

CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC ‘MANAGEMENT’ AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

South Africa’s political transition to democratic rule was the catalyst for ambitious public sector reform efforts, which sought to restructure the organisational and personnel profile of the state. A key aim of this process was to enhance the state’s management capacity to steer a far-reaching socio-economic policy agenda, which drew on the principles and tools of comparative public management practice as it had evolved globally and intellectually. This article examines how South Africa’s policy commitment to management reform can be characterised in comparative terms, and twenty years on, assess if and how this commitment has materialised in practice. I will argue that the South African case exhibits a confusing and directionless mix of traditional management control and unconsummated NPM advocacy. Although this is generally consistent with NPM practice in developing countries, I will propose that there are at least three specific elements that lend texture to the South African case, namely, capacity, commitment and capture.

Keywords - *Management Development, Public Management Reform, South Africa*

INTRODUCTION

The study and practice of ‘public management’ has a lengthy history intimately entwined with changing philosophical conceptions of state administration. This reflects changing historical assumptions about what constitutes good management. This paper was prompted by an impression that the discourse around management in South Africa’s public sector often obscures the term’s complex history. I submit that this has been the result of the term being contextually captured by the urgency of reforming the public sector after the transition to democracy in 1994. The aim of this paper is to critique the coherence of South Africa’s management reform efforts as part of wider public sector reform, and to illustrate both the contradictory and cosmetic nature of these efforts, as well as the possible motives behind them.

South Africa’s political transition necessitated wholesale restructuring of the state bureaucracy, a process which attracted considerable policy attention in the mid to late

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1990s. This transformation included all major facets of the public sector including organisational and personnel reforms. The scale of the endeavour saw South African policy makers draw inspiration from an accumulated wealth of international experience in public sector reform efforts, especially related to management development and practice. Now over twenty years after the process began, it is appropriate to ask whether the policy rhetoric of reform, premised on international comparative principles, has in reality matched the practice.

In part one of this paper I will reprise the conceptual incarnations of the term management in the study of Public Administration, including the shared parentage of 'management' and 'administration'; the early influence of industrialisation, organisational behaviour and government performance on conceptions of management in government; the emergence of New Public Management as the pinnacle of economic efficiency; and the post-NPM corrective and search for public management 'value'. The purpose of this overview is to illustrate the multi-faceted nature of management. In part two I will outline and appraise management reform approaches in South Africa. This will show that the urgency and scale of general public sector reform, combined with a wealth of available knowledge on comparative public management practice, has resulted in a formal espousal of multiple management approaches. This has however produced a contradictory and inconsistent application of reform approaches in practice, especially with regards to NPM and post-NPM approaches.

The research approach that I employ in this paper combines a range of primary and secondary sources on the experience of public management reform in South Africa, and analyses this against comparative management reform experience. The primary sources that I draw from consists of legislative bills debated before Parliament, empirical research findings published by public sector oversight bodies in South Africa, selected government reports and policy documents.

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: ITS BACKGROUND AND MEANING

The subject of public sector management exhibits a lengthy and complex history necessitating commensurate analysis if the seemingly obvious need to manage better amounts to anything more than rhetoric. While the historical terrain tracing the evolution of public management is fertile, this paper will try to avoid a mechanical exercise in comparing and contrasting definitions by focusing on selected research offering more contextually rich descriptions of the issue. The first example perhaps appropriately sought to answer the big existential question of *what* public 'management' is and what does it refer to, taking the form of an online debate between four public management scholars documented in the journal *International Public Management Review* (2003). Each contributor¹ was allowed an opportunity to address such fundamental questions as: how can public management be defined as an academic field; from what disciplinary bases has it evolved; and what knowledge frameworks does it need to comprehend.

In his overview of the meaning of 'M', or 'management', Kelman (2003) cites the deliberate distancing of public management from related academic concerns such as Political Science, Public Administration and other social science disciplines. This isolation

was predicated on what he referred to as public management's prescriptive focus, which Kelman links to the emergent curriculum of public policy schools in United States academic institutions from the 1970s. The nature of public management's prescriptive orientation emphasised improvement in the performance of government organisations through a focus on policy implementation and the strategic actions of top level decision makers. The terminology used by Kelman (2003, 3) to describe public management's approach in action clearly demonstrates an emphasis on doing rather than simply explaining or critiquing observable problems in a more traditional academic sense, such as 'training' of students, 'translat[ing] an idea into reality', and 'using performance measurement to improve organizational performance'. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000, 9) offered their own description of this, where 'management is about getting things done as quickly, cheaply and effectively as possible-and usually about getting things done through other people'.

In Jones' (2003) response to Kelman, the essential premise that the significance of public management is its prescriptive orientation is retained, however Jones does not paint the same kind of estranged relationship between public management and related social science academic disciplines. This allows for a broader, more evolutionary and altogether useful portrayal of public management thinking. To begin with, some of the characteristics that Jones (2003, 11) attaches to public management reflects the prescriptive tenor described by Kelman, such as the role of public managers as active and motivating agents, a focus on the 'operation of management systems and the use of management techniques, ...', outcomes, improving agency operations, 'resolving' problems, and assessing organisational performance and devising instruments thereto. Jones however goes beyond Kelman's more limited description of public management emerging from American public policy schools in the 1970s to trace a previously more intimate relationship between public management and other academic disciplines which contributed ideas about the functioning of public organisations. The inter-disciplinary evolution of public management, in respect of its broad concern with public organisational functioning, is said to have been influenced by contributions from disciplines such as Political Science, Public Administration, Sociology, Economics and Psychology.

By widening the discussion about public management's evolution, Jones refers to an identity that public management appears to have carved out within the broader study of Public Administration. He argues that the former has been regarded as essentially different from 'traditional public administration', which viewed the operation of government organisations as functionally staid and static, which generally and ironically reflects another prescriptive focus linked to Weberian bureaucracy and notions of scientific administration (Gulick and Urwick 1937). The idea of management supposedly departs from this traditional model by situating the study of public organisations in wider and more dynamic 'environments', which reinforces the importance of the strategic role and behaviour of key organisational decision-makers (i.e. managers). The irony referred to earlier is not however lost, because in advancing such a distinction Jones obscures the reality, acknowledged by others, firstly that the distinction between public management, or 'PM', and public administration, or 'PA', exhibits a shared historical

and terminological ancestry, and secondly that the character of PM itself has been subject to historical change.

Jones appears (though this is not clarified) to associate the 'functionalist' camp with PA, although he includes in this 'mechanistic' view of organisations the contribution of Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose work explicitly carried the management label (i.e. scientific management), and whose research derived from private industry did in fact focus, as PM is supposed to do in contrast to PA, on the 'use of management techniques, technology and control systems, ...' to improve performance. Is there not in reality then two kinds of public management at play, and if so, what makes them different? What this example illustrates and what Jones later acknowledges is that the concept of management in the public sector has itself metamorphosed over time. Although there seems to be coherence around the foci and objectives of public management, how these have been expressed at different points in time and spaces² and what influenced these expressions, are the subject of greater inquiry. This is later acknowledged in Jones' reference to the implementation of more recent public management 'reforms', referring specifically to New Public Management.

ENTER NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

The emergence of NPM reforms did not so much represent a dramatic divergence from previously held conceptions of public management, influenced by private sector practice, as much as it represented the dramatic extent to which such thinking could effect changes in the structure and functioning of public bureaucracies (Hