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Public Management Reform: Reliable Knowledge and International Experience

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1. Learning what works

In this paper I want to address some fundamental questions concerning the nature of knowledge about public management reform, and particularly its transferability between countries and contexts. My main point will be that knowledge of what works and what does not tends to be heavily context-dependent. That is to say, a technique or organisational structure which succeeds in one place may fail in another. So – to put it bluntly – there is no set of general tools that can be transferred from one jurisdiction to another, all around the world, with confidence that they will work well every time. This means we have to look carefully at contexts, and at the "terms of trade" each time we are thinking of borrowing a good management idea from somewhere else.

This is not a "how-to-do-it" paper. Rather it is a series of reflections on the nature of the "trade" in public management reforms, drawing on the existing academic literature and seeking to identify issues where further work seems to be desirable.

2. The increasing prominence of the international management "trade"

Once, when I was in Helsinki on a mission advising the Finnish Government, the then Minister for Public Management asked me whether I thought Finland should copy "the New Zealand model"? As far as I was concerned, the question came out of the blue. It turned out that neither of us favoured the idea, but the significance is that the question should even have been asked. Meanwhile the British model of Next Steps executive agencies has been exported to, *inter alia*, the Netherlands, Tanzania, Jamaica, and now Japan (Pollitt *et al*, 2001; Pollitt and Talbot, 2003). The Germans borrowed the Dutch local government Tilburg model for use in their local authorities. National audit offices all over Western Europe have shared information about how to do performance auditing (Pollitt *et al.*, 1999) and governments have extensively swapped information about accruals accounting. Or again, the idea of restructuring tax collection services as autonomous agencies, which was pioneered in Bolivia and Ghana in the late 1980s, spread to at least 15 developing countries by 2001 (Taliercio, 2003). The Brazilian national school of public administration, ENAP, owes much to the famous French ENA – and so on.

Of course, such international traffic is far from new. For example, history records that constitutions themselves are often borrowed. Some elements of the United States Constitution travelled to West Germany, and subsequently to Spain and Hungary. In Brazil, the modernisation of the 1930s included the import of American scientific management ideas through the Administrative Department of the Civil Service (Rinne, 2001). Nineteenth century Japan borrowed systematically and shrewdly from various European models of public service (Westney, 1987).

3. Selected academic questions concerning the international transfer of management technologies

Despite the current wave of international borrowing, and its long history, rather little academic attention has been devoted to it.[1] The vast majority of public management scholarship has been, and continues to be, confined to one jurisdiction. Yet the relatively limited amount of work that has been done on international transfers of management technology already shows that they are both complex and problematic. To put it briefly, the act of importing a management technology from one country to another is risky and volatile. Some observers believe that one of the most common outcomes is "inappropriate or hasty transfer" (Stone, 1999, p. 54). Others remark on how frequently the import is "translated", "edited", "transformed" or "localised" during the process of acquisition. Transfers frequently result either in failure or in a substantial metamorphosis of the technology itself: for better or worse it becomes something else.

There are many interesting questions which can be asked about this phenomenon. For example, some scholars have concentrated on identifying the conditions which encourage or discourage the export of policies from jurisdiction A to jurisdiction B (including a foundational text by Rose, 1993). Others have attempted to describe the institutional networks which facilitate the flow of ideas (Halligan, 1996; Premfors, 1998). Others have explored the best way to theorise transplantation (De Jong *et al.*, 2002). But these are not the aspects I intend to focus on here. My main concern will be with the question of the conditions favouring a successful transfer. I will attempt to identify some of the variables which seem likely to influence whether or not an imported technology will achieve the expectations which are attached to it.

4. That looks good – maybe I should get one?

Let us begin with the naïve position, and build outwards from there. Perhaps the reason there has not been much academic work on borrowing public management techniques is that there is no a problem? Couldn't it be that this was a fairly straightforward matter – like selecting a new car? Let us say I see my neighbour has a new car, I ask him about it, discover that it is both more powerful and more economical than my own, and go down to the garage with my cheque card, and soon I am the proud owner of a new, improved model.

Note some of the assumptions behind this analogy:

- The technology which is transferred is relatively simple and well-understood (a car).
- The task to be performed is (likewise) simple and well-understood (transportation from A to B).
- The knowledge transfer does not take long (the neighbour and I quickly discuss speed, fuel consumption, comfort and price).
- The purchase is voluntary – I choose freely and the neighbour gladly helps by letting me take a short test drive in his car.
- Relationships among the main actors are simple – there is a dyadic transfer of knowledge between the neighbour and me, followed by a similarly dyadic commercial transaction between me and the garage.

And one more:

- We share the same language, so we can easily exchange information and we can readily check and confirm that we do indeed share the foregoing assumptions.

My suggestion is that for many transfers of public management reforms, few or none of the above assumptions hold. In the following paragraphs I go through the assumptions, one by one, and try to set out the reasons for, and consequences of, this view.

5. Simple and well-understood management technologies

The management technologies which are transferred internationally are often fairly new. It is innovations which hit the headlines, politically and professionally, and which therefore grab the attention of would-be importers, exporters and management entrepreneurs. Such new technologies tend to be less well-understood than those which have existed for longer. The Dutch, for example, began a process of adopting the concept of "executive agencies", explicitly basing this on the United Kingdom Next Steps programme, during the early 1990s – when the Next Steps programme itself was still in the middle of its early phase and its full implications were probably only partly understood. The United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS), launched two large and expensive Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) projects just three years after the Americans, Hammer and Champy, hit the business headlines with their claims to have invented a revolutionary technique (Hammer and Champy, 1995). At that point the bad press which BPR was subsequently to receive was only just starting.

More generally, many of the management technologies which have been the subjects of recent international transfers are anything but simple. Accrual accounting, Business Process Re-engineering, Total Quality Management (TQM), autonomous agencies, regulatory impact analysis, evaluation – each of these is exceedingly complex, having simultaneous effects on many different parts of the organisations which adopt them, and, in most cases, on other organisations with whom the primary organisations have dealings too. None of these widely-traded technologies is a simple, standardised item. For example, research has convincingly demonstrated that TQM is not a single technology, but a broad approach, including within itself many disputes and differences (Joss and Kogan, 1995; Zbaracki, 1998). Similarly, autonomous agencies have taken on a fantastic variety of forms in different countries (Pollitt *et al.*, 2001; Pollitt and Talbot, 2003). Accrual accounting contains within itself many significant choices and it would be an unwise observer who assumed that the figures generated by accrual accounting in New Zealand could be directly compared with those from, say, the United Kingdom or Sweden. In his path-breaking study of lesson-drawing in public policy Rose (1993) persuasively argued that the simpler the cause and effect model, the simpler the transfer was likely to be. The preceding examples show that such simplicity may be less than common.

Nor is it a matter of complexity and variation alone. Less widely recognised, but equally significant, it is not unusual for there to be a lack of unanimity as to how these technologies actually work. How, exactly, do they produce the beneficial effects they are supposed to produce – what is the key chain of logic? I once worked on the evaluation of a major BPR project in a big hospital, where one of the project leaders was a recent and enthusiastic graduate of a Mike Hammer seminar (Hammer and Champy, 1995). It soon became apparent that expectations for the transformation varied widely within the hospital. Some – the true believers – thought that the rigorous mapping and then radical re-thinking of key processes would achieve the breakthrough that was sought. The technology itself would deliver the goods. Others supported the programme not because they believed in BPR as such but because they thought, Hawthorne experiment-style, that almost any outside intervention would release the innate productive capacity of staff who had never before been so directly involved, on such a large scale, in managed change. Others still, including some senior doctors, were sceptical of the technical claims of BPR, but realised that it would pull in extra resources and therefore tried to use it as a vehicle for financing pet schemes which they had been nurturing long before the management consultants showed up. So all these groups thought that the BPR project could be used to improve the performance of the hospital, but they differed rather fundamentally as to how and why the improvement would come about.

In short, the analogy of acquiring a car or other mainly mechanical technology does not fit.

6. Simple and well-understood management tasks

It is not just a question of the complexity of the import, but also one of the complexity of the task and context into which the new management technology is being introduced. There are at least two dimensions to this second source of complexity. First, there is the clarity (or lack of it) of the immediate policy objective(s). Second, there is the institutional and cultural context in which the policy is operating. Each deserves some discussion.

