

Best Practices in Public Management: History, Theory and Application

Public management reform – indeed the reform of the entire public sector – became a major focus of most developed and developing countries after 1990 (Caiden 1991: 57-70). Reform of different elements of the public sector, such as the recruitment and appointment of civil servants, goes back well over a hundred years (Roberts 2010), and there were various efforts in many countries through the 1960s and 1970s to reform budgetary practices, expenditure management, and policy instruments such as state enterprises (Lane 2000; Christensen, Laegreid 2007; Christensen, Laegreid 2002; Christensen, Laegreid 2008, Dunleavy 2006). However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-91 concentrated attention on major reform efforts in central and Eastern Europe, building on the Thatcher/Reagan movements to re-build the state in the 1980s (Savoie, 1994). By 1990 these disjointed – and partly ideologically driven -- efforts had congealed into a broad field of policy intervention in its own right: reforms of the entire system of the public sector, including many policy fields such as health, education and income security. “Since the 1980s, a global reform movement in public management has been vigorously underway” (Kettl 2005: 1). Peters and Pierre noted: “Except perhaps during major wars there never has been the extent of administrative reform and reorganization that has been occurring during the period from approximately 1975 onward” (Peters, Pierre 2001: 1).

While these reform programs were country specific, they were not isolated or self-contained, for at least two reasons. First, governments were embarking on new terrain, and so naturally looked to learn from other governments’ experiences. Second, a network of global organizations (international governmental agencies, foundations, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, professional associations, leading academic programs) existed to provide a platform for this learning, exchange, and ultimately, transfer of information about public sector reform experiences. In some cases the transfer was coercive – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are the best examples of international agencies that could impose conditionality on their loans (Hood 1998: 202). They had the leverage of money, and that money came with demands for certain policy and management practices (Pollitt, Bouckaert 2004). In other cases, organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) relied on the power of ideas and research, as well as unique opportunities for member and non-member states to voluntarily exchange experiences and learn from each other (Risse-Kappen 1995).

Policy transfer and the application of “lessons” in the area of public management have been remarkably under-studied outside of a few high profile cases such as the sweep of neo-conservative ideas and “new public management” in the Reagan and Thatcher era (Evans 2009, Savoie 1994). That gap has been recently filled in part by mapping the global networks around public sector reform and at least one key player, the OECD (Buduru, Pal 2010; Pal, Ireland 2009). While more attention is beginning to be paid to international channels of policy transfer in this field (Rautalin, Alasuutari 2007; Dolowitz, Marsh 2000; Simmons, Dobbin & Garrett 2008a), the vast bulk of comparative public management research consists of either country-based case studies (single country studies of reform or management practices) or limited comparisons of national-level reform projects. But these reform programs are amalgams of key ideas coursing through the networks dedicated to public management (broadly defined). For example, a reform of a country’s integrity framework (anti-corruption) might borrow some ideas from the OECD, some from the World Bank, some from Transparency International, some from recent reforms in Brazil – amalgamating them into a broad policy initiative. In our view, these ideas or “strands,” are the DNA of reform. To understand the dynamics and content of reform, we need to understand its recombinant character.

Countries do not borrow everything, and transfer agents do not pass on ideas indiscriminately. Only those strands deemed to be “best” are passed on and examined. “Best practices” has been the touchstone for policy transfer in this field for the last twenty years (OECD 1995; OECD 2005; OECD 2010b). We propose to map the public sector reform genome.

Objectives

The project has six key objectives related to three main segments of research. The first segment is an analysis of publications and reports on public management “best practices” emanating from ten international agencies between 1990 and 2011 (detailed methodology is described below). Each of these agencies, while specialized to a certain degree, have regularly and continuously produced research on good governance “best practices” in books, journals, reports, symposia, conferences, and other vehicles such as checklists and guides and toolkits. Indeed, the sheer amount of material produced by these agencies is so large and variegated that we will adopt the 2010 OECD approach to defining the core of public administration in terms of eight pillars: budget practices; human resource management; integrity; internal and external reporting; e-government readiness; centre of government; regulatory quality; multi-level governance (OECD 2010a). The first objective in this segment is to use the template in conjunction with some operational definitions of what falls under the category of “best practice” to trace the production of advice in each of these agencies over the past twenty years. This will produce a database (concepts/advice plus source citation) of possibly hundreds if not thousands of examples of advice about what constitutes “best practice” in a given field. The second objective in this segment is to conduct an analysis of trends for each agency in the evolution of their definitions of “best practice,” comparison among different agencies, overall trends over time in the aggregate, and a probe for contradictions and inconsistencies. We hypothesize that even in the same field (e.g., expenditure management) agencies will have different definitions or approaches to “best practice.” Furthermore, we hypothesize that there will be reversals and even ruptures, depending on circumstances and fads, in these definitions. As an example, “agentification” and contracting out was all the rage in the 1990s, but came into question as governments realized that their oversight capacity of these agencies was shriveling (Pollitt, Bouckaert 2004; Radin 2006; Pollitt, Thiel & Homburg 2007; Pollitt 2001). The relatively sudden emphasis on ethics and integrity is another example (Denhardt, Denhardt 2003).

