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The Aftermath of Modernization:
Examining the Impact of a
Change Agenda on Local
Government Employees in the UK

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IRSPM17

OBJECTIVES

- Examine the consequences of change in public sector organisations; and,
- Investigate the reactions and responses of senior and middle management employees, as key organisational stakeholders, to the modernisation change agenda.

SELECTED BACKGROUND LITERATURE

- **Paradigms of management:**
 - *Public Admin:* (Bozeman and Bretschneider 1994; Dunsire 1995; Henry 1975; Hood 1991)
 - *New Public Management* (Dunleavy and Hood 1994; Ferlie et al. 1996; Hood 1991; Newman 2002; Osborne and McLaughlin 2002)
 - *New Public Governance / Public Value* (Denhardt and Denhardt 2011; Moore 1995; Osborne 2006; Osborne 2010)
- **Discourse analysis** (Barker 1998; Danaher et al. 2000; Fairclough 2000; 2001; 2013; Foucault and Rabinow 1984; Kendall and Wickham 1998; Talbot et al 2003)

SETTING THE SCENE

Analysis of political forewords of four white papers on public sector reform:

- **Modernising Government** (1999) [Labour]
- **Strong & Prosperous Communities** (2006) [Labour]
- **Communities in Control** (2008) [Labour]
- **Open Public Services** (2011) [Conservative / Liberal Democrat Coalition]
- Why White Papers?

MODERNIZATION

- Core NPM group of countries: UK, Australia, New Zealand, and to lesser extent USA (Christensen and Laegrid 2011)
- New Labour's interpretation of NPM traditions –
 - Aim was “to make local authorities more open and democratically accountable to local populations, to increase strategic thinking and planning and to substantially improve performance management” (Tichelar and Watts 2000, p.222).
- Particular tools used to frame improvement approach
- The biggest change agenda ever introduced in the UK

KEY TERMS FOUND: WHY SEARCH FOR KEY WORDS?

Government

People, communit*

Good, better, best

Public service*

Citizen

Power*

Modern*

New, recent

Reform*

Improve*

Opportunit*

Democra*

Equal*, fair*

Poor, poverty, impover*

Unequal*, inequal*, unfair*, less fair

Fail*

Change

* Denotes a wildcard search, e.g. reform* includes reform, reforms, reformed, reforming, reformation etc.

PRIMARY TERMS IN FOUR WHITE PAPERS

Modernising Government (1999)		Strong & Prosperous Communities (2006)		Communities in Control (2008)		Open Public Services (2011)	
Government	42%	Local	33%	People and communit*	14%	Reform*	14%
Modern*	20%	People and communit*	15%	Power	7%	Public service*	12%
Good, better, best	13%	Government	14%	Local	7%	Equal*, fair	12%
New, recent	7%	Citizen	7%	Citizen	4%	Opportunit*	10%
People and communit*	6%	Public service*; new,	6%	Government;	4%	Good, better, best;	10%
		Recent	6%	Democra*	4%	Poor, poverty, impover*	10%
Total accounted for	88%		81%		40%		68%

KEY DRIVERS

- Modernization set in context of service improvement (Best Value duty)
 - “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”. Updated in 2015 (no change to duty)
- Modernization...to individualization
- Performance management seen as proxy for NPM
- ‘Gershon’ and other efficiencies
- Differing focus emerged from across white papers

PRE-RECESSION (2009) IMPACT OF REFORMS

- Significant focus on communities, deprivation and ‘wicked’ issues
- Improvement goals coupled with additional resources
- Strong improvement infrastructure at national and regional level – marked by promotion of external intellectual capital
- Buoyant staffing, and expansion of diverse delivery models (e.g. neighbourhood management etc.)
- Strong (excessive?) regulatory control by central government, including intervention

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT ON PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES POST-2009?

Empirical data collection

- Case studies in English local authorities
- Selected by deviant case method
- Qualitative interviews and focus groups with senior representatives
- Data inductively analysed and coded through qual statements to first order codes and then to aggregated dimensions

EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF MODERNIZATION



KEY ELEMENTS OF AFTERMATH OF MODERNIZATION

- Deregulation
- Budget reductions
- Search for efficiencies

- Austerity dominating discourse
- Deregulation of performance environment
- Increasing 'politicisation' of performance – pledges, manifesto commitments
- Lack of external view on performance
- Decreased transparency, accountability & assurance
- Some efficiencies made, but close to tipping point

CONSEQUENCES OF MODERNIZATION

- Staff reductions
 - Loss of staff expertise (including voluntary redundancy, etc.)
 - Moratorium on some hiring, training etc.
 - Loss of 'competent middle core'
- Skills deficiencies
 - Reduction in capacity and capabilities to transform service
 - Loss of institutional knowledge
 - Leaner set of staff responsibilities
- Efficiencies driven out but...size and scale of budget cuts needed are considerable:

PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

- **Commissioning**
 - Including commercialization: different skills required (Lodge and Hood, 2012)
 - Insourcing
- **Service reduction**
 - Managed decline in performance
 - Reducing access to services
 - Reducing VFM
- **Self-policing**
 - Lack of external validation, reductions in transparency and accountability

CONCLUSIONS FROM RESEARCH

Rhetoric and reality for public sector employees:

- Are services more 'modern'? Undoubtedly yes, but would this have happened anyway?
- Are services more 'customer-focused'? Probably yes
- Are communities stronger and more prosperous? Seems unlikely, but whose fault is that?
- Are communities 'in control'? Doubtful
- Are services more 'open'? Depends on whether this is open to competition or transparent
- Councils have responded to the challenge of austerity in ways that limit their long-term abilities – probably unsustainable, so what next?

A FEW THOUGHTS

- Reforms are not neutral – they are value-driven and embedded with implicit meaning
- Deregulation of performance may inhibit accountability, though regulation may have driven game playing: so how much regulation is ‘enough’?
- Austerity dominating discourse of public sector reform and likely to continue
- Individualistic relationship with state changes the way we (need to) think about services – private goods vs public goods, what is VFM in this context?
- Will local authorities be able to choose very different futures in terms of delivery versus commissioning? ‘Thinking the unthinkable’

White Paper	Modernising Government (1999)		Strong & Prosperous Communities (2006)		Communities in Control (2008)		Open Public Services (2011)		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Local*	2	2%	55	33%	11	7%	0	0%	68
Government	36	42%	24	14%	6	4%	1	2%	67
People, communit*	5	6%	25	15%	23	14%	2	3%	55
Good, better, best	11	13%	7	4%	1	1%	6	10%	25
Public service*	2	2%	10	6%	4	2%	7	12%	23
Citizen	1	1%	11	7%	6	4%	4	7%	22
Power*	0	0%	5	3%	12	7%	3	5%	20
Modern*	17	20%	0	0%	2	1%	0	0%	19
New, recent	6	7%	10	6%	2	1%	0	0%	18
Reform*	3	3%	1	1%	4	2%	8	14%	16
Improve*	1	1%	9	5%	2	1%	1	2%	13
Opportunit*	0	0%	5	3%	0	0%	7	12%	12
Democra*	1	1%	3	2%	6	4%	0	0%	10
Equal*, fair*	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%	7	12%	9