It has long been a common observation of students of the policy process that policy objectives are frequently "multiple, conflicting and vague". This is sometimes true also for management reform. Studying the process of autonomisation of public agencies in the Netherlands, van Thiel found that politicians had offered a variety of reasons for the restructurings, but most frequently they had specified no objective at all (van Thiel, 2001). Commonly there is ambiguity about whether the top priority objective is to save money, to improve service quality for service users or to make the service more effective from the government's point of view. The normal procedure is for the promoters of reform to claim that all these effects will be achieved, rejecting or ignoring the idea that there might be some trade-off between them (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000, Chapter 6). In such situations there is very likely to be some ambiguity over the "success" of a transfer of management technology, because it is not entirely clear what the key objective was supposed to have been in the first place.

The second source of complexity is probably even more directly threatening to successful transfers of management technology between different countries. It is the embeddedness of the "target" (the specific programme or organisation in the importing country) in a wider network of relationships, and in a particular administrative culture. Networks are "sticky", so that the particular target cannot be fully addressed without drawing in other organisations, or programmes, and understanding the dynamics between them. Thus, for example, the relations between a United Kingdom agency and the legislature is very different from the relationship between a United States federal agency and the (much stronger) United States legislature, as those trying to set up United States Performance Based Organisations (PBOs) in the late 1990s found out. Similarly, attempts to set up United Kingdom-style performance-oriented agencies in Tanzania ran into difficulties partly because of hugely influential relationships "outside" the agencies themselves, such as the centralised strength of the presidential system of government, and the acute budgetary instability of a poor, developing country (Pollitt and Talbot, 2003). Klein well summarises the point when he says that:

> *[p]olicy learning … is as much a process of self-examination – of reflecting on the characteristics of one's one country … as of looking at the experience of others.*
>
> (Klein, 1997, pp. 1269-1270)

To ignore this wider picture may lead to problems. Radaelli, in a recent analysis of the spread of Regulatory Impact Analysis (RIA) through Western Europe, notes that:

> *There is no doubt that best practice and benchmarking are by far more popular than context-sensitive lesson-drawing.*
>
> (Radaelli, 2002, p. 5)

He strongly criticises the best practice approach, at least when it is used in a decontextualised manner (see also Lynn, 1996, p. 105). RIA, he says, is often treated in this way, despite the fact that:

> *the problems to which RIA is associated differ widely across countries. RIA is an attempt to tackle the problem of competitiveness in Australia. It becomes a solution to the problem of competitiveness in the process of liberalisation and economic integration (via NAFTA) in Mexico. It certainly was a solution to the problem of "rolling back the state" in the early days of compliance cost assessment in the UK. It is an instrument geared towards the general aim of simplification and the "slim state" in Germany. It is a way the EU tries to cope with the problem of legitimacy in its regulatory system.*
>
> (Radaelli, 2002, p. 5)

It could be argued that some contemporary trends in public management make the need to address this "wider picture" even more acute. The burgeoning popularity – in many countries – of public/private or public/public partnerships means that the introduction of a new management system to one public organisation may easily have a direct effect on other interested parties. So does the fashion for "joined-up government" and "cross-cutting programmes" .

(Pollitt, 2003)

Again, the analogy of buying a car or other "piece of kit" is misleading. It underestimates the possibility that there may be several views on the nature of the job to be done, and it completely ignores the likelihood that the process in question (in the analogy, driving from A to B) will in practice be intimately linked to a range of other tasks and processes.

7. The transfer of knowledge is rapid, straightforward

This can be quickly dealt with. Public management reform is usually a multi-stage process which takes some considerable time and involves many iterations. There can be debate about a specific technology, but little action. There can be a formal decision to adopt, but implementation may be unenthusiastic or incompetent. Implementation may be vigorous and yet the desired results may still not appear. Hitches and diversions can occur at each stage and for many different reasons (Pollitt, 2001). At first, implemented new technologies may seem full of snags, but, after a couple of years of settling in, the objectives originally aimed for may gradually be achieved. The analogy of rapidly purchasing a new machine and immediately setting it to work usually just does not fit large-scale organisational change.

