as indicators of success	Accountability means clearly stated aims
3.	Greater emphasis on output controls	Resource allocation and rewards linked to performance	Need to stress results rather than procedures
4.	Shift to disaggregation of units	Unbundle public sector into units organised by products with devolved budgets	Make units manageable; split provision and production; use contracts
5.	Greater competition	Move to term contracts and tendering procedures	Rivalry as the key to lower costs and better standards
6	Stress on private sector styles of management practice	Move away from military-style ethic to more flexible hiring, pay rules, etc	Need to apply "proven" private sector management tools
7.	Stress on greater discipline and parsimony	Cut direct costs; raise labour discipline	Need to check resource demands; do more with less

The texts on the "new public management" (NPM) are generally unsatisfactory. They consist generally of breathless reviews of the various changes which have taken place in the organisation of public services (particularly Anglo-Saxon) - contrasting the badness of the old with the vigour of the new. Sometimes, but rarely, an attempt is made to assess the impact on the consumer of the reforms. Even more rarely does anyone try to explore whether and why certain services are "non-marketable" and therefore need to remain "public. McKevitt¹¹ identifies three distinctive features to core "public services" -

- differential information between providers and suppliers
- the provision of socially important and interdependent services

⁸ D Osborne popularised the new approach in *Reinventing Government*) A good overview of the concepts and practical issues can be found in *The State under Stress - can the Hollow State be Good Government?* by Foster C and Plowden (Open University Press 1996)

⁹ Mark Moore's *Creating Public Value - strategic management in government* - apart from being one of the most practically helpful books for public managers - contains in its introduction a very good overview of the literature (Harvard 1995)

¹⁰ In *The Art of the State* (OUP 1998)

¹¹ McKevitt D *Managing Core Public Services* (Blackwell 1998)

- the concept of professionalism as a relation of trust and agency between providers and clients.

McKevitt also notes the three very different reasons (sovereignty, natural monopoly and social welfare) for the functions remaining in the public sector.

How much is really new?

In all the excitement of new rhetoric, it is all too easy to imagine that we are confronting these issues for the first time: in fact argument about how to run government and public services goes back many centuries and the present debates are in some ways a replay, in different language, of those debates. Whilst the technology and skills have certainly presented us with new opportunities, perhaps a touch of humility or sense of history might help us in these frenetic times?

1988 saw the publication of a particularly interesting and strangely neglected book¹² which took such a perspective and managed to produce 99 different "solutions" which had been advanced at one time or another to the issue of improving administrative performance.

If ever we needed a lesson in the need for a measure of scepticism toward the enthusiastic marketing of the latest management fashion, we have it in the brief list of these 99 solutions - many of which happily contradict one another. Sometimes the need for continuity in staffing is stressed: sometimes the need for turnover. Sometimes openness; sometimes secrecy.

Hood and Jackson suggest that we tend to use three general "stereotypes" in our thinking about organisations -

	Military Stereotype	Business Stereotype	Religious Stereotype
Slogan	Run it like the army	Run it like a business	Run it like a monastic order
Work force	Limited career	Hired and fired	Service for life
Motivation	Fear of punishment Hope of honours	Fear of dismissal Hope for money	Fear of damnation Hope for salvation
Control	Audit of war	Impersonal	Faith; social acceptance
Objective setting	Orders of day	Profit	Worked out at length in discussion and reflection
Belief	Obedience to leadership brings efficiency	Incentives to reduce waste and search for innovations	Lifetime internal commitment limits rash selfish ideas

¹² Administrative Argument by Hood and Jackson (now out of print)

Getting Government Reform taken seriously

We are increasingly angry these days with politicians, bureaucrats and government – and have developed an appetite for accounts and explanations of why our democratic systems seem to be failing. [The Blunders of our Governments](#); and [The Triumph of the Political Class](#) are just two examples of books which try to satisfy that appetite.

The trouble is that **the academics** and **journalists** who produce this literature are outsiders – so it is difficult for them to give a real sense of what scope for manoeuvre senior policy-makers realistically have. **Political Memoirs** should help us here but never do since they are either self-congratulatory or defensive – with the Diaries of people such as Chris Mullen, Alan Clark and Tony Benn being exceptional simple because they were outside the magic circle of real power.

Two rare and brave attempts by politicians to pull aside the curtain of power in a systematic and objective way are [How to be an MP](#); by Paul Flynn and [How to be a Minister – a 21st Century Guide](#); by John Hutton

[Various problems](#) make it exceedingly rare for British senior civil servants to publish memoirs.

This leaves the important category of **consultants** and **think-tankers** to turn to – with Michael Barber's [How to Run a Government so that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers don't go Crazy](#) (2015) and Ed Straw's [Stand and Deliver – a design for successful government](#) (2014) being recent examples. John Seddon's [Systems Thinking in the Public Sector – the failure of the Reform regime and a manifesto for a better way](#) (2008) and Chris Foster's [British Government in Crisis](#) (2005) are older examples.

Barber's should be the most interesting since he has made such a name for himself with his "[deliverology](#)" but I find it difficult to take him seriously when he doesn't include any of the other authors in his index. Straw's is an angry book which fails even to include an index – let alone mention of Seddon's or Foster's books. [The Unspoken Constitution](#) was a short spoof published in 2009 by Democratic Audit which probably tells us as much about the British system of power as anyone....And, however, entertaining "In the Thick of it"; and the British and American versions of "House of Cards", they hardly give a rounded account of policy-making in the 2 countries.

Curiously, those wanting to get a real understanding of how systems of government might actually be changed for the better are best served by going to the theories of change which have been developed in the literature on international development eg the World Bank's 2008 [Governance Reform under Real-World Conditions – citizens, stakeholders and Voice](#) and its [People, Politics and Change – building communications strategy for governance reform](#) (2011) – in particular the fold-out diagram at the [very end of the 2008 book](#)

Further Reading

Canadian examples are [here](#) and [here](#)
[Good Governance criteria](#); also [interesting diagram](#)
["governance" discourse in India](#)

16 June 2017

Stand and Deliver - a new design for successful government ??

