

Introduction to Special Issue of Public Policy and Administration:

‘Public Administration in an Age of Austerity: The Future of the Discipline’*

Introduction

In the United Kingdom academic endeavour in Public Administration has the reputation for being an old fashioned backwater, restricted to pronouncing on the functions of institutions like the ‘civil service, local government and nationalised industries’ (Fry, 1999: 533), or preoccupied with concerns about practitioners’ wisdom and knowledge (Rhodes, 1996). Reflecting changes in the nature of governance, some have questioned whether Public Administration is now an historical anachronism, no longer capable of capturing the nuances of how practitioners *manage* and no longer merely *administrate* public bodies, and the wider implications this implies (Hughes, 2003).

Few contemporary Public Administration scholars would accept that their interests are as narrow as Hughes (2003) and others would suggest. A more accurate account of contemporary Public Administration scholarly activity is that whilst it continues to be interested in the everyday concerns of practitioners, it is now also notable for its theoretical and methodological heterodoxy and interdisciplinarity. This broader

approach has been applied to the investigation of government and the practice of governance, including intergovernmental relations, policy development, decision making and implementation, management processes such as accountability mechanisms, and, indeed, the interface between the public and private sectors. Despite funereal claims, over the last two decades in the UK Public Administration research has blossomed, producing new academic scientific knowledge renowned for its theoretical depth and diversity. This, in turn, has spawned new sub disciplines, including the study of Public Management and Governance (Raadschelders, 2008). In this paper we refer, as does Rhodes (1996), to 'public administration', 'public management' and 'governance' as the practices themselves, whereas in capitalised form 'Public Administration' and 'Management', and 'Governance', refer to subjects of academic and intellectual enquiry.

While a legitimate debate exists between specialists and optimists, this special issue demonstrates grounds for optimism by indicating the continuing diversity and adaptability of the field of Public Administration. In this introduction, we first sketch the variety of intellectual traditions which comprise the field of modern Public Administration. We then consider institutional challenges facing the subject given considerable pressures towards disciplinary fragmentation, and ideological challenges arising from a new distrust and denigration of public provision in the UK. Despite these challenges, we go on to highlight the variety of ways in which Public Administration

can continue to provide a framework to analyse the practice of government and governance, governing institutions and traditions, and their wider sociological context. It can also directly inform policy reform- even if this endeavour can have its own pitfalls and pratfalls for the 'engaged' academic.

We then suggest that, rather than lacking theoretical rigour, new approaches are developing which recognise the structural and political nature of the determinants of public administration. Finally, we highlight the richness of modern comparative work in Public Administration. We also suggest that researchers can usefully look beyond the Atlantic relationship for theoretical enhancement and also consider more seriously the recursive and complex nature of international pressures on public administration. Considerable challenges will remain to the future survival of the subject, not least the implications of the continuing global financial crisis for governments and those who study governments professionally. However, we conclude that the economic, political and social trials faced by governments present considerable challenges for subject specialists to respond to, and make good of the opportunities for the subject to flourish.

'Public Administration': Defining the Indefinable?

There are far too many commentators to mention who have attempted to offer parsimonious definitions of Public Administration. To attempt to identify the core essence of Public Administration risks ignoring the evolutionary nature of the field.

Moreover, without any consideration of the contestability of the socio-political context, the purpose of Public Administration is unfathomable. Rather than attempting to draw up a list of approaches and theories and arguing that these 'constitute' the field of Public Administration, we prefer to refer to the many intellectual traditions that include a variety of theoretical approaches and models within the study of Public Administration (following Raadschelders, 2008). There is greater convergence and overlap between these than can be teased out in this restricted space, but they at least provide both a conceptual map, and an historical account of the epistemological advancements in the latter half of the twentieth century in both the social sciences and Public Administration more narrowly.

In brief chronological order, Public Administration can be viewed as:

- 1) 'A study for the development of practical wisdom': political and administrative theory identified with the Athenian tradition, concerned with the ruler-ruled relationship;
- 2) 'A study for the development of practical experience': a technocratic approach to experiential learning about administrative action;
- 3) 'A study for the development of scientific knowledge': closely linked to social science positivism and the search for a rational general theory based on objective fact, with links to decision making and organisation theory; and

- 4) 'A study of relativist perspectives': summarised as *postmodernism*, but alert to diverse cultural values which can inform understandings of government which focus on the judgements, interpretations and beliefs of actors.