The second segment of the research is a response to the “so what?” question. Our hypothesis is the policy transfer does indeed take place, though in more complicated ways than most of the literature assumes (see Context section below for a discussion of this literature). The exact mechanisms of transfer are obscure, and most policy transfer analysis has either been anecdotal, or simply measured prevailing standards at the international level against what emerges in legislation at the national level (Dolowitz, Marsh 2000; Larmour 2005; Dolowitz, Marsh 1996). The first segment of research will definitively map what constitutes the global understanding about “best practices” in public management over the past twenty years. The second segment will explore the degree to which these strands of conceptual DNA actually get incorporated into the body of public sector reforms. To do this, we will conduct detailed case studies of five recent national level public sector reform efforts: Australia, Canada, France, Italy, and the UK (methodology is described below). Australia, France and Italy embarked on their public sector reform projects several years ago. The UK started a new wave of reforms under the Cameron government. Canada launched a quiet but far-reaching reform exercise shortly after the 2011 election. The first objective under this segment of the research will be to provide a detailed case study for each country on what their reforms entail, why they were launched in the first place, how they evolved, and if possible, gauge their effects. The mix of countries should provide a good cross-section of global regions as well as forms of government. The second objective in this segment is to provide a comparative

analysis of the degree to which policy transfer actually occurred and which sets of “best practices” were taken, adapted, and applied. The “best practice” segment will cover twenty years; this segment will examine reforms in the last five years among these countries.

The third segment of the research is a review of the curriculum of about fifty leading schools of public administration (MPA) and public policy (MPP) around the world, to assess the degree to which the identified “best practice” prescriptions are reflected in academic programs. This is an important but understudied link in the policy transfer literature – ideas migrate not only through governmental institutions but through academic programs that train those who populate those institutions. MPA/MPP programs contain more purely academic subjects such as organizational behaviour and constitutional law, but as professional degrees they also have to be open to developments in the actual practice of public management. In this way, ideational DNA migrates from international agencies and government practice into programs (with some lag), and is absorbed by students who often then go and work for these agencies and governments. It will be impossible to conduct a historical analysis of the evolution of curricula, so this segment of the research will take a snapshot of curricula circa 2011, using a combination of web site analysis and requests to see actual syllabi. To complement this, we will also analyze the standards developed by leading accreditation organizations in the field such as the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (US), and the United Nations/International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration Task Force on Standards of Excellence for Public Administration Education and Training (Rosenbaum, Kauzya 2007; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2008). The first objective in this third segment of research is to provide a “curriculum map” of leading MPA/MPP programs around the world, using categories derived from the accreditation agencies from previous work conducted by the authors on the Canadian case, and some of the few attempts in the literature. The second objective is to compare the content of identified “best practices” with the content of programs. Our hypothesis (based on previous work in Canada) is that the core of these programs will vary to the degree that they reflect identified “best practices,” but nonetheless will contain key elements such as expenditure management, e-government, and client service standards. Using syllabi, we can trace citations to work produced by the identified agencies.

These three segments of research with their accompanying six objectives will yield the first comprehensive database and analysis of public management “best practices” identified at the global level by international agencies and pedagogical institutions. The ultimate and overarching objective is to make this database available to both researchers and especially practitioners, as a tool to inform their public management reform projects. Given the current climate, these projects promise to become a fixture of government policy over the next decade.

Context

The Literature

The project is situated at the intersection of three bodies of literature: (1) public management analyses of public sector reform, (2) best practices, and (3) policy transfer.

