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Performance paradoxes: The politics of evaluation in public services

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Performance Paradoxes

The Politics of Evaluation in Public Services[AQ]

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Introduction

The expansion of systems for scrutinising and evaluating the performance of public services has received much academic attention (e.g. Davis, Downe and Martin 2001; Hood *et al.* 1998; Humphrey 2002; Paton 2003; Pollitt *et al.* 1999; Power 1997). In this chapter, I intend to explore some of the paradoxes and forms of politics associated with the development of these systems. I draw out the international and national politics of inspection in relation to the themes of transparency and good governance before examining the 'paradox of government' in relation to public services. I then consider the 'paradox of independence' embedded in the institutional organisation of evaluation and the 'paradox of publicness' as a focus of competing representations of the public interest. Finally, I turn to the 'paradox of success' that is associated with the practice of evaluation and its outcomes. Each of these paradoxes is associated with different forms and modes of politics – as agents, groups and organisations strive to claim 'success' in representing the public interest. I use 'evaluation' to refer to the array of agencies that audit, inspect and scrutinise the provision of public services.

This is a slightly different view of scrutiny and evaluation from that offered in official accounts that stress the themes of transparency, accountability, good governance and continuous improvement (on the part of services and their evaluators). This paradox-centred account is not a story about the distortion of

the pure principles of inspection, audit, or evaluation. This is not a process in which 'politics' enters to undermine or corrupt innocent intentions or practices. On the contrary, these paradoxes – and the possibilities for politics that they create – are built into the intentions, design and implementation of performance evaluation in public services.

Public service performance
The paradox of government

The expansion of public service performance evaluation in its many forms is associated with two interrelated processes: the reconstruction of the organisational forms of states (variously branded as the 'new Public Management' and 'reinventing government', Hood 1991; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; see also Clarke and Newman 1997) and the development of what Larner and Walters (2004) call 'global governmentalities': ways of thinking about the regulation of economic, social and political action that work across national boundaries. These globalising conceptions include notions of accountability, transparency and good governance that circulate through international organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (see Harper 2000; West and Sanders 2003). These organisations provide 'templates and benchmarks' against which national governments can place (and, of course, evaluate) their own public service and public management reform programmes.

In a complex interaction with these globalising dynamics, national state systems have been subjected to extensive organisational remodelling and refurbishment. I want to highlight a number of distinctive features here that create the institutional landscape in which the expansion of performance evaluation 'makes sense'. They form the contexts in which systems of evaluation appear reasonable, plausible and necessary. This is a brief list but I hope it makes clear the multiple dynamics that have been in play in programmes of state reform.

First is the *fiscalization of discourses* about public services, welfare provision and other state-centred activities (Prince 2001). This refers to the ways in which public and political debate about policies, governmental objectives and forms of organising to achieve them have been increasingly placed within 'fiscal' frames: about acceptable levels of taxation and public spending; about the relationship between public spending and national competitiveness; about the 'efficiency' of provision (and calculations of its 'value for money'). Stein describes the widespread use (and slippery meanings) of 'efficiency' as a cult:

> The cult of efficiency, like other cults, advances political purposes and
> agendas. In our post-industrial age, efficiency is often a code word for an
> attack on the sclerotic, unresponsive, and anachronistic state, the detritus of
> the industrial age that fits poorly with our times. The state is branded as
> wasteful, and market mechanisms are heralded as the efficient alternative.
> (Stein 2001, p.7)

Second, Stein's comments point to the construction of *new types of organisational
forms* for the production, distribution and management of public services
(Clarke 2006). These include 'outsourcing' to preferred market suppliers; the
greater engagement of voluntary sector organisation; the creation of 'hybrid'
organisations that work across the increasingly blurred boundary between
public and private sectors; and finally the increasing 'devolution of responsibil-
ity' to individuals, families and households to provide for their own well-being.
But all of these different organisational forms are expected to behave in 'busi-
nesslike' ways and to be 'well managed'. Such norms – it is claimed – will drive
improvements in efficiency and quality (Cutler and Waine 1997). The effect is
to create a more dispersed and complex field of 'public services' (sometimes
described as 'fragmentation') that poses problems of co-ordination and control
for governments.