(Raadschelders, 2008)

There is a risk that by portraying these traditions in terms of historical development, they may be read as linearly cumulative and progressive. Raadschelders' schema may be criticised for being overly informed by the American experience, where disciplinary boundaries are more immutable than in the UK. In the UK context, Public Administration draws upon all the social science disciplines and the emergence of new traditions need not cause previous ones to wither entirely; instead, they may persist in varying degrees, embedded within Public Administration scholarship.

A major strength of adopting this approach is that it frees scholars from struggling to produce a parsimonious, yet workable definition of Public Administration (for example Evans, 2007; and for a more nuanced approach, Rhodes, 1991, 1996; Rhodes et al, 1996), when arguably it can be variously defined as an academic discipline, a synergy of theory and practice, a field of inquiry, *and* a mixture of art and science. In this regard, comparisons may be made with medicine, which also encompasses multiple sub-disciplines (Rhodes, 1991). Public Administration's many sub-disciplines arguably include administrative theory, Public Policy analysis, Public Management/ New Public

Management (including budgeting, organization studies and strategy), the study of inter-governmental relations, executive politics (Lodge and Wegrich, this volume), and Governance. The boundaries of these traditions are more permeable than is often implied. This more generous, pragmatic approach captures the essentially normative and contestable dimensions of Public Administration rather than setting up artificial boundaries to exclude what not to measure or investigate (Hughes, 2003).

Papers in this volume arguably directly cover three out of the four categories Raadschelders identifies, but also indicate their permeability and acknowledge his fourth tradition. Hence, for example, Diamond and Liddle's paper relates to how the 'post-crisis' experiences of the 'public and political community' can be contextualised and the activities of public managers shaped through theoretical studies in Public Management and Public Administration; while Parry's paper uses his very detailed knowledge of public administrative developments to test various meso-level theories. Both Cairney's and Lodge and Wegrich's papers focus on the development of scientific knowledge, but in each case they also draw on their extensive empirical research into the subject, and consider practical questions facing public administrators.

The academic context: centrifugal pressures

Academic heterodoxy in the field of Public Administration is not, however, without its dangers. Contemporary UK higher education management continues to judge the value

of research and other academic endeavours according to well-policed academic boundaries. Without a disciplinary organising frame, Public Administration academic activities are vulnerable in environments unsympathetic to theoretical diversity (Evans, 2007). Interdisciplinarity may be considered to be a virtue in a complex world (J. Moran, 2002; M. Moran, 2006), but without an obvious institutional academic disciplinary home, there are now fewer spaces in British universities that host the full range of academic activities specifically dedicated to Public Administration (Chandler, 2002). The increased vulnerability of the subject is exacerbated by the decline in popularity and provision of specialist Public Administration postgraduate and undergraduate programmes. Support for new and innovative methods of collaborative research and practice, such as professional doctorates and knowledge exchange initiatives (see Diamond and Liddle in this volume), may be reduced in this time of public sector austerity, given that there are now only a few public bodies that can afford to fund post-experience higher education for their staff. Evolutionary changes in the configuration of social science disciplines have also caused academic disciplinary fragmentation. Fewer Public Administration specialists are to be found in their traditional homes within Politics departments. Reflecting specialist interests, they are increasingly located within multi-disciplinary Management and Business Schools, or in units specialising in Health, Education, or other policy domains.

The political context: the public is the problem

In addition, new challenges to Public Administration specialists in the UK are presented by their relationship with Government. Formulated in May 2010, the UK's new Coalition Government was described by commentators as an exciting political development, with less attention being paid to the implications of the coalition's approach towards the purpose and structure of government. The Coalition's 'Politics of Austerity' (MacLeavy, 2011) attributes the cost of government and its administration, including the practices of public sector service provision, as a major factor in the UK's financial crisis and the country's long term structural economic decline.

The 'Politics of Austerity' narrative may also be read as an implied critique of academic specialists in the field of Government and Public Administration. Certainly, following the Coalition's deficit reduction strategy, specific policy changes have curtailed the number and value of research grants available to the social sciences from research councils, whilst financial pressure has resulted in fewer research commissions from government departments and local authorities. This is aside from pressures arising from the reconfiguration of funding for teaching and research in higher education following the Browne Review, the mid- term and long-term effects of which are difficult to discern at this stage. In a climate which diagnoses the structure and scale of government to be a partial cause of the country's problems, there is a general expectation within the profession that this will lead to contraction in student numbers.