8. The transfer is voluntary – a free choice

Transferring management technologies from one country to another has become big business. Well-intentioned neighbours who have no motive other than good neighbourliness seem to be in short supply. More often we find transfers suffused with considerations of prestige, legitimacy, the exercise of influence or the straightforward desire to earn a good fee.

Some transfers have a post-colonial dimension to them. Governments in ex-French West Africa are advised by experts from Paris. Agencification programmes in Jamaica and Tanzania are undertaken with substantial help and steering from London (Pollitt and Talbot, 2003). There is nothing necessarily wrong with this, but it does mean that the importer is taking the advice of a far wealthier and more powerful neighbour, who will frequently have other items on its agenda, in addition to the management reform itself. Other technology transfers to developing and transitional countries may be bound up with the conditionalities for loans and/or other forms of assistance from international organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank or the European Union (Stiglitz, 2003). Certain countries – Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom among them – pride themselves as being in the vanguard of management reform, and send their experts all over the world.

It may not be an ex-colonial link, or a condition of an international loan, which produces an inequality in the relationship between "adviser" and "importer" but rather the extension of a particular community of discourse to a position of international dominance. In the early and mid-1990s the Public Management Service (PUMA, now GOV Directorate) of the OECD, whether by accident or design, seemed to slide into the role of global mouthpiece for a particular, "Anglo-Saxon" model of management reform (Halligan, 1996; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000; Premfors, 1998). The norm became a continuing programme of NPM-style change, and this agenda established itself as the one around which most debate took place. That, I presume, was why the Finnish minister asked me about the New Zealand model – his officials at the time were active members of PUMA and dutifully brought back Anglo-Saxon ideas to Helsinki for local assessment and possible borrowing.

More than 20 years ago, Powell and DiMaggio proposed a theoretical explanation for the convergence of organisational forms in particular fields towards a common type (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Their idea of "institutional isomorphism" has subsequently been quite widely used to explain trends in both the public and the private sectors (*e.g.* Pollitt, 2001). Interestingly for our present concern with international transfers, none of the three convergence mechanisms proposed by Powell and DiMaggio involves simple voluntary copying aimed exclusively at better performance. The first type, coercive isomorphism, occurs when an organisation adopts a new form because some superior or dominating authority pressures it to do so. Mrs Thatcher's insistence on compulsory competitive tendering for local government and the National Health Service would be a case in point. In the international arena some of the reforms in the developing world are clearly made largely at the behest of aid donor organisations, both national and international. The second type, mimetic isomorphism, occurs when, under conditions of uncertainty about what the best thing to do may be, an organisation concludes that the safest course is to copy what has been done by some apparently successful or high status organisations in their field. This should confer legitimacy, even if performance does not improve – one always has the defence that one was imitating the best. The third type, normative isomorphism, typically occurs when some professional body or other standard-setting organisation decrees that particular processes should be organised in a particular way. Hospitals organise a certain treatment in similar ways because this is what is recommended by national institutes or colleges of medicine. In the world of public management, international consultancy firms may spread a particular technology as the wind spreads sycamore seeds (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991, p. 70).

The point about the theory of institutional isomorphism is that it extends the range of motives through which international transfers may come about far beyond either simple goodwill or, indeed, a single-minded drive for greater efficiency. Importers may not be rational actors – or, at any rate not only rational actors. Copying may occur because of external pressure on the importing government, because it seems like the safest way to legitimise reform, or simply because some particular piece of management technology has become "the norm" in relevant international networks.