    Third, these changes have taken place in the context of changing relation-
ships between governments and the governed. In western societies, at least,
these relationships seem marked by several intersecting tendencies: disaffection
from processes of official politics (lower involvement in activities ranging from
membership of parties through to voting); increasing scepticism or cynicism
about politics and politicians; and increasing mobilisations outside of conven-
tional politics around different sorts of interests and identities (from environ-
mentalism through to 'countryside' and 'fathers' movements in the UK). These
different tendencies have paradoxical consequences for governments and the
role of the state in contemporary societies. Hansen and Stepputat pick up a
version of this paradox (what they call the 'paradox of inadequacy and indis-
pensability') when they argue:

> The paradox seems to be that while the authority of the state in con-
> stantly questioned and functionally undermined, there are growing pres-
> sures on states to confer full-fledged rights and entitlements on ever more
> citizens, to confer recognition and visibility on ever more institutions,
> movements or organizations, and a growing demand on states from the

so-called international community to address development problems effectively and to promote a 'human rights culture'. (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, p.2)

This paradox is intensified in the case of public services. Governments persistently promise to reform, improve or modernise public services, not least because publics continue to want publicly provided services to support them in the face of both old and new 'risks'. Meanwhile, governments have adopted a position of mistrust in relation to public service providers. The logic of market superiority (as against sclerotic and anachronistic state bureaucracies) means that public services should be subjected to the improving discipline of market dynamics. Where such dynamics cannot be achieved by direct 'outsourcing', governments have tried to find the mechanisms through which to mimic market dynamics, creating internal or quasi-market forms; creating 'competition regimes' between organisations; and creating 'virtual consumers' (Clarke 2006; Miller 2005). The idea of responding to 'consumer expectations' and providing reliable information have played a central role in UK public service reform:

> The challenges and demands on today's public services are very different from those of the post-war years. The rationing culture which survived after the war, in treating everyone the same, often overlooked individuals' different needs and aspirations. Rising standards, a more diverse society and a steadily stronger consumer culture have increased the demand for good quality schools, hospitals and other public services, and at the same time brought expectations of greater choice, responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility. (Office of Public Services Reform 2002, p.8)

It is worth noting one more twist in the paradox. As governments strive to reform public services and produce 'improvements', they encounter an increasingly sceptical public unwilling to believe things that they are told by politicians. Evaluation systems and agencies promise a way out of this paradox of government: independent and expert agencies that can assess performance and its improvement 'at arm's length' from government. This leads unerringly to the second paradox: the paradox of independence.

Reliable sources?

The paradox of independence

Independence is a critical dimension of the rise of performance evaluation systems. Transparency and accountability need to be guaranteed by agents and agencies who can be 'trusted' to provide accurate and reliable information that is untainted by affinities and attachments (this is discussed at greater length in Clarke 2005a). There are several ways in which independence can be claimed and legitimated, all of which are in circulation in the way that evaluation agencies represent themselves. Here I explore four dimensions of independence: the technical, institutional, political and social. Technical claims refer to the techniques, technologies, methods and approaches that trained experts put to work in the process of doing evaluation. Institutional claims rest on separation between the evaluation agency and other governmental bodies. Institutional independence has a double dynamic: evaluators need to be seen as independent from government and from the evaluated organisations. Political independence refers, in the world of public services, to separation from party political attachments, obligations or loyalties. Finally, the social dimension of independence involves questions of representativeness: how do those who stand in judgement 'represent' the public? Representativeness has become an increasingly contested issue in relation to public institutions, especially in terms of their sociodemographic composition. All of these bases for claiming independence are always potentially vulnerable to counterclaims and challenges.