I have been reading these past 2 days an important tract which appeared last year and which pillories the state of British government - Stand and Deliver. It suggests that the performance of the British government system is so poor as to require a total overhaul and indeed formal "Treaty". The BBC gives good coverage to the author in this piece

His more radical ideas are based around bringing in new feedback systems into the working of governments. He likens government at present to a gardener planting seeds, telling people what the garden will look like but then never actually checking whether or not they have grown as planned (instead spending lots of time checking on the sharpness of a spade or the water efficiency of a hose). That is in contrast to the private sector, which checks on the outcomes of spending continually.

A similar discipline needs to come into government, he says. There has been progress with the National Audit Office, the Office for National Statistics and select committees, he says, but he wants them all brought under the umbrella of the second chamber (the House of Lords at the moment) becoming a "Resulture" able to score policies and kill off those ones which are not working.



I call this a "tract" since it is not the normal "run of the mill" academic, political or technocratic treatise. Its author is thoroughly familiar with the political and technocratic worlds (less so the academic) and is very angry with what he has experienced.....

So it is a very individual take on the British system of government - despite his consultancy experience in other countries and his emphasis on the need for "benchmarking", only the Swiss system really seems to rate for him (and the Canadian experience of health reform).

My first reaction as I read the opening pages was to try to remember when I had last read such a diatribe.....

- Simon Jenkins' "Accountable to None - the Tory Nationalisation of Britain" (1996) and Thatcher and Sons (2006) were both powerful exposes of the excesses of the 1979-2006 governments;
- Christopher Foster's British Government in Crisis (2005) was more measured and brought his particular rich blend of academia and consultancy.
- It took a search of the latter's book to remind me of the title and author of the famous expose of civil service waste which had first attracted Margaret Thatcher's attention - Leslie Chapman's Your Disobedient Servant (1979).
- And 2005 saw the launching of the Power Inquiry into the discontents about British government.....

Oddly, however, none of these books appear in Straw's three page and rather idiosyncratic bibliography (nor a clutch of recent books on government "failure").

The book itself promises to give an "organisational" rather than political take on the subject - which suited me perfectly as this has been my perspective since I first went into "government" (local) in 1968 - absorbing the more radical challenge to hierarchies and power.....

Faced in turn with the challenge in 1975 of becoming one of the senior figures on the new Strathclyde Region, I used my position to develop more open and inclusive policy-making processes - extending to junior officials and councillors, community activists.

With a huge Labour majority we could afford to be generous to any opposition! And, even under Thatcher, the Scottish Office Ministers were conciliatory - "partnership" was the name of the game we helped develop and was most evident in the success of the "Glasgow" revival.

Straddling the worlds of academia and politics, I was able to initiate some important networks to try to effect social change

It was this experience of cooperating with a variety of actors in different agencies I took with me when I opted in 1990 to go into consultancy work in central Europe - to help develop the different sort of government capacity they needed there.....then, for 8 years in Central Asia. I was lucky in being allowed to operate there to take advantage of "windows of opportunity" and not be hogbound with the stupid procurement rules...but I became highly critical of the EC development programme as you will see in this 2011 paper The Long Game - not the Logframe

Throughout this entire 45 year-period, I have been keeping up with the literature on change and public management - so am intrigued by this book of Ed Straw's which promises to bring an organisational perspective to the frustrations we all have with government systems.....

It was published more than a year ago; has a dedicated website but, from my google search, seems to have gone down like a lead balloon.

I have chosen the following questions to use in my assessment of the book -

- "resonating" with the times?
- a "convincing" argument?
- demonstrated "feasibility"?
- opposition identified?
- sources of support?

21 may 15

"Stand and Deliver" is an angry book - which reflects the public's loss of trust in the political system.....

It has attracted surprisingly few reviews so let me start with the BBC coverage which, as you would expect, is simply a summary of the book's blurb they were given -

The thrust of Ed Straw's book is that the current system of government is too adversarial, fails to include any feedback on whether policies have succeeded, gives little choice to voters and suffers from a civil service which hampers politicians' attempts to get things done. "Between elections, the places where power resides are the news media running their various agendas, good and bad, political and business - large companies and industries with expert preferential lobbyists and party funders, dealing with a political and civil service class mostly ignorant of their business," he says.



He says governments "limp on with a mixture of muddle, error, howlers and the occasional success" and politicians "rarely work out before getting power that it's bust". He says he has come to the conclusion that the civil service cannot be reformed on its own, because reform would involve transferring more power to the government, which would "make it worse because they have too much power already".

So his solution is a revamp of the whole system of government.

The better-known reforms that he wants to see include proportional representation and state funding of political parties - with a ban on large donations - to promote competition among parties and make sure that individuals or interests cannot buy influence.

Swiss-style referendums would be held on a more regular basis, while governments would be limited to four-year terms and prime ministers not allowed to serve more than eight years (to stop the "autocracy cap" where a leader with pretty much unchecked power becomes autocratic and "wants to stay for ever because you can't imagine life without that power").

His more radical ideas are based around bringing in new feedback systems into the working of governments. He likens government at present to a gardener planting seeds, telling people what the garden will look like but then never actually checking whether or not they have grown as planned (instead spending lots of time checking on the sharpness of a spade or the water efficiency of a hose). That is in contrast to the private sector, which checks on the outcomes of spending continually.

A similar discipline needs to come into government, he says. There has been progress with the National Audit Office, the Office for National Statistics and select committees, he says, but he wants them all brought under the umbrella of the second chamber (the House of Lords at the moment) becoming a "Resulture" able to score policies and kill off those ones which are not working.

The civil service would be radically revamped with it retaining a smaller administrative role, but in other areas there would no longer be a permanent civil service. Instead specialists with knowledge of, say, the railways, would be brought in to contract, manage and regulate that industry.

Ed Straw says that his application of organisational theory onto how the UK government works is unique. He has also strong views on the Labour Party's structure. He says a lot of Labour's problems could have been avoided if they had a better process for challenging or replacing a leader, saying the Conservative system is

much more efficient. It would have allowed Mr Blair to be removed before the 2005 election, for Gordon Brown to have gone within a year of taking office and John Smith to have led Labour in 1992 rather than Neil Kinnock, he says. But whatever the changes within parties, he says that successive governments have shown that nothing much will change without the wider reforms he is suggesting.

Apparently this is because his is an "an organizational perspective" (page 10) But what exactly does he mean by this?