9. The transfer is dyadic – there is one "importer" and one "exporter"

International transfers may be dyadic, but often relationships are more complicated than that. Governments certainly proclaim their own success stories directly to other governments, but the growing network of international conferences and seminars where ideas are exchanged about "good governance", "benchmarking" and "management best practice" includes other kinds of "player" in addition to currently serving national civil servants. These other actors include:

- the staff of international and supranational organisations such as the World Bank, the OECD or the European Commission. These nodal institutions both bring national (and sometimes local) government representatives together in *fora* specifically devoted to improving management technologies, and themselves engage in advisory and proselytising roles;
- management consultants, who are regularly hired either to work as expert advisers on specific instances of technology transfer or to report to deliberative *fora* on the latest developments in the private sector;
- recently retired senior civil servants, who frequently find themselves travelling extensively in retirement to advise other governments;
- some academics – there is a limited but growing band of academics who are "on the books" of national governments and international agencies, and who are regularly called upon to join teams that advise importing countries, or simply to play their part by providing some more "academic" input at international seminars or conferences (Talbot and Caulfield, 2002, is one example of this kind of work).

In practice, transferring management technology from one country to another is rather seldom the work of a single adviser (from any of the above groups). Often it will be a team effort, with teams composed of some mixture of members of the above categories. At their best such teams can be exhilarating places to work – a fruitful mixture of experiences and perspectives. At worst the different motives and cognitive styles of the various types of adviser can lead to mutual irritation and to incoherence or superficiality in the advice the team delivers.

Most such teams will have a designated contact person in the administration of the importing jurisdiction. Some teams will actually include a native of the importing country as a full team member. This can be a crucial role. As indicated above, understanding the domestic context – the local institutional networks and dependencies, and the politico-administrative culture of the host country – may well be essential for the chances of a successful transfer. Implementing TQM in a Russian driving license agency is most unlikely to be the same as implementing TQM in a Swedish hospital. Without authoritative advice on the local situation, the most expert team can easily get into difficulties. Yet even with that advice, matters may still go astray. Does the crucial local liaison person/team member have his or her own axe to grind? How can the rest of the team assure themselves of the quality of the "inside dope" which they are being fed?

To summarise, international transfers of management technology are seldom accomplished on a "from me to you" basis. Frequently they involve representatives of several different organisations or disciplines who are brought together for the purpose and expected to work as a team. Access to local knowledge is often vital, and sometimes difficult. A transfer of this type is not a matter of a glossy brochure or a brief PowerPoint presentation – it is itself a complex process, in need of good management.

10. There is a shared language between the importer and the exporter

Most people who have studied or taken part in international transfers of policies and technologies have anecdotes to tell about awkward or amusing misunderstandings which have arisen because more than one language is being used. Words are slippery, and even when everything is translated into one language, for non-native speakers key terms may still carry distinctive connotations associated with experiences in their home country. In my own comparative work on executive agencies I was struck by how, even among the Dutch, Swedes and Finns – almost all fluent in English – the term "agency" itself conjured up different sets of expectations, often significantly different from those of the Brits who were accustomed to "Next Steps"-style agencies (Pollitt *et al*, 2001).

This is not a trivial matter, and its importance is amplified by the fact that what is traded internationally is not usually the practice itself, but words describing the practice:

> *Reformers may learn about reforms to imitate through written reports, on short visits during which they are given talks about a country's experience with reforms, or more indirectly when consultants or researchers tell them about change initiatives elsewhere. Thus, what is spreading is not practice as such, but accounts of this practice.*
>
> (Sahlin-Andersson, 2001, p. 54)

11. Concluding remarks

In terms of mainstream social science, we seem to be at the stage where we recognise the complexity of the issues, and have developed some broad conceptual schemes that help us map what we suspect will turn out to be important independent variables. The latter "candidate variables" include:

- the similarity of the goals within the exporting and importing jurisdictions;
- the simplicity/complexity of the technology itself;
- the institutional similarity between the jurisdictions;
- their cultural compatibility.

A number of illuminative case studies stress the significance of one or more of these factors for the success or failure of the transfer (see, *e.g.* De Jong *et al.*, 2002; Pollitt and Talbot, 2003). Theorists of "path dependency" show how the logic of institutional and cultural similarity may influence the costs of reform and the chances of success (Pierson, 2000). What we do not yet have, however, is much comparative work, where the same conceptual framework is applied to a series of management transfers, to see if some variables, in some circumstances, feature as more significant than others. In general terms it would be likely that characteristics of both the technology itself and the institutional context into which it is being imported will affect the outcome (Manning, 2001; Pollitt, 2003), but to say that is to do no more than announce the first step in model-building.

