
REVIEW ESSAY

FOR THE PEOPLE: CAN WE FIX PUBLIC SERVICE?

John D. Donahue and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., eds.

LES METCALFE
BOCCONI UNIVERSITY

For the People: Can We Fix Public Service? John D. Donahue and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., eds. Visions of Governance in the 21st Century, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2003, 282 pages, ISBN 0-8157-1896-9 (cloth), 0-8157-1897-7 (paperback)

For the People: Can We Fix Public Service? is the concluding volume of the Kennedy School's Visions of Governance project, launched in 1996. It is a collection of fourteen chapters by nineteen authors, all of Harvard and almost all at the Kennedy School. This provenance generates higher expectations of standards of scholarship and policy relevance than usual. Multi-author collections range widely in quality and presentation, from the themeless to the seamless. The former is more common than the latter. In terms of both the quality of the contributions and the editorial expertise deployed, to say nothing of the academic community on which the authors have been able to draw, there is reason to expect valuable contributions to understanding public management and improving public service.

In the main, these high expectations are met. Individual chapters are well written, interesting, and sometimes very provocative and challenging. At the same time, public management is a difficult field in which to establish a clear focus and develop a theme that can both encompass many diverse phenomena and generate plausible policy prescriptions. As well as being intrinsically difficult, public management reform has to overcome eroding public distrust, media scepticism, and widespread lack of comprehension of the practicalities of managing change in government.

Donahue and Nye begin by stating that meeting the emerging challenges of governance "depends—not exclusively, but overwhelmingly—on the talents, training, motivation, ethos and organization of the people who do the work of governance" (ix). In fact, the book is mostly about the people in government who make the system work rather than the organizations. Its normative theme is that better service for the public requires a better public service. Few involved in teaching and research on public management would disagree, and reformers generally (if belatedly) reach the same conclusion. While the book does contain some comparative analysis, it is mainly related to American concerns. There is a strong sense in most of the chapters of working within, and struggling to overcome the problems of, an American public

Direct all correspondence to: Les Metcalfe, Bocconi University, Department of Public Management and Health Care, Viale Isonzo 23, Milan 20135, Italy. E-mail: les.metcalfe@uni-bocconi.it

service tradition that is more Madisonian than Hamiltonian and has created institutions and a culture more preoccupied with preventing the abuse of political power than promoting effective executive performance.

Given this institutional context, the main current preoccupation is how to respond, in a climate of public distrust, to the challenges of distributed governance. This is more than just another way of looking at public management in a federal system. Governance tasks and responsibilities are dispersed even more than before among different levels of government and among different types of organizations outside as well as within government. Nye and Donahue set out a broad canvas for the era of distributed governance. On the vertical dimension there are different levels of government: subnational and international government as well as the national level. On the horizontal dimension the framework allows for organizational diversity encompassing nonprofit and for-profit organizations as well as a variety of public-sector organizations. The thesis is that the effectiveness of these interorganizational systems and networks of governance requires innovative public management skills. New forms of expertise need to be deliberately nurtured and developed because they are inadequately provided by the current crop of public servants and the structures and systems that socialize them.

The book is divided into three sections, oriented to three basic questions. The first section is diagnostic, and addresses the question "What's wrong with public service today?" It has chapters by David Gergan and Barbara Kellerman on public leadership; Georg J. Borjas on public sector/private sector pay differentials; Donahue on career patterns and mobility; Pippa Norris on whether there is still a public service ethos that influences values, job satisfaction, and performance; and Merilee S. Grindle on the problems of improving public service in poor countries. The second section considers "What should a future public service look like?" compared with what currently exists. It includes chapters by Linda J. Bilmes and Jeffrey R. Neal on human resources management, Elaine Ciulla Kamarck on public servants in the twenty-first century, Stephen Goldsmith on local problem solving, and Kenneth Winston on moral competence. The third section poses the prescriptive question "How do we get from here to there?" Chapters cover leadership, by Robert D. Behn, education for public service by Alexander Keyssar and Ernest R. May, performance-related pay by Iris Bohnet and Susan C. Eaton, and a comparative perspective on government personnel policy by Derek Bok.

It is apparent that authors found it difficult to keep strictly to the logic of the editorial framework. This is not surprising. The subject is so large that the early chapters could not provide a unified diagnostic framework for all the subsequent chapters. Individual authors provide more specific diagnoses related to their own interests and subjects. Each of the three sections will be considered separately with comments on individual chapters.

Gergan and Kellerman stress important changes in the public management context and make a stimulating case for new thinking about public leadership. However, propositions such as "[p]ublic leaders must work across every imaginable boundary" (21) are obvious overstatements. And, they make highly questionable, one-size-fits-all assertions, like "[a]s the literature on public, private and nonprofit leadership attests, our images of ideal leadership have merged. The traits and skills expected of leaders in

one sector scarcely differ from those in the others" (25). Ignoring strategic contingencies in institutional contexts might lead to someone who has run a baseball team to think he could become president of the United States or even initiate regime change in a far-off country. Borjas shows that, in the U.S., public-sector employees are not just less well paid but pay differentials have become significantly less than in the private sector. He points to the difficulty that widening private-sector pay differentials pose for the public sector in attracting sufficient high-quality staff. This is a problem for most if not all public services. It would be interesting to establish benchmarks that show whether it is worse in the U.S. than elsewhere. Donahue's empirical examination of the career patterns of presidential appointees shows that assumptions of increasingly transient, top management, in-and-out careers are unwarranted. Incomers from the private sector with little governmental experience are not swamping those that have. Similarly, Norris finds little support in the International Social Survey Programme study (1997), on which she relies, for the loss of public-sector ethos. But it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from such a broad multinational survey, and there are unresolved conceptual problems about the underlying model. We are left with the question of whether job satisfaction is a dependent variable alongside job performance or an intervening variable that contributes to performance. Are happy workers productive workers? Or, is there a tradeoff between job satisfaction and performance? It is unclear what this contributes to diagnosis without a clearer specification of public-service ethos. Grindle has interesting and telling examples but, again, it is difficult to pull them together in a diagnosis of what ails public service. This chapter moves fairly quickly to prescriptions for second generation public management reforms, and concludes with the thought that in poor countries civil society nongovernmental organizations may offer salvation.

In the second section, Bilmes and Neal look at what the public sector should be like if it is to attract a fair share of current students. They provide a diagnosis of the flaws of government's personnel management, which are reflected in the findings of a survey of students whose experience of public management is unrecorded but is not likely to be extensive. Seeing the public sector as students see it has some obvious relevance from a recruiting standpoint. But how does it contribute to providing a vision of the future shape of public service? The alternative they propose is largely based on a selective view of how progressive businesses manage personnel. This does not take into account the policies and practices of, *inter alia*, Jack Welch, and arguing for more flexibility offers no systematic basis for dealing with the significant differences among public-sector organizations. Their own view seems to be that the private sector leads the way in people management, and government should imitate private-sector models. There are similarities here with Kamark's chapter, which argues for a shift from rule-based to performance-based organizations. She connects this with the theme of distributed governance through familiar trends to network and market governance. It would have been interesting to pursue one or both of these further. But the rather truncated discussion of educational vouchers does not unravel the real management problems of constructing public management systems in which professional and commercial models of organization vie for supremacy. Children are clients, but their parents make consumer choices on their behalf among schools whose managers must balance commercial preoccupations with income generation against

professional concerns with educational need. Goldsmith's case study of reforms in Indianapolis is as much about solutions and change processes as diagnosis. Aside from the fact that the reforms he describes went against the conventional wisdom of privatization and outsourcing, his account provides an integrated and more rounded picture of the public management reform process than is often the case. There is a sense of getting inside the process of managing change. Job satisfaction comes from being challenged and enabled to perform better. Winston addresses important issues of moral competence in the context of distributed governance. In the anomie of distributed governance, what are the codes of conduct? While his chapter discusses social architecture, it would have been useful if it had contained a more thorough consideration of the implications of organizational diversity and organizational interdependence for the conduct of public managers in organizational networks and the design of appropriate frameworks of accountability.

The third section, on how we get from here to there, might be expected to cover issues of process and reform strategy but only does so in part. Behn's chapter is the most challenging because it questions the technocratic assumption of fixing the public service. What has gone wrong and how can we fix it? His rejection of the idea of a quick fix only serves to highlight the problems and challenges of managing change in government. Reform always involves the management of change. But there is no chapter in this section on how we get from here to there that considers alternative change strategies or the dynamics of managing change. Behn's useful discussion of leadership is premised on the impossibility of radical structural change in U.S. government. This is a pity, because there are many public management problems where improvements do require radical reform. For example, the European Union is currently in the process of major structural change without doing nearly enough to build the capacities needed to make the enlarged system work effectively. The chapter by Keyssar and May on the history of education for public service in the U.S. is more about where things have been than where they should go or how to get there. Bohnet and Eaton provide a useful discussion of performance-related pay that defines fairly precisely the motivational and organizational conditions in which pay can be related to individual performance in ways that are likely to lead to better results. Often, these conditions are not met in the field of public management. This prompts questions about whether they are met in business contexts that are held up as irrefutable proof of the merits of an approach that relates high financial rewards to high performance, ignoring intervening institutional variables in the process. As Herbert Simon (2000) remarked in his Gauss lecture, the same individual is very likely to achieve markedly different levels of performance in the U.S. and in a developing country. Should rewards be attributed to individual talent as if organizational context and social infrastructure do not matter? Bok's chapter is stimulating, level headed, and directs attention to what kind of training and development public managers should receive. In some ways it would have been better to have it at the beginning rather than the end of the book. Governments everywhere seem to get an inadequate share of a limited pool of talent, and make poor use of it. Is the U.S. government really so bad when one makes international comparisons?

Whatever the answer, there is still the question of how much improved performance is a matter of getting enough of the right people to run public

organizations, and how much it is a matter of introducing reforms of the organizations themselves. This book is much more about the right people than the right organizations. There are dangers in this. The innovative leader in public management is a coalition builder rather than the go-it-alone hero of business management folklore. Given the concern with distributed governance, it is surprising that the book does not pay more attention to the interorganizational dimension of public management and the problems of coordination and integration that are generally so important to success in managing public policies. Also, the book is principally about having the right people in government. But, as the editors and authors emphasize, governance goes wider than government. This raises questions about how much individual and organizational development needs to take place in counterpart organizations outside government to make the system work. Does government have a role in this developmental process? Those, at least from the European side of the Atlantic, appear to be significant omissions (or issues for future research), in what is a stimulating collection of essays and research reports.

REFERENCE

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