He seems to mean the "contestability" brought by competition between commercial companies (when it is allowed to exist) thereby **raising a couple of critical questions** - the first being the hoary question which occupied some of us in the 1980s - the extent to which it was possible to apply the same management principles in public and commercial organisations. One the Professors on my MSc programme wrote one of the classic articles on this - with a strong warning about the scale of the difference between the two contexts and their measures ("profit" and "public interest")

The second question is - Has the contestability factor not been at the heart of New Public Management (NPM) which the UK has had for the past 20-odd years?

Ed Straw has been a senior partner in the Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) Management Consultancy for many years - and *gave evidence* to the British Parliament's Select Committee on Public Administration in 2005 which included strong support, for example, for the privatization of the Prison Service...and talked loosely about the need for further "politicization" of the Civil Service. In the name of "accountability".....

His Demos pamphlet of the same year - *The Dead Generalist* (2005) - spelled out in more detail what he meant. Apparently he wants more contestability.....but his book is not happy with NPM - on page 36 he says simply that "*the developers of NPM omitted some essential components of the original conception*".

On the same page he refers to the

"countless diagrams attempting to represent the unified field theory of public sector reform developed in central units like the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and Delivery Unit from international management consultancies.....some are worth reading and some so limited as to be aberrant".

And that's it! He divulges no more - except to tell us to read Norman Dixon's *"On the Psychology of Military Incompetence"* (1976), Peter Drucker, Charles Handy, Michael Porter, Peter Senge and 3 others I have only vaguely heard of....So what are the essential components of the NPM model which the British designers missed? We're not told....

After at least ten years musing and writing on such matters, I would have expected more.....

footnote: *the subtlety of the book's main title may be lost on some of my foreign readers - it is the demand that came from the highway robbers of the past when stopping stage-coaches - "deliver your valuables....." But "delivery" (implementation) is also the bit of policy-making which governments (let alone consultants) have been identifying for decades as the key weakness of the government process*

28 May 2015

You have nothing to lose but your Chain.....-link Fences

The last few posts may have appeared to have had different themes but, I realise, were linked to the basic difficulty we seem these days in establishing common ground about the state of our societies/systems - or agreeing actionable programmes of change.

I mentioned the failure of Ed Straw's book to mention - let alone begin to analyse - the important contributions which have come from other consultants/academics about the sad state of the machinery of British government. Everyone - left/right; Ministers/civil servants; Think Tanks/consultants/ economists/ sociologists/ political scientists - has their own narrative - and all talk past one another.....and the citizen...

Almost no one tries to establish a common denominator about this - let alone alliances.

I appreciate that this is perhaps more of an Anglo-American thing than European - where there is broader acceptance of the need for negotiation and coalition.

But the academic specialisation which Scialabba was talking about - plus the niche marketing which the various experts (their institutions and publishers) are compelled to take part in in order to make any impact in the modern Tower of Babel we all now inhabit - has also affected the "consensual" aspect of European society....We are confused and cynical.....

A couple of books which were delivered just a few hours ago make the point - Governing Britain: Power, Politics and the Prime Minister was published in 2013 by a well-known British academic (Patrick Diamond) and is the detailed story of how New Labour tried to modernise the machinery of government over its 13 years. Who Governs Britain? is a short book published this year by one of the doyens of British political science (Anthony King) and explores the question whether "our system of government is fit for purpose".

Both books have copious indexes and bibliographies which I immediately checked for mention of the books of practical men such as Ed Straw or John Seddon. What do I find?

- No mention of these two - although Chris Foster (with an academic background) does rate 2 entries in Diamond's book.
- Michael Barber (Tony Blair's Education guru and the inventor of "deliverology") is the only significant change-agent to get real space in Diamond's book.
- The important Power Inquiry of 2005-2010 oddly gets no mention in King's book and only 2 references in Diamond's index.
- Democratic Audit's satirical The Unspoken Constitution (2009) which gives us a very pointed critique of the concentration of irresponsible power of the British system is, of course, totally ignored.

What conclusion do I draw from this? Simply that academics reference only one another (within their own narrow discipline) - and disdain to mention the outputs of mere practitioners (if they even bother to read them).

And practitioners (civil servants/politicians) don't have the temperament or patience to read and distill what the academics write.

Consultants, journalists and Think-Tankers, however, are the sort of intermediaries who should be capable of selection and summary - but have their own interests, disdain most writing (Think-Tankers being an exception) and bring instead their particular brand of snake oil.....

One of the (few) heartening sections of Naughton's book about the Internet is his chapter on the "media eco-system" in which he produces several case-studies of the upstaging of the mainstream media by bloggers who had more specialized knowledge than the journalists.

There are an increasing number of (older) bloggers who have the time and inclination to challenge what the power elites are doing - but they have to network more - and sharpen their message.

Perhaps my contribution is to try to identify those who are working in my field(s)....and try to get more of them working together and developing a higher profile???

Coincidentally, another book in the packet which arrived this afternoon offers an approach which might help pull ourselves out of our confusion - Ben Ramalingham's Aid on the Edge of Chaos which applies systems theory to a range of complex problems faced in most parts of the world.

Saturday, May 30, 2015

How to Run a Government

Michael Barber's 2015 book How to Run a Government has what to a Brit is a rather off-putting American sub-title - "so that citizens benefit and taxpayers don't go crazy"

But, for at least 5 years, he was Blair's right-hand man in the Cabinet Office trying to "deliver" better performance of carefully selected targets mainly in the educational and health sectors and has, for the past decade, used this experience to build a global reputation as a "delivery" or "implementation" guru in various parts of the world - not least Canada and the Punjab. And he is one of a small (if growing) number of people who has been able to both straddle the worlds of government and consultancy and write coherently.....

So I didn't hesitate to buy the book from Bucharest's Anthony Frost Bookshop - even although it failed my "standing on the shoulders of giants" test (ie its - short - reading list failed to mention some important texts from other practitioner/academic/consultants such as Christopher Foster and John Seddon let alone such writers as Chris Hood and Pollitt; Robert Quinn and the entire literature of change management)

But I'm at page 170 and thoroughly enjoying it - despite the occasional over-indulgent self-referencing..... Hardly surprising that he's made a fair number of enemies in his time but his



straightforward language and description of the various techniques and working methods he's found useful in the last 20 years of advising political leaders in various parts of the world I find both useful and refreshing.