The *technical* dimension involves challenges about the reliability and robustness of methodologies and their implementation, affecting how claims about evaluations, judgements and evidence are perceived and received. Accountancy practice – the basis for conventional audit – has been the 'master' methodology in this field but other forms of evaluation and scrutiny have been more vulnerable to challenges to their epistemology, methodology and practice. There have, for example, been persistent questions about the reliability and replicability of the methodologies employed by inspectorates , and about the relationship between evidence and evaluation. Such challenges are contested in return, through claims about the robustness of the methodological practices of evaluation or their future perfectibility. Downe and Martin offer a critical reflection on the 'technical' character of the Audit Commission's 'Best Value' inspections:

> Our contention is that whilst the Audit Commission has successfully pre-
> sented its work as being underpinned by a rigorous process which is
> applied consistently across all services, the air of quasi-scientific 'objectiv-
> ity' which attaches to both the inspection methodology itself and to the
> reports it produces belies the often less than totally clear cut-cut basis on
> which judgements are made by inspectors. (Downe and Martin 2007a,
> p.24; see also Harper 2000 on IMF missions)

The *institutional* dimension involves challenges about the scale of the distance
between scrutiny agencies and other areas of government that is needed to
create and maintain independence. The UK government's 2003 policy
statement on the Inspection of Public Services defines inspection as 'an external
review that should be independent of the service providers' (Office of Public
Services Reform 2003, p.3). To the extent that agencies are evaluating the
implementation of government policy, they risk being viewed as the agents of
government. The degree of perceived institutional independence is also
affected by the ways in which the role of audit and evaluation agencies has
expanded and shifted. In particular, the blurring of lines between evaluation
and consultancy/prescription also raises issues about institutional independ-
ence (as indeed it has in corporate sector practices of accounting and audit
post-Enron).

   The *political* dimension of instability involves challenges that address the
conflation of party, government, policy and evaluation. Challenges to the
political independence of scrutiny agencies may address the too close identifica-
tion between governmental policy and party interest (particularly in an
adversarial polity, such as the UK). Evaluation agencies tend to make every effort
to behave in politically neutral ways (briefing all parties, eschewing direct
political representation, etc.). Labour governments since 1997 have made a
virtue of 'evidence based policy' – and a commitment to eschew 'ideology' in
favour of a pragmatic commitment that 'what counts is what works' (Davies,
Nutley and Smith 2000; Trinder and Reynolds 2000). This puts evaluative
agencies in a highly visible – and potentially vulnerable – place in the policy
process. Since New Labour have, in practice, combined 'pragmatism' with the
evangelical pursuit of selected policies (the 'one best way', such as in the pursuit
of Public–Private Partnerships), evaluation and evidence are persistently at risk
of 'contamination' from political zeal (Clarke 2005b).

It is always difficult to 'depoliticise' policy choices, because the realm of politics extends beyond issues of party affiliation. While scrutiny agencies and agents may be independent of parties, they may nevertheless take up identifiable positions within the politicised field of choices about policy, practice, or even organisational design. Despite efforts to claim pragmatism, evidence-based, and non-ideological foundations for policy formation, policy and practice in public services has remained 'contentious' – the focus of contending philosophical, moral, professional and political judgements (see, inter alia, Stein 2001; Strathern 2000).

Finally, the *social* dimension of independence has been relatively invisible in relation to evaluation regimes. Nevertheless, questions of social composition, identity and representation have been raised in relation to almost all forms of public service (from the judiciary to social services). It seems unlikely that evaluation agencies will remain immune to questions about who they are and what they stand for. Challenges around issues of representation and representativeness demand something other than institutional, technical or political neutrality. They claim that social composition has pertinent *organisational effects* – about what identities, interests and experiences can be taken account of in serving a complex and differentiated public. The linked question is whether social composition has *political effects* – creating and sustaining policies that reproduce divisions and inequalities. If evaluators are to take a 'user perspective' (ODPM/HM Treasury 2005, p.31; OPSR 2003), then in what ways should they be representative of service users? At present, though, the technical, institutional, professional modes of independence appear to have insulated evaluation agencies against such 'social' challenges.