The public management literature since about the early 1990s has been preoccupied with national experiments in public sector reform, and principally about the application and success of “new public management” (NPM) as an ideology guiding those reforms (Kettl 2005, Boston 1996, Aucoin 1995). A good deal of the debate has been about what NPM actually is (or was), and more recently whether it has been eclipsed by “post-NPM” paradigms. We do not wish to enter this debate, but rather would point out some of the limitations of this literature. For one thing, the work on NPM per se as a theory of

management has only rarely looked at the international sources for these ideas, and has contented itself with discussions about what NPM really is, and its application in single national contexts (Lane 2000; Christensen, Laegreid 2002; Christensen, Laegreid 2008; Dunleavy 2006). The literature therefore provides interesting analysis of the application of some NPM ideas in specific countries, but without any serious discussion about the origins of those ideas. Complementing these single country studies are a small handful of comparative analyses (Pollitt, Bouckaert 2004; Halligan 2003; Charih 2007). Again, this work has taken NPM as the backdrop, and tries to compare applications across countries, usually finding that different clusters of countries (e.g., the Anglo-democracies, the Nordic states, Western European) have adopted NPM to varying degrees depending on legal and administrative traditions and culture. We will build on the evident strengths and the firm foundations of this literature by looking more deeply at the sources of these reform frameworks.

The second, smaller, literature is on “best practices” as a sociological and administrative phenomenon. Best practice as a conceptual framework was pioneered in the business management literature (Osborne, Gaebler 1993, Peters, Waterman 1982), and took hold in the public management literature in the 1990s, not coincidentally just as NPM was ascendant and claiming a new “one best way” of managing government. In fact, “best practice research” was explicitly linked by some early observers to the NPM “post-bureaucratic” reform movement (Overman, Boyd 1994, Loffer 200). By one definition, the “concept of “best practice” is widely used to distinguish exemplary or improved performance in organizations” (Katorobo 1998: 1). The public management literature bristles with articles on “best practice” in a host of areas, from human resource management to program evaluation to the management of municipal waste. The literature tends to be heavily anecdotal and case based, in order to provide detailed portraits of “success” that can then be transferred and emulated. Indeed, the proliferation of prizes for outstanding performance, as well as the growth of benchmarking and performance measurement (Buduru, Pal 2010) has gone hand-in-hand with an emphasis on uncovering “best practices” – what is best cannot be determined without some sort of metric. The most perceptive analysis of the phenomenon of “best practice” in the realm of public management comes from Hood. He points out that “... the international organizations are almost by their *raison d’être* committed to a view of international convergence on some single ‘best practice’ model which it is their role to ‘benchmark’ and foster, helping the ‘laggards’ to catch up with the best-practice techniques of the vanguard” (Hood 2000: 203). Despite the methodological and analytical difficulties in identifying “best practices,” let alone discerning their underlying causal structure, the language of “best practice” is very much alive in the practice of public management. The Canada School of Public Service, for example, states that “Best practices in public management are defined and integrated into learning by building on the existing work in policy centres and departments. ... The Canada School of Public Service ... encourages the promotion of best practices in public management and change management support” (Canada School of Public Service 2010).

The third literature addresses the issue of policy transfer. Apart from Hood and some others, the public administration literature has not looked closely at the phenomenon of policy transfer, especially from international governmental agencies. The strong tendency, as we noted, has been to do single country studies of public sector reform. Students of public policy, as opposed to public management per se, have however been interested for several years in the process of “copying” or transferring policy models from one jurisdiction to the others, or from international agencies to national governments.

Rose provided the seminal contribution to this work in 1993, focusing on what he called “lesson-drawing” in public policy, and explicitly highlighted the role of IGOs: “Intergovernmental and international organizations encourage exchange of ideas between countries with similar levels of economic resources” (Rose 1993: 105). Bennett’s work (Bennett 1991, Bennett 1992, Bennett 1997) was

a sustained attempt to explore policy transfer or diffusion. He concluded that there was no one method of diffusion, but that there were different dynamics of adoption: lesson-drawing (where governments see a problem and borrow an existing solution – essentially a rationalist problem-solving and borrowing procedure), legitimation (referring to other international examples to satisfy domestic critics), and harmonization (Bennett 1997). This insight was supported by Dolowitz and Marsh (Dolowitz, Marsh 2000, Dolowitz, Marsh 1996). But how to frame this process? Evans points out that the literature has generated a variety of terms, all broadly similar, but with slight differences in emphasis: bandwagoning, convergence, diffusion, emulation, policy learning, social-learning, and lesson-drawing (Evans 2009: 238). Work on policy diffusion also routinely highlights another important transfer mechanism: the role of policy professionals, academics, intergovernmental organisations and NGOs (Simmons, Dobbin & Garrett 2008b: 35). These “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992) help to define problems and frame solutions for those problems, and become key promoters and sellers of policy, effectively the human side of the policy transfer network (Dunlop 2009, Common 2001: 35 2001, Evans 2004).

Our work will draw on all three literatures, but extend them significantly. We will conduct the first longitudinal analysis of best practices in eight related fields of public management by looking at ten key international transfer agents and fifty MPA/MPP programs.

Relationship to Previous Research

The proposal builds directly on recent work by the two co-applicants. Pal received a SSHRC grant four years ago (# 410-2007-2056) to examine global public policy networks around public sector reform. The premise was that public sector reform had emerged as a distinct policy field in a range of countries, and that reform efforts had strong similarities across jurisdictions. The reform movement and the similarities are rooted in a loose network of intergovernmental organizations, foundations, professional associations, and non-governmental organizations. The work yielded five refereed articles on characteristics of the network itself and a forthcoming refereed book on the OECD and its role in governance reform (Pal 2012). Clark combines a long career as a practitioner (Secretary of the Treasury Board of Canada) with extensive experience with post-secondary educational policy. He also is currently serving as the Chair of the Accreditation Committee of the Canadian Association of Programs of Public Administration (CAPPA). His recent research has been on reforms to the Ontario post-secondary system (Clark 2009). Moreover, he led a SSHRC-supported project to develop the Public Policy and Governance Portal (PPG), which will be the platform for the open-access database on international governance “best practices” (see www.ppgportal.ca). This combination of research interests and experience positions the two co-applicants to conduct all three segments of the proposal.

Importance and Contribution to Knowledge

The project is important in several senses. First, it will continue Pal’s work on global networks of public sector reform by examining one specific tool used by international agencies to develop benchmarks and induce convergence towards common standards of governance. By using the OECD’s eight pillars of public sector governance as a template, and analyzing all publications of the listed agencies over twenty years, it will be the first complete database of so-called “good governance” standards. Second, it will be the first attempt to systematically assess the application of these standards in actual national reform projects. We expect that the application will be uneven, and standards will undergo a process of “translation” or “editing” (Sahlin-Andersson 2000). Being able to trace these processes in five different empirical cases will provide important site lines for future research on

governance reform. Third, it will be the first matching of these global standards or “best practices” to what is taught in the crucible of management training – MPA/MPP programs around the world.

The contributions to knowledge mirror these elements. There is no existing database on “best practices.” We will provide it. There is no comparative analysis of public sector reform projects in light of a common understanding of global standards. We will provide it. There is no careful international comparison of MPA/MPP programs in light of what is considered important by practitioners. We will provide that too. The project will also contribute further to the literature on standard-setting (see below) and global policy networks.

Methodology

Each segment of the project has a specific methodology. In the first segment, we will rely on the OECD’s eight pillars of public governance as a template to gather “best practices.” We will hire three research assistants, who will work for about a year on the publications of the ten identified organizations. They will code each best practice entry, and enter them into the PPG database. The ten organizations will be: OECD (focusing on divisions related to the GOV directorate), World Bank, International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Public Administration Network, the Asia Development Bank, the Commonwealth Secretariat, Eurasia Foundation, Open Society Institute, and the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe.

The second segment will rely on a mix of literature on document review and interviews. As a result of Pal’s book on the OECD, we have a network of senior contacts in all five governments who have led their respective reform efforts. The interviews will be conducted by the co-applicants. In our experience, senior officials are prepared to submit to confidential interviews for research projects of this type, but only if they feel that they are engaged with researchers of similar status (graduate students or hired interviewers won’t do). We will develop a standard questionnaire probing the nature and dynamics of the reform effort, and specifically probe for the influence and incorporation of “best practices.” To our knowledge, this will be the first empirical probe of the micro-dynamics of policy transfer through global policy networks around public sector reform, using a process-tracing methodology (King, Keohane & Verba 1994).

The third segment will use the methodological template designed for the analysis of MPA/MPP programs in Canada – core courses, program requirements, etc. (Clark, Pal Forthcoming). The schools will be selected on the basis of accreditation reports by the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation and the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (USA). We will use an electronic survey combined with any publicly available information (e.g., accreditation reports).

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