In 1999 I pulled together my own scribbles about reform efforts - for a new audience I was then facing in central Asia - [In Transit - some notes on good governance](#). This was just as New Labour's Modernising Government effort (which lasted until 2010) was getting underway. I followed these with great interest although the ex-communist context in which I was working was a very different one - see my ["The Long Game - not the logframe"](#) (2012) for its assessment of the chances of Technical Assistance programmes making any sort of dent in what I called (variously) the kleptocracy or "impervious regimes" of most ex-communist countries.

There are surprisingly few reviews for a book which has been out for some 18 months which says a lot to me about academics, consultants and journalists.....

8 November 2016

video

<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/how-run-government-so-citizens-benefit-and-taxpayers-dont-go-crazy>

<http://followersoftheapocalyp.se/any-data-will-do-a-review-of-michael-barbers-how-to-run-a-government/>

A Good Review

The opening of the final chapter, which essentially retells the Old Testament story of Joseph in Egypt using the language of modern public policy, was perhaps the moment where the absurdity of the edifice won out and tears of laughter ran down my face.

Pharaoh's dream as interpreted by Joseph - what we would now call a Treasury Forecast - suggested that [...] boom and bust had not yet ended.

[...] draw a trajectory for gathered corn, which will result in a store of at least 140% of the baseline. Then strengthen the delivery chain.

[...] He built a data system and started counting the grain (or had someone like [Tony O'Connor](#) count it for him). Barber, chapter 7.

You get the idea.

Barber's conception of "delivery" describes the frictionless movement of an idea between the head of a politician and the headache of a junior public servant - but the book spends as much, if not more time in ensuring that information - of a sort - is returned and aggregated to keep said politician engaged in their project. For an avowed attempt to define a science, Barber's standards of data are low - he argues that even poor quality data is better than no data. A scientist would proceed with more care.

Structured as a manual, and cutely decorated with 57 key "rules" (largely kept under 140 characters), the text itself has a self-conscious and self-effacing wit that the TED-style "appeals to anecdote" largely undermine. Neither realpolitik nor history has the clarity required to illustrate the clean lines of deliverology - many of the stories and asides undermine themselves in their completion.

I've written a lot about Barber and deliverology. I was scathing about the many flaws in ["Avalanche is Coming"](#), oddly moved by the honesty of ["Instruction to Deliver"](#). "How to run a government" sits in between the two: some of the content of the latter presented in the style of the former (though much [better referenced](#)).

As a system of government, deliverology has on the surface an apolitical appeal. It comes across as the art of getting stuff done in the public sector - perhaps a way for a latter-day Jim Hacker to best Sir Humphrey. However, like Sir Michael's own career, (from the CBfT delivery of his much-vaunted literacy hour onwards) much of this entails going outside the public sector entirely.

It is an expression of our current political consensus to the extent that this is hardly worthy of remark. It is a description of the big data, small government, permanent austerity neo-liberal consensus. As a myth, it defined and shaped the reality of public service long before it was expressed in this form.

It is a world-view that contains no possibility of genuine dissent. Even the idea of the "red team" - taken from military planning techniques (and Barber's obvious delight with efficient military delivery is deeply disquieting given his Quaker upbringing.) is as a licensed cynic - a court jester improving rather than vetting an unstoppable plan.

So what can we learn about the myth and the flawed reality of public service delivery-as-a-"science"? Three select quotes give us a path in to the darker side of the deliverology mindset:

"More for less trumps investment for reform" (rule 50)

"Trust and Altruism is popular but doesn't work (other than in unusual circumstances)" (rule 15)

"I am not recommending the content here to blatant autocracies or "extractive regimes" interested purely in enriching themselves, though of course I can't be sure that some of them won't read the words." (Introduction)

Efficiency, as I am sure Sir Michael would agree, is not the same as efficacy. And "more with less" does not mean the current offer plus more, it means a shift in spending and a shift in delivery. [Writing today in the FT](#) (£), he repeats his contrast between the Blairite "investment for reform", and the austerer coalition demand for better results at least cost". Not only is this economically illiterate (currently the national deficit is roughly the same as it was in '97, growth in GDP quarter by quarter is slightly higher...), it also betrays a presumption towards smaller government and privatisation that reveal his Blairite, or indeed Thatcherite, roots.

Trust and Altruism refers to any governance regime with a preference for professional expertise over managerial oversight, and it is telling that despite a clear argument to the contrary (presented around schools in Finland) such methods are presumed never to work. Mere expertise has no answer to measurement and prescription - and again for reforming purposes we are directed to other agenda based around market narratives, making Barber possibly the only writer in history to marry the biblical story of the patriarch Joseph with the ideas of the patriarchal Sir Michael Joseph.

Finally, the point about autocracies seems like a disclaimer but hides something more problematic - delivery by control and measurement is (historically) the management methodology of the autocrat.

Barber's career and ideas illustrate the gradual drift of the centre-ground of British politics to the authoritarian right. You should read this book, but you should read it as a cautionary tale of how far down the road of managerial public service we have come, and as a spur to consider how and where we can turn in another direction.

<http://www.cpsrenewal.ca/2016/02/impossible-conversations-how-to-run.html>

I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, it's genuinely useful. As much as we might like to, most of us public servants don't spend our days up in the theory clouds; we have deliverables, deadlines, and performance expectations. Once in a blue moon, we might have a few days to grapple with and devise solutions for a complicated issue that wasn't even on the radar a few weeks before. Barber's book is practical in that way: it deals with the nitty gritty of policy and program delivery, and provides simple, road-tested conceptual tools that can help you think through those tough situations. I've already found myself referring to his

approach in meetings and referring to some of his charts while writing up some documents - the same can't be said of, say, [the Evgeny Morozov book](#), much as I appreciated it.

Another reason I enjoyed the book is that it serves as an effective wake-up call for the public service to get its own house in order. Barber humorously describes the silly things us bureaucrats do all the time, from the point of view of a politician or staffer - think of our attachment to the status quo, our tendency to claim that something can't be done, our proclivity to engage in ridiculous turf wars, our stalling tactics, etc. If we agree that these kinds of behaviours are pervasive and counter-productive, we won't be able to rely on 'deliverology' to save us, given that there wouldn't be delivery units for most of the things the government does. So if the Government of Canada as a whole is going to become the kind of modern, high-performing, data-literate organization that Barber is envisioning, then bureaucrats will have to deal with some of our own purely internal performance issues in a more ambitious fashion (all within the framework of our delegated authorities, yada yada yada). Better diagnosing the nature of the silliness, and the possible solutions the bureaucracy could reasonably implement on an internal basis, is a topic for another day.