Of course, assertions concerning the toxicity of government, public sector organisations and self-interested producers are not new and were deployed to justify the introduction of reforms that continue to be known as New Public Management (Foster and Plowden, 1996; Hood, 1991; Stewart and Walsh, 1992). Yet, from the perspective of the Coalition, previous management reforms have failed to mitigate the toxicity of producer interests to government and public services and the dangers such interests present to the economic and social well-being of the UK (HM Treasury, 2010). David Cameron's claim that there is no public service that cannot be run by the private sector (Daily Telegraph, 2011) can be read as suggesting that conventional public administration is irrelevant to contemporary circumstances.

It should, of course, be noted that Public Administration research concerns many issues germane to both 'public' and 'private' institutions- particularly in a context where the distinction between these categories is more difficult to sustain. Gray and Jenkins argue that the New Public Management has led to a turn away from Public Administration approaches, as 'efficiency is valued over accountability and responsiveness over due process' (1995: 87). However, modern Public Administration has incorporated many of the concerns of New Public Management. It now includes, directly or indirectly, consideration of the promotion of values such as transparency, accountability,

effectiveness, and efficiency; the mobilization and/or incentivization of staff; the skills required for effective governance; and, broadly, the ability of organisations to achieve their policy goals. Such research can involve the study of private as well as public organisations- not least given the existence, and likely growth, of private sector influence on government, or even of 'private government' in certain sectors. As a result, at this stage, Gray and Jenkins' prognosis appears overly hasty.

Paul Cairney's paper in this volume argues strongly for the continuing relevance of Public Administration to the practice of government. Cairney's paper leads us to question whether the Coalition's likely impact on policy *style* (if not content) may be overestimated. For Cairney, Public Administration research can correct 'heroic' models of policy-making and implementation, and complicates the very notion of policy 'design' as a planned and rational process. Even apparently radical agendas, such as the current UK Coalition's deficit reduction plan, are likely to bear the hallmarks of a policy process that is still, for Cairney, in many respects incremental and (neo-)pluralist.

While Cairney's paper considers the indirect impact of Public Administration on societal understandings of governance, the question remains of the direct relationship (or lack of it) between Public Administration researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. Whereas traditional Public Administration researchers may have cast

themselves in the role of the 'permanent secretary manqué' (Rhodes, 1996: 514) and been overwhelmingly focused on offering 'enlightened prescriptions' (Evans, 2007), other academics have offered radical prescriptions for administrative and political change which have been seized upon by governments. This has been particularly the case within local government, with the adoption of policies promoting the 'new localism' and the restructuring of local administrations, which had been heavily promoted by a variety of academics within the field (e.g. Stoker, 2002; Corry and Stoker, 2002; Copus, 2006).

Of course it is difficult to discern whether these academics were genuinely influential, lucky, or simply clever enough to synch their work with prevailing policy imperatives. However, the current 'fate' of the new localism, which is being evoked not only as a policy programme but a political value to justify a huge range of often controversial initiatives, suggests the potential dangers from collaboration. In practice, there may be a fine line for academics between being revered for the relevance of your work amongst practitioners if not necessarily amongst your peers, and being a mere 'policy wonk', exercising little impact on policy-makers yet still paying the price of losing academic respectability. Either way, it appears up to academics themselves to decide to what extent they will engage with 'real life' problems, rather than Public Administration approaches necessarily being sidelined or viewed as irrelevant.

Public Administration: atheoretical, or the wrong theories?

Research in Public Administration and New Public Management may often have been presented as 'common sense'- in the case of the former, concerning the design and operation of institutions to deal with public policy problems, and in the case of the latter, concerning how to ensure that the public sector is effective and efficient. Much of this type of research was largely descriptive, and scholars within these fields may have believed that their research programmes, and many of their findings, were incontestable. This position has been subject to sustained critique.

Gray and Jenkins argued sixteen years ago that 'the context of the political-administrative relationship and the basic values underlying administrative behaviour' which had underlain Public Administration research in the post-war period started to break down as early as the mid-1980s with the advent of theories of New Public Management (1995: 77) predicated on the notion of government failure (Foster and Plowden, 1996). Nonetheless, the changes Grey and Jenkins articulate concern different approaches to the then perceived problems of the public sector (see, for example, p.78)- which at that time was not a challenge to the legitimacy of large swathes of the public sector itself.

Not all of those who initially looked to adopt some of the philosophical approaches found in private sector management necessarily supported a radical shrinking in the size of the public sector. Some argued for a smaller state (Foster and Plowden, 1996; Le Grand, 2006, 2007; Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002) and the wholesale rejection of Weberian, 'rational' approaches to bureaucracy (Hughes, 2003). Others, nonetheless, preferred critiques of the application of private sector methods to the public sector (Doherty and Horne, 2002; Flynn, 2007; Walsh, 1995) and of the privileging of the voluntary sector as an agent of service delivery (Kelly, 2007).