These vulnerabilities are the site of political work in the larger sense. At the macro level, agencies and agents affirm independence claims, produce evidence or testimony to their autonomy, and reassert the promise of technical improvement. At the micro level, evaluators and those being evaluated construct negotiated practices of 'evaluation' – in which the management of performance and interaction is a task for both parties, but where both parties must collude in the 'production of truth and transparency' (Clarke 2005b). Independence is not a condition that can be proven or disproved. Rather it is a claim that must be continually sustained and revitalised in practice.

Dogging public services
The paradox of publicness

A favoured media image of evaluation agencies is that of the 'watchdog' but, as Robert Hackett has suggested, there are other sorts of metaphorical dogs. Hackett's own analysis deals with the relationship between the news media and questions of civic equality, but has suggestive parallels with the relationship between evaluation agencies and the public interest. He discusses a longstanding conception of the news media as watchdog:

> The standard view presents journalism as the Great Leveller – a builder of a sense of local and national community, but also a righter of wrongs, a humbler of the mighty, a watchdog against the abuse of power, and agent to 'comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable'. The commercial press of the 1800s, the world's first mass medium was born with a profound democratic promise: to present information without fear or favour, to make it accessible to everyone, and to foster public rationality based on equal access to relevant facts. (Hackett 2001, p.197)

Representations of evaluative agencies have many echoes of this conception of the watchdog: collecting and publicising information; making such information universally accessible and attempting to foster 'public rationality'. Such 'watchdogs' aim to protect the public against poor quality services through multiple means: naming poor performers 'without fear or favour'; spreading 'best practice' and enabling people using public services to make informed, rational choices based on comparative evidence. Hackett goes on to raise the possibility of thinking of the media as 'mad dogs':

> One avenue of critique sees journalism as having shifted from watchdog to mad dog, mindlessly attacking authority (especially governments), avoiding serious news about public affairs in favour of scandals, celebrities and 'infotainment'. In doing so, the media are reputedly blocking government's efforts to communicate with citizens and even threatening the legitimacy of democratic public authority. (Hackett 2001, p.198)

This seems less readily applicable to public service evaluation agencies, yet their reputation for 'independence' is, as I noted above, often sustained through reference to their 'challenges' to government or public service providers. There are also tensions around conflicting claims to represent the public and its

interests, especially in the field of services that are provided or organised by local government. There are at least three such claims in play:

1. National governments claim an electoral 'mandate' to represent the public interest and have increasingly come to position themselves as the 'people's champions' in relation to public service providers (Clarke 2005b).

2. Local governments claim an electoral mandate to represent their 'local' public and its interests in their organisation and provision of public services or in local 'partnership' arrangements with other organisations and agencies.

3. Evaluative agencies claim to provide an evidential basis for protecting and enhancing the public interest (understood as a combination of a fiduciary understanding of the taxpayers interest and a quality/standards model of the consumer interest (Clarke 2005b; Cooper 1998).

Viewed in these terms, evaluative agencies have the potential to function as Hackett's 'mad dogs', at least in the sense of disrupting governmental claims and authority. The field of claims to represent the public interest is, of course, more crowded than this in practice, containing many other organisations that claim to be the 'voice' of the public or specific segments or interests within the public (social movements, non-government organisations, government-operated NGOs, and so on). The news media also claim 'public interest' representation in their reporting on public services (whether in watchdog or mad dog mode). Hackett's third version of media doggery is as 'lap dogs':

> Another critique sees the media not as mad dogs, but as lap dogs, excessively subservient to the economic and political elite…the media are seen to legitimize the unjust policies and privileges of the state and corporations while muzzling the voices of fundamental dissent and marginalizing ordinary citizens from political debate, positioning them as passive spectators. (Hackett, 2001, p.198)

Again, the connections to evaluative agencies look more tenuous than in their 'watchdog' image. But to the extent that the agenda of evaluative agencies' investigations is framed by governmental policy, conceptions of the public

interest and, increasingly, conceptions of the public as consumers of services, then evaluative agencies risk being seen as government 'lap dogs', even if they occasionally bite the hand that feeds them.