There's also a lot I didn't like about this book. My main irritant is that Barber is a poor social scientist. He usually conforms to a 'logic model' vision of government, where, for any given policy problem (e.g., low literacy rates) you just need to find the one right lever to pull (i.e., forcing teachers to teach one new literacy class a week in elementary school). Um.. hold on a minute. For most policy issues, there's a lot more going on under the hood - I dunno, maybe persistent social exclusion driven by economic inequality, systemic discrimination, or uncontrollable economic forces over which governments have little to no control? (Pick your poison.) So yes, I was somewhat disturbed by Barber's tendency to make sweeping statements about complicated situations, without much in the way of caveats. So you might want to listen to Barber to decide on how to 'run a government', but take his opinions on what the actual policy responses should be with a massive grain of salt. (Don't get even me started on his frequent claims that 'the markets vs. governments debate is over' - the guy's a pro-market social liberal with light redistributive tendencies. Which is fine; just don't try to make a drive-by 'end of history' argument which passes that off as being the only viable political/policy approach out there.)

Argh, there's a ton of other things that annoyed me about this book, but I want to keep this review 'lengthy', as opposed to 'unreasonably lengthy', so I will leave it at that - I won't even address Barber's constant humble-bragging and lack of critical self-reflection, or the unsatisfactory way in which Barber discussed the risks of over-relying on metrics (I'll leave Prez to [do the explaining](#), from way back in 2004). Another topic I would have liked to explore is that ultimately, Barber really only addresses a small sliver of what policy implementation actually involves (a lot of the times it seems to come down to tracking bureaucrats in order to scare them into coming up with new solutions, but he doesn't often tell you what the actual solutions were), but I'm a slow writer, and a man has to have evening hobbies that go beyond reviewing books.

[John Kenney](#)

I liked the book and agree with Nick that Barber's focus on delivery is refreshing. Here are a few things on my mind in relation to how it might be applied, particularly at the federal level:

One of the things that makes the "science of delivery" different than, say, federal public administration via the Management, Resources and Results Structure (MRRS) and the Management Accountability Framework, is that deliverology focuses government on strategy and priorities. The point is not to "deliverology" everything. In theory at least, it requires a government to make deliberate choices, understand where it's going and how it'll know if it's making progress getting there, and if not, learning and adapting as needed. It's hardcore when it comes to assessing whether or not the government has the capacity to deliver on what it sets out to do. While some of that may sound like the good intentions of the MRRS or "integrated planning", deliverology takes it to a new, concentrated level with political engagement and leadership.

Deliverology strikes me as a convergent practice. It picks up at a point where a government has identified its priorities and what it intends to do to achieve them. In the context of complex public problems (aka "wicked problems"), new and emerging policy approaches are attempting to embed divergent and integrative thinking, user research and experimentation into the policy design process in advance of converging on solutions. If well-executed, deliverology could expose the (non)effectiveness of intended policy solutions earlier in the policy cycle and open up opportunities for creative problem-solving and experimentation. I like how it builds in (some) stakeholder engagement, rigorous (enough) performance measurement and monitoring, learning and iteration to rapidly improve and address delivery problems as they arise. It's an action-oriented and continuous learning approach. Arguably, governments need more of that assuming they're open to learning, acknowledging when things aren't going well and adapting their approach to hit the mark.

I'm intrigued by the application of deliverology at the federal level. The UK and Ontario are oft-cited examples of deliverology in action, and in both cases, they are arguably closer to where the rubber hits the road as far as delivering policy interventions directly to citizens go. I'm writing generally here and it will depend on the policy priorities and strategies in question. The government and implicated jurisdictions are open to challenge conventional assumptions of how stakeholder arrangements may work to deliver the public goods, at least in theory (possibly in practice?).

Deliverology is not a magic bullet. Barber doesn't present it as one so let's not get cult-ish about it. There's a lot of good stuff to learn and apply, but note that the same federal government that appears eager to apply its principles and practices has also been clear on the need to create the time and space for (super)forecasting, designing citizen-centred digital services, and experimenting with new policy instruments and approaches, including behavioural and data-driven insights, and engaging Canadians via crowdsourcing and open data initiatives. It remains to be seen how consistent and compatible those approaches are with deliverology, which, as Barber writes, "...is still in its infancy". He concludes the book with three rules on the future of delivery:

- Big data and transparency are coming (prepare to make the most of them);*
- Successful markets and effective government go together (avoid the false dichotomy); and,*
- Public and social entrepreneurship will become increasingly important to delivering outcomes (encourage it).*

Deliverology is not a linear approach although it can sometimes come across as one. While Barber's focus is intentionally on delivery here, there's a continuous learning loop built into it that, if executed effectively, could yield insights that inform ongoing and future policy design and delivery approaches.

I've added "in theory", "if executed effectively" and "assuming that..." in a number of places above. I agree with Francis that Barber oversimplifies things a lot to demonstrate the lessons (or "rules") for government. I like many of them in principle (there I go again), but if and how deliverology is applied to influence complex systems and human behaviours both within the public service and beyond may depend on its openness to adapt where necessary to the policy contexts and needs of numerous implicated users and stakeholders at different times and scales.

Kent Aitken

Er... well done, gentlemen. I'm getting to this joint review late, and Nick, Francis, and John have covered a lot of ground in spectacular fashion. I only have a handful of points to add.

One is to re-emphasize Nick's angle, which is that part of the reason this book was so interesting was the possibility that it's about to influence public administration in Canada - possibly in tangible, day-to-day ways for some public servants. That said, during the discussion I also cautioned that one bureaucrat's environmental scanning or forecasting may be another bureaucrat's tea-leaf-reading. I'm trying to resist reading too far into things until deliverology rears its head for real.

The second is to sum up what the core of the book, and the idea of deliverology, was for me: it's government knowing what it wants to do, and knowing for sure that those things are getting done. Which sounds pretty reasonable. Barber highlights in the book that holding administrators to account for results isn't about a blame game, it's actually about helping and clearing obstacles for initiatives that are challenging to implement. (Which, I suspect, is an ideal that some past "implementers" may not have felt at the time.)