At a more basic level there is also much work to be done in order to operationalise some of the concepts which have figured in the policy transfer literature thus far. Cultural compatibility, for example, is often mentioned, but how are we to measure it? What technique will enable us to distinguish between situation A, where cultural differences are substantial but can be surmounted, and situation B, where they are so profound that the particular transfer under consideration would stand very little chance of success? The major works in the field of comparative contemporary cultures bring us face to face with this question but do not yet give us the intellectual equipment for answering it (see, *e.g.* Hofstede, 2001; Hood, 1998).

Once we have advanced further with operationalisation and with systematic comparisons, we may be able to begin to get some idea of the relative frequencies of different kinds of approach and outcome. Do governments normally scan their current portfolio of management arrangements, identify areas of weakness, and then seek the best buy on the international market place? Or are we in a more Kingdonian world, where streams of technical solutions flow along, their advocates waiting for a suitable problem to batten onto, and hoping for a brief moment of political attention, out of which can be squeezed the necessary authority and resources for action (Kingdon, 1984; Wolman, 1992, p. 36)? Case studies of transfer seem to reveal the existence of both types – the "rational shopper" and the "garbage can" model of "impulse purchasing" when a particularly irritating problem needs a new "fix" of legitimacy. What we do not yet know is what the distribution is between these two extremes, and whether the growing interest in transfers means that this distribution is changing.

Finally, we should return to the issue of management knowledge itself. Too often, the unspoken assumption is that "management" is now a field of sufficiently certain and invariant knowledge that it can be traded across almost any kind of boundary – organisational, legal, cultural, linguistic, topographical. The paratroopers of the World Bank or Arthur Andersen or the United Kingdom Cabinet Office will float down and help the importing government build a performance indicator system or a financial management system or an autonomous revenue agency. They will "facilitate learning", "build networks", "share best practice". The official texts make it sound as though, in principle, almost any technology can be transferred. Indeed, the category "management technologies that are specific to this place and time, and which cannot be transferred" is *de facto* empty – it is just not referred to. After all, adjustments can surely be made to meet the institutional and cultural differences of the importing country? But the epistemological foundations of this far-travelling management knowledge are rarely discussed. The possibility that widely-used technologies may contain fundamental flaws or contradictions is not on the agenda. Cultural and institutional differences are categorised as problems to be overcome rather than fundamental reasons for pursuing different, home-grown solutions. [Although, of course, there is a parallel critical literature that questions the status of this expertise: see, for example, Power (1996) on audit; or Hood and Jackson (1991) on the "principles" of public administration; or Pollitt (2003, Chapter 7) on getting and giving public management advice.]

Meanwhile, career paths for the new experts are emerging. The advent of the internet and easy air travel enables their professional networks to be truly international. The construction of a cadre of international public management experts and a network of connected institutions is proceeding apace. Correspondingly, the idea of domestically-devised solutions to local problems – local operative staff working patiently to improve their own practice – begins to look dull and old-fashioned. In our globalised world of management it is increasingly assumed that someone out there must already have a better solution, if only we can find it.

The concluding message is therefore one of caution about this whole way of looking at things. The international experts may know about the technology, but they often know little of the local context, and they may not even know much about the specific functions concerned. Yet functional knowledge and contextual knowledge may be just as important for the success or failure of the reform as knowledge about the technology itself. It is only by combining technical management expertise, functional knowledge and local contextual awareness that we can hope to close the implementation gap in public management reform. Effectively to combine these three streams of knowledge is itself a management task of the highest importance.

Notes

1. This remark should be partially qualified. The academic literature dealing with international transfers of public management technology is limited (but growing). There are, however, other, much larger literatures which may well contain relevant ideas. These include the general policy transfer literature (*e.g.* Dolowitz and March, 1996; De Jong *et al.*, 2002; Rose, 1993; Stone, 1999), work on the diffusion of innovations (*e.g.* Halligan, 1996; Rogers, 1995), and analyses of the modes of propagation of management fashions (*e.g.* Jackson, 2001, Pollitt, 2001). Clearly, understandings derived from the transfer of management technologies between different jurisdictions within a single country may well prove relevant for the yet more complex subject of transfers between countries.

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