Similarly, the rationalist model of evaluation and information (combined with populist reportage techniques such as 'league tables' and 'star ratings') may diminish public debate about politics, policy and priorities, promoting instead a collusive relationship with government policy choices and a consumer/ spectator position for individuated citizens (Needham 2003). The risk of being perceived to be agents of government is increased by the tendency for independence to be blurred when agencies are expected to act as 'consultants' and 'critical friends', proposing advice and support for improvement (Day and Klein 1990). Downe and Martin refer to this as the 'transition from independent "watchdog" to helpful "guide dog"' (2007b, p.228), filling out the dog imagery still further.

My argument is not that evaluative agencies are one or other of these 'dogs', but that the contexts and complexity of their roles make it likely that they will be seen as all three (or four) by different groups at different times. Both governments and the agencies have aspired to the image of the watchdog: the impartial and independent purveyor of evidence-based judgements. There has been a growing use of agencies as 'guide dogs' driven by the performance improvement agenda (and partly in response to providers becoming tired of being savaged by 'mad dogs', or at least experiencing evaluation as expensive, burdensome, time consuming and intrusive). Such agencies constantly run the risk of being seen (especially by a hostile news media) as 'lap dogs' – in collusion with either the government or service providers.

Competitive evaluation
The paradox of success

'Success' is central to the system of public services performance evaluation. Success is both an effect of, and a dynamic in, the process of evaluation. Evaluation seeks to produce success in general (systemically), while also distinguishing between particular organisational successes and failures. The regime of evaluation in the UK has been comparative-competitive: evaluating performances against success criteria (targets, standards, benchmarks, etc.) and rating or ranking the performance of individual performance. The setting of targets, the scrutiny of organisations and the measurement of performance are both

constructed and constitutive processes. Targets, criteria, methods and their implementation in the practice of evaluation are contestable, even though the process and its results are represented as 'categorical' (Paton 2003, p.29; see also Humphrey 2002). Schram and Soss (2002) have explored how the evaluative criteria for welfare reform in the US were framed and applied in practice. For example, the selection of caseload levels and numbers of programme leavers as 'outcomes' measures reflected particular views about welfare, poverty and dependency and obscured other possibilities, such as poverty reduction, (2002, p.193). They highlight the political significance of 'success':

> The discursive processes that we have highlighted…merit close attention because judgements of policy success and failure are more than just political outcomes; they are also political forces. Beliefs about which policies are known failures and which have been shown to succeed set the parameters for a 'reasonable' debate over the shape of future legislation. Reputations for developing successful ideas confer authority, giving some advocates greater access and influence in the legislative process. Public officials who are able to claim credit for policy success hold a political resource that bestows advantage in both electoral and legislative contests. (Schram and Soss 2002, p.200)

The construction of evaluation as a process of co-ordinating dispersed public service provision has created different versions of 'success' (and multiple interests in being successful). It is a process that is about the production of success (and failure): the comparative-competitive model of performance evaluation is intended to rank 'winners and losers'. This process predisposes people to attempt to be successful. Organisational analysts have long known that 'what gets measured is what gets done' by focusing organisational performance on the criteria of evaluation. These evaluation dynamics produce many actors with an interest in 'success':

- the government and specific ministers (demonstrating their capacity to 'deliver')

- service or agency heads (demonstrating their capacity to 'improve' the service)

- organisations (demonstrating their relative effectiveness)

- managers/leaders in organisations (demonstrating their ability to innovate, improve or 'turn round failing organisations').