Which leads into a related third point: I'm curious as to how bureaucratic writing and deliverology will mesh. Government officials can tend towards non-specific language like "commit to," "enhance," "support," "enable," and "facilitate" in their planning and reporting - which I don't think would cut it to a delivery unit: "Okay, but what did you really do?"

Lastly, which contrasts a little with the above reviews: as a public servant, I spend my time in the weeds of public administration. I think about the details, the working level, and the implementation. Barber's ideas are those of someone who has to take the 10,000 foot-high view, working with heads of state or their close circles. So where Francis and John (rightly) express concern with how these ideas work in complex, day-to-day realities, the book gave me some perspective on what delivery might look like to a country's senior officials - who are forced to look for the best ways to condense their information intake while making things happen.

<http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/6017/full>

Michael Barber served as the head of Tony Blair's delivery unit. He is the doyen of what is now called "deliverology". His book is a very useful compendium of all that he learnt in his time. He distils 57 lessons, perhaps too many to absorb easily. But there is a lot of common sense and practical wisdom. He believes in ministers setting a clear strategy with specific indicators or targets which you then monitor to see how you are doing against your key objectives. This may seem radical in politics but is how many organisations are run nowadays. It is why he was a breath of fresh air in Whitehall.

His approach is far better than just seeing Whitehall and the civil service as plotting to stop ministers doing things. From Yes Minister to the Chris Mullin diaries this picture of Whitehall has been mined for its comic potential. But it is largely nonsense. It has painted a picture of ministers as by and large hapless, hopeless, and powerless. This is bad for politics and is not even true. Politicians may not be able to change things in the short run as much as they or the media hope. But in the long run — and that may be only a few years — ministerial decisions make a very big difference indeed. And these need not even be the obvious big decisions taken at the top by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. You have to know what to do and if as a minister you can get over three high but not insuperable hurdles you can get a lot done. First, you need to get the Treasury on side or, failing that, Number 10 has to be massively supportive. Second, your colleagues have to be broadly willing to trust your judgment. Third, you have to stay out of too many media scrapes. Then the truth is that ministers in a British government can actually get a lot done. Blaming the civil service is usually an alibi for a badly thought through policy which had little chance of success anyway.

Of course, that does not mean that ministers will necessarily get things right and nor may their advisers. There is a lack of real policy expertise in Whitehall. Too many officials move around too quickly which means they are susceptible to the institution's conventional wisdom because they have not really had the time to master the evidence and become truly expert. So the same mistakes are repeated. And ministers face trade-offs which have been around for decades without really any idea of how these dilemmas had presented themselves in the past and what decisions were taken then and why.

There is a repertoire of options for managing and improving public services which have been developed over the past few decades. You can always improvise and innovate but there are some classic types of response. Barber has a particularly strong discussion of different key strategic approaches — trust and altruism, hierarchy and targets, choice and competition, devolution and transparency, privatisation and vouchers. With

so much political heat around these options it is quite a contrast to have such a low-key, almost managerial assessment. Trust and altruism score particularly badly in his assessment.

Once the policy or the strategy is formulated you then have to deliver it. This is where Michael Barber really gets going. Implementation is what truly interests him. I worked in the Number 10 Policy Unit 30 years ago and if I had my time again I would do more to follow up on implementation. We did try to spend a day a week out of London just seeing how things were going in the hospital or the business or the benefit office. Often Margaret Thatcher appreciated the notes we wrote for her afterwards with a bit of the salty reality to them. But instead it is easy to be seduced by the sweet smell of freshly baked policy and not focus on the tricky job of what happened afterwards. The final product is not the ministerial speech or the policy statement or even the legislation; the final outcome is when services and people's lives are better.

But there are gaps in Barber's account. A lot of politics is missing. His examples are mainly from the Blair government and he could surely tell us more about how things really happened. He tells a story of Blair gradually building up the experience to reform. He completely fails to acknowledge the deliberate decisions taken early on by that government to abolish grant-maintained schools and GP fund-holding. For me, sitting on the Opposition benches in the late Nineties and watching Blairite ministers destroy these initiatives was desperately frustrating when they could so easily have kept them and improved them. He could have been more frank about why the Blairites did that and how they came to realise their mistake and ended up with a policy agenda not that different from John Major's.

That would open up the question of where the strategy comes from and the costs of sticking to it as against adjusting it. Another frustration when one observed the Blairites from the Opposition benches was that problems were easily dismissed as mere implementation issues when sometimes it was that the strategy was fundamentally flawed. Was Gallipoli a failure of implementation? In the real world there is an endless interplay between the strategy and the evidence about what is working. It was clearly tempting for Blair's advisers at the centre to assume that the strategy must be right and the only problems were implementation — but that is the behaviour of First World War generals in their chateaux. How do you get important messages about the real world to them?

Then there are also questions of how you set up and monitor performance indicators. Two incidents when the Treasury brought in performance measurement and pay for its officials revealed this challenge. I was working in the monetary policy division and had to set out measures of my performance. In a way the objective was very simple then — low inflation. But holding me personally responsible for that did seem a trifle presumptuous. So you then look at what you can control and instead suggest prompt and accurate briefing for the Chancellor's monetary policy discussions. But that is a retreat into the minutiae of process. The life of public sector bodies is so complex and so constrained that it is very difficult to pitch the performance measures at the right level.

Then what do you do? One person in each Treasury division was to receive a performance-related bonus. In our division it went to Bill. We were all rather surprised by this and as a young Turk I was bold enough to challenge the senior officials on this peculiar decision. The reply — from the Treasury's senior management, who were always hauling the rest of the public sector over the coals for their performance — was that Bill was a decent chap, but he was never going to be promoted, so giving him a performance bonus was a suitable consolation prize. That is what happens when central initiatives collide with Whitehall culture.

Politics and public policy are complex and difficult and worthwhile because there are so many different measures of success and there are trade-offs between them. You cannot simply suspend the trade-offs just to focus on one thing called the strategy. Michael Barber comes close to recognising this in an excellent discussion of what he calls the responsibility of stewardship. This is not the same as inertia or refusal to change. To me it seems like a Burkean respect for the wisdom that lies within an organisation and a recognition that we are custodians who want to pass it on better than we found it. Sometimes the very people working

away in the middle of an organisation in the less glamorous jobs far removed from strategy are the ones who understand this responsibility best.