Current developments are, however, arguably more radical than those debated during previous decades, and might best be described not as a 'hollowing out' of government (Rhodes, 1994), but as a process of amputation of particular functions and/or services which had previously formed part of governmental activity (see Cabinet Office, 2011). A more acute and wider-ranging theoretical framework appears necessary to understand contemporary developments, and to address the very practical concern of how in the wake of a number of private sector failures government can manage its relationships with providers from the private sector.

As the then editor of the preeminent academic journal *Public Administration*, Rod Rhodes argued as far back as 1996 that Public Administration research had developed

from a relatively atheoretical pursuit to one which was challenged by numerous theoretical frameworks from outside the discipline: initially by organisation theory, then also by state theory, rational choice theory and public management approaches. At that stage, he recommended that the 'most important' endeavour for the discipline to undertake was to 'develop an explicitly theoretical approach' (Rhodes, 1996: 514). Public Administration arguably followed his injunction, emerging as a laboratory for considerable theoretical innovation which has had some impact on other, cognate social science disciplines and particularly political science. Much of this has involved expanding the scope of the discipline beyond its traditional focus on the institutions and practice of government or governance, to attempt to capture the changing nature and purpose of voluntary and private sector organisations involved in providing services to the public, and the expansion of policy networks to coordinate these complex arrangements (Rhodes, 1997).

The emergence of Governance was a major development in the field, which arguably contributed to a decline of interest in Public Administration (Stoker, 1998; Kjaer, 2004). Informed by insights from organisational behaviour, Governance shifted the unit of analysis from institutional arrangements to acknowledge the importance of agency and multi-actor engagement as key variables in determining the nature and form of public sector organisation.

It is impossible to do justice to the debate surrounding the utility and prospects of this shift of focus onto (the practice of) governance rather than ('just' the institutions of) government. It is important, however, to acknowledge that while Governance's focus on meso-level factors brought many benefits, it was also as a result limited in its explanatory scope. The focus on Governance may have been useful to explain multi-actor *implementation* of policy decisions, or even, multi-actor accountability as part of new understandings of that concept (Newman, 2004). However, some of the claims made by governance theorists (for example, that governance entailed multi-actor *decision-making*) may have underestimated the power of the central executive (or at least, how the central executive perceives its own power and believes that policy 'works') (Flinders, 2008).

More recently, critics of Governance have concluded that it lacks explanatory and analytical capacity (Jordan, Wurzel, et al., 2005). In addition, some have adopted an interpretivist stance and rejected the type of 'rational', 'expert' view of governance which they claim underlies 'whole of government' approaches which overestimate the capacity of public action (Bevir, 2010; see also Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). For some of these theorists, new forms of democratic anchorage are required to legitimise

the contractual arrangements that have replaced bureaucratic accountability (Bevir, 2010; Sorensen and Torfing, 2007). Other voices critical to the notion of Governance have come from the fields of social geography (Davies, 2009; Fuller and Geddes, 2008), often drawing on Foucauldian analysis (Mckee, 2009) and political economy (Jessop, 1998). These analyses conclude that the new governance arrangements reflect a reorientation of the state towards the promotion and sustenance of neo-liberalism.

Such interdisciplinary approaches can only enrich the field of Public Administration. Theorists of 'critical' and 'democratic' governance, for example, have raised challenging questions and brought macro-level theories into their analysis to complement meso-level and micro-level approaches (Flinders, 2008). As a result, they can help provide a partial answer to the problems highlighted by Cairney in his paper in this volume. Cairney suggests there may be a perennial struggle within UK Public Administration against 'inaccurate, top-down, conceptions of policymaking', which fail to acknowledge 'the complexity of political systems'. As a result, Cairney suggests, Public Administration scholars have developed new theories which acknowledge both contextual complexity and political agency. Arguably, however, this has been at the cost of neglecting more structural, cultural and institutional influences on policy-making which have not been the focus of more recent analyses.

Lodge and Wegrich, in this volume, attempt to set out an approach to Public Administration which incorporates an understanding of 'executive politics'. Their

approach *explicitly* acknowledges the role of ‘politics’ itself and, importantly, ‘context’, defined as ‘historical and institutional setting’. For them, the decisional process, the practice of politics, itself provides insights into why, for example, particular reforms are adopted at certain times in different countries. This approach also immediately leads to the problematising of reform. Within mainstream accounts, the reform of public administration is often implicitly viewed as inevitable, and its obstruction by particular groups constitutes the main focus of interest. In contrast, Lodge and Wegrich suggest that reform should be viewed as a political construction, replete with the various and potentially conflicting meanings associated with different reform trajectories by (both individually and collectively) politicians and civil servants.

As they cogently argue, ‘by being a social science, public administration should not forget that it is inherently about the exercise of power and human relationships’. The ‘technical turn’ towards both managerialist and economic perspectives on public administration effectively depoliticises the actions of government and government actors. While this may comfort researchers by absolving them from value conflict, it risks, ultimately, reducing Public Administration’s explanatory purchase.

A parochial pursuit?

Given growing international interconnectedness, the appropriateness of examining developments in a single nation rather than adopting a more multi- or international

perspective can be questioned (Page, 1995), yet the vast bulk of British Public Administration studies remain focused on the domestic context. Exceptions include cross-national studies which broadly consider the (uneven) spread of New Public Management (e.g. Pollitt, 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011), and discrete elements of administrative reform such as independent regulatory and executive agencies and performance management (see Lodge and Wegrich in this volume for a summary).

Richard Parry's comprehensive review of public administration within the devolved nations, in this volume, indicates that even within one country, previously 'unalterable' administrative conventions may be subject to sometimes radical, and unanticipated, change. Institutional isomorphism, or copying of existing institutional structures, was perhaps evident in the adoption of some Westminster conventions within the new executives. However, Parry's article also demonstrates the relative autonomy of many characteristics (such as the relationship between Ministers and civil servants) which had been assumed to be dependent on the previous political context, which took a commitment to the Union by all governing parties for granted.

Of course, there is a trade-off to be made between the generalisability of comparative analysis and the in-depth focus and rich findings which can be derived from single-country studies. UK Public Administration might usefully internationalise in other ways, beyond the mere addition of extra case studies.

First, theoretical perspectives from other nations can, of course, offer lessons for the British study of Public Administration. The theoretical positions we adopt may inevitably reflect the specificities of our domestic institutions and embedded political institutions. For example, Lodge and Wegrich suggest in this volume that German approaches to network governance focus on negotiation and compromise due to the importance of these values within the more consensual German political system. To that extent, there may be limits on theoretical cross-fertilisation.

Interestingly, while UK Public Administration has traditionally borrowed from the US (see Rhodes, 1996), it has often been less willing to learn from its continental cousins. Mayntz' broader understanding of governance (2010), similar to the Dutch and Danish governance schools (for example Kooiman, 2003; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007) appear to have enjoyed influence only in those areas in the UK sympathetic to the underpinning normativity in these approaches. In addition, a new wave of Public Administration research in France has developed sociologies of 'public action' (Hassenteufel, 2007) and 'collective action' (Duran, 1996). Yet, French perspectives rarely filter into British debates (Smith, 2002).

In addition, there has been little explicit focus on the recursive relationship between public administration and its increasingly international context. In many fields, public administrators are simultaneously affected by both the domestic and the international level (Putnam, 1988; see also Callaghan, 2010), sometimes enabling them to reorganise

domestic public decision-making and administrative structures (see James, 2010). At the same time, separating international from domestic causal processes has become increasingly challenging for researchers, as interconnections between nations both deepen and multiply. More detailed and subtle examination of the recursive relationships between domestic and international pressures (Thatcher, 2007) on public administration is required.

Conclusion

Commentators have periodically produced gloomy perspectives on the future of academic study of Public Administration. Some have pointed to new theoretical, political, and institutional, challenges that were perceived to be irreconcilable and leading to terminal decline. Other commentators pointed to the damage caused by longstanding tensions in the field, between those who were interested primarily in the development of scientific knowledge and theory building, and those more interested in substantive practice.

Whilst such debates are often highly productive and encourage commentators to reflect on their own research interests in the wider context of their peers, ultimately Public Administration, similarly to other fields of academic enquiry, is constantly evolving and adapting to changing circumstances. The papers in this special edition reflect the persistence of the traditions of Public Administration enquiry and how they continue to

create new academic knowledge, by synergising theory and practice into new understandings. Theoretical advances cannot be made without reference to practice; whilst studies which seek to explore and understand how practitioners understand their world cannot be merely descriptive anecdotes but require theoretical coherence informed by rigorous empirical evidence.

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