Evaluation agencies also have an interest in success. They need to demonstrate that scrutiny 'works' – improving the performance of the service. They also need to show that earlier recommendations (of policy, practice or organisational design) have had the desired effect. Paradoxically, scrutiny agencies need to both promote success and look 'tough' by identifying 'failure', so as to resist charges of producer capture.

Finally, as Schram and Soss (2002) argue, 'success' is a political resource. It is a resource that matters to organisations, managers and political representatives, especially in competitive or marketised systems of service provision. 'Success' provides a competitive edge – in relation to resources, political access and 'consumers' (directly and indirectly). Organisations must tell 'success stories' (and suppress or invalidate non-success stories) as a condition of organisational reproduction and development. The effect is a 'success spiral' in which all participants to the process have an inflationary interest in producing 'success'. In such an inflationary context, there are potential problems about how audiences perceive and respond to success claims.

Although scrutiny agencies publish their reports, commentaries and evaluations, these seem not to have reached the 'general reader'. There remains a gap between the imagined 'active citizen-consumer' scrutinising performance evaluations and making rational/responsible choices, and the everyday practices of members of the public (Clarke *et al.* 2007). A survey for the Office for Public Service Reform 'revealed that the public has a generally low recognition of inspectorates' with Ofsted the most recognised, by 17 per cent of those surveyed (OPSR 2003, p.23). Evaluation reports circulate mainly in political and policy networks so that taxpayers/consumers mainly get to know about them in mediated forms. In a loop back through the previous section, we might note that reports of the performance of public services circulate primarily through mass media in a context of journalistic ambivalence (if not cynicism) about government (Phillis Report 2004). Media treatment of the reports of scrutiny agencies range from celebration of their 'watchdoggery' to cynicism about both government and producer interests (the 'burying of bad news'; the celebration of 'massaged' good news; or the effects of producer capture in producing obfuscatory comparisons).

The final paradox
Performance evaluation in a sceptical world

I have tried to indicate ways in which the contexts that have created the rise of performance evaluation systems as a key element of the co-ordination of public services also create the paradoxes that make performance evaluation the focus of different sorts of conflicts, competing objectives and political manoeuvring. Treating the contexts of public service reform as constitutive of these paradoxes suggests that they are unlikely to be resolved by technical, methodological or organisational innovations. I do not mean that performance evaluation systems cannot be improved in technical, methodological and organisational ways: clearly they have been, and will continue to be, improved by such innovations. But it is impossible for such innovations to resolve the paradoxes that emerged from the fundamentally political contexts involved in 'reinventing' or 'modernising' government and 'reforming' public services.

As a result, governments that have promoted a sceptical view of public services (insisting on the need for their transformation and subjection to new disciplines) will, in their turn, continue to be viewed sceptically by publics that mistrust politics and politicians (O'Neill 2002). The paradox of independence in which none of the legitimating claims about the independence of evaluators and evaluation can provide a secure and stable foundation in the face of less deferential and more fragmented public means that performance evaluation systems cannot resolve the 'credibility' problem for governments. This is exacerbated by the mediated circulation of 'evidence' and its assessment in mass media that are predisposed towards 'market populism' (Frank 2001). Evaluation agencies have to deal with the paradoxes of their role as representatives of the public interest, imagined as the 'value for money' orientation of the taxpayer/consumer. Finally, the comparative-competitive model that has dominated the evaluation regime in the UK makes 'success' a highly valued construction with many different agents and agencies having a strong interest in being 'successful' (even as they know that being successful is a constructed or negotiated outcome, produced through particular criteria in specific social processes).

In the end, performance evaluation systems and processes cannot 'square the circle' of political and governmental paradoxes. They are compromised by the conditions of their invention. Apparatuses that promise transparency, accountability, evidence and the rational determination of the public interest have

to operate in a sceptical world. They are located within political and cultural dynamics that have produced publics who want improved public services and who – unevenly and unpredictably – distrust the governmental machinery that tells them about improvement. That is the final – and possibly most fundamental – paradox of performance evaluation.

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