Role of delivery units

https://www2.gwu.edu/~ibi/minerva/Spring2015/Joelson_Vellozo.pdf

http://www.opml.co.uk/sites/default/files/The_role_of_the_centre_in_driving_government_priorities.pdf

Cardiff Public Value Business School

<https://cardiff.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=902722b7-2a15-4dca-937e-36aa76f755cb>

<https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/deliverology-science/>

[The role of the centre in driving government priorities - the experience if delivery units \(2016\)](#)

<http://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/download/file/218617>

https://www.calfac.org/sites/main/files/Deliverology_Book_Reviews_for_web_0410.pdf

the problem of simplification <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/93747/3/93747.pdf>

<http://followersoftheapocalyp.se/opened13-john-seddon-and-others-on-deliverology/>

<https://montrose42.wordpress.com/2011/07/31/professor-michael-barber-in-demand-but-does-deliverology-deliver/>

<http://defendthecsu.blogspot.ro/2009/12/barbers-deliverology.html>

[Does Deliverology Matter?](#)

<http://wonkhe.com/blogs/deliverology-in-out-and-around-the-university/>

<https://www.odi.org/comment/7703-jim-kims-science-delivery-role-politics>

<https://www.alsde.edu/sec/rd/Presentations/Deliverology%20MEGA.pdf>

[Indonesia example \(WB\)](#)

<http://www.cpsrenewal.ca/2016/02/impossible-conversations-how-to-run.html>

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/20-things-about-delivery-michael-barber-and-3-stories-about-neglected-american-president-you>

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[Deliverology 101 - a field guide for educational leaders](#); Michael Barber (2011)

http://www4.ntu.ac.uk/nbs/document_uploads/99821.pdf

<https://publications.iadb.org/bitstream/handle/11319/6674/Governing-to-Deliver-Reinventing-the-Center-of-Government-in-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean.pdf?sequence=1>

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVANTICORR/Resources/3035863-1285601351606/NovemberGetNote.pdf>

<http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Voices/ArtofDelivery-web.pdf>

About the author

"Ronald Young lived the first 48 years of his life in the West of Scotland - 22 of them as an aspiring academic and innovative politician in local, then Regional, Government.

His next 22 years were spent as a consultant in central Europe and central Asia - generally leading small teams in institutional development or training projects.

Since 2012 he has divided his time tasting wines and paintings from a flat in Sofia, a flat in Bucharest and a house in the Carpathian mountains."

In such a manner is a life normally described - and how little of the hopes, pleasures and anguishes of life does it give away....so the following lines try to be more honest and revealing... ..

In 2008 I started a website which contains the major papers written over the years about attempts to reform various public organisations in the various roles I'm lucky enough to have played - politician; academic/trainer; consultant.

"Most of the writing in my field is done by academics - and gives little help to individuals who are struggling to survive in or change public bureaucracies. Or else it is propaganda drafted by consultants and officials trying to talk up their reforms. And most of it covers work at a national level - whereas most of the worthwhile effort is at a more local level.

The restless search for the new dishonours the work we have done in the past. As Zeldin once said - "To have a new vision of the future it is first necessary to have new vision of the past"

Since 2009 my blog - [Balkan and Carpathian Musings](#) - has tried to make sense of my organisational endeavours - to see if there are any lessons which can be passed on; to restore a bit of institutional memory and social history - particularly in the endeavour of what used to be known as "social justice".

"My generation believed that political activity could improve things - that belief is now dead and that cynicism threatens civilisation. I also read a lot and wanted to pass on the results of this to those who have neither the time nor inclination - as well as my love of painting, particularly the realist 20th century schools of Bulgaria and Belgium".

A new website - [Mapping the Common Ground](#) - is a library for articles and books he considers useful for those who - like Brecht - feel that "So ist die Welt - und muss nicht so sein"!

This book reflects a life (and perhaps attitude) shaped by the good fortune I've had -

- to work from an early age (26) with an unusually wide range of people (professionals, politicians, community activists - and a much smaller number of academics) who shared an aspiration to improve social conditions;
- To have had a job in a Polytechnic (and planning school) in the 1970s and first half of the 1980s which gave me the licence to talk and write about the issues relating to this work
- to have achieved a position of influence which helped develop a more inclusive style of government in the West of Scotland for 20 years
- to reengineer myself as a consultant, working and living for 25 years in central Europe and Central Asia - in the pursuit of what the turgid academic literature has come to call "good governance"

- all the while trying - through wide reading and writing - to try to make sense of what the masthead on my blog calls our "social endeavours", ie efforts to make the world a better place...

I've always had great difficulty answering the simple question "What do you do?" "Student" was easy but, after graduation, I had a quick succession of jobs in what could be called generally the "planning" field - and "planner" is as vague a term as "manager" and enjoyed a rather limited vogue. In 1968 I joined a polytechnic and was also elected to a town council - so "lecturer" was as good a description as what I did as any. Using my voice was what I was paid for - whether to transmit information or opinions. I read widely - so "reader" was also a pertinent word. I became heavily involved in community development - managing to straddle the worlds of community action and political bureaucracy (for 20 years I was the Secretary of ruling Labour groups in municipal and regional Councils and also a sponsor of community action) and figured in a book about "reticulists" (networkers) - but imagine putting that word in a passport application!

For a few years I was Director of a so-called "Research Unit" which was more like a Think Tank in its proselytising workshops and publications celebrating the new rationalism of corporate management and community development.

At age 43 my default activity became full-time (regional) politics - with a leader role but of a rather maverick nature who never aspired to the top job but was content to be at the interstices of bureaucracy, politics and academia. I remember my reception at an OECD function in central Sweden as someone with a proclivity to challenge.

All this paved the way for the "consultancy" which I have apparently practised for the past 20 years in Central Europe and Central Asia. But "consultant" is not only a vague but a (rightly) increasingly insulting term - so I was tempted for a period to enter the word "writer" on my Visa application forms since this was as good a description of what I actually did as any. At one stage indeed, my despairing Secretary in the Region had actually given me the nickname "Paperback writer". Except that this was seen by many border guards in central Asia as a threatening activity! Robert Reich's "symbolic analyst" briefly tempted - but was perhaps too close to the term "spy"!

When I did the [Belbin test on team roles](#) to which I was subjecting my teams, I had expected to come out as a leader - but was not altogether surprised to discover that my stronger role was a "resource person" - someone who surfed information and knowledge widely and shared it. What some people saw as the utopian streak in my writing gave me the idea of using the term "poet" at the airport guiches - but I have a poor memory for verse.

This morning, as I looked around at the various artefacts in the house, a new label came to me - "collector"! I collect beautiful objects - not only books and paintings but pottery, pens, pencils, laquered cases, miniatures, carpets, Uzbek wall-hangings, Kyrgyz and Iranian table coverings, glassware, terrace cotta figurines, plates, Chinese screens, wooden carvings et al. Of very little - except sentimental - value I hasten to add! But, of course, I have these things simply because I have been an "explorer" - first of ideas (desperately searching for the holy grail) and then of countries - in the 1980s Western Europe, the 1990s central Europe - finally central Asia and

beyond.

Some 25 years ago, when I was going through some difficult times, my sister-in-law tried to help me by encouraging me to explore the various roles I had - father, son, husband, politician, writer, activist etc. I didn't understand what she was driving at. Now I do! Lecturer, reticulist, politician, maverick, leader, writer, explorer, consultant, resource person, collector - I have indeed played all these roles (and more too intimate for this blog!). Makes me wonder what tombstone I should have carved for myself in the marvellous [Sapanta cemetery in Maramures](#) where people are remembered humourously in verse and pictures for their work or way they died!!

And it was TS Eliot who wrote that

old men ought to be explorers

I believe in people coming together at a local level to work for the common benefit - principles enshrined in [communitarianism](#) (about which I do have some reservations). I spent a lot of time supporting the work of [social enterprise](#) in low-income communities. None of this went down all that well with the technocrats or even members) of my political party - and the national politicians to whose books I contributed (eg [Gordon Brown](#)) soon changed their tune when they had a taste of power.

But, above all, I am a [passionate sceptic](#) - or [sceptical pluralist](#) - which is the reason for my adding the terms which form the glossary at the end - [Just Words?](#)

[This flickr account](#) gives with more examples of art.....[also this one](#)

LIST OF Author's PUBLICATIONS

[Dispatches to the Next Generation](#) March 2017

[The Slaves' Chorus - the 2016 posts](#)

[In Praise of Doubt - a blogger's year \(2015\)](#)

[Bulgarian Realists - getting to know Bulgaria through its Art](#) (2017 edition)

An unusual take on a country, the core of this book are 300 short notes on painters who caught my fancy in the decade I have known Bulgaria....

[Crafting Effective Public Administration](#) (2015);

This is a collection of short reflective notes about the efforts we have seen in the past 50 years to improve the machinery of government - with an emphasis on the role of the EU and its various programmes. They draw on (a) my pretty extensive reading of that extensive section of the literature on public administration reform which focusses on British experience (since 1970); but also on that of the various countries of central Europe and central Asia with which I have become familiar since 1991; and (b) my own experience as a political change-agent for 22 years and then consultant on administrative reform for the past 25 years

The book should be read alongside two long papers which I produced a few years ago -

- ["administrative reform with Chinese and European characters"](#) (2010) starts with an outline of the 12 features of Chinese public service which impacted on me when I lived in Beijing for a couple of months, preparing for a longer project. The rest of the paper is a summary of the sort of lessons I felt I had learned up to 1999 about public administration reform
- ["The Long Game - not the logframe"](#) was a caustic paper I presented to the 2011 NISPAcee Conference (building on an earlier paper to the 2007 Conference) in which I took apart the superficiality of the assumptions EC bureaucrats seemed to be making about the prospects of its Technical Assistance programmes making any sort of dent in what I called (variously) the kleptocracy or "impervious regimes" of most ex-communist countries.

With the exception of some 20 pages, they are, in effect, chatty notes on my everyday reading and thinking in a period - after 2009 - when I could be fairly relaxed. I had basically "hung up my boots". Although I was nominally Team Leader of an (EU Structural Fund) project in Bulgaria in 2010-12 and also involved in a bid for another (unsuccessful) project in the same country - my role was not a demanding one and gave me the time and opportunity to reflect.

[The Independence Argument - home thoughts from abroad](#) (2015)

How I tried to make sense of the 2 year debate which took place in Scotland about its referendum about independence.

[Mapping Romania - notes on an unfinished journey \(2014\)](#) [My \(cultural\) introduction to a little-known country](#)

[Introducing the Romanian Realists of the 19th and early 20th Centuries \(2014\)](#) [a disorganised set of notes about a little-known painting tradition...](#)

[Just Words](#) - a glossary and bibliography for the fight against the pretensions and perversities of power

[A Draft Guide for the Perplexed](#); a short paper I wrote in 2001 to share my concerns about the direction in which Western society was going.....

[The Long Game - not the log-frame \(2011\)](#); an attack on the myopic and arrogant assumptions western development agencies have taken to the task of building effective institutions in transition countries....

[Administrative Reform with Chinese Characteristics](#) (2010) my guilty contribution to a failed mission.....

[Training that works! How do we build training systems which actually improve the performance of state bodies](#) (2009) - this paper extracts some lessons from the work I've done in the last decade - particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Bulgaria. Even altho I say it myself - it is one of the best papers on the subject

[Learning from Experience - a Bulgarian](#) project

[Building Municipal Capacity](#) (2007) - an interesting account of an intellectual journey

[Roadmap for Local Government in Kyrgyzstan](#) (2007) - this is a long doc (117 pages. I enjoyed pulling out this metaphor - and developing and using (in workshops) the diagram at pages 76-77

[Building Local Government in a Hostile Climate \(2006\)](#)

[Overview of PAR in transition countries](#) - This is the paper I drafted for the European Agency for Reconstruction after the staff retreat the EAR Director invited me to speak at in June 2006 in Skopje, Macedonia. The best papers are always written after the event!

[Transfer of Functions - European experiences 1970-2000](#) I learned a lot as I drafted this paper for my Uzbek colleagues. I haven't seen this sort of typology before.

[In Transit - notes on good governance](#) (1999) The book I wrote almost two decades ago for young Central European reformers. I find it stands up pretty well to the test of time

[Annotated Bibliography for change agents](#) - For quite a few years I had the habit of keeping notes on the books I was reading. Perhaps they will be useful to others?

[The Search for the Holy Grail - some reflections on 40 years of trying to make government and its systems work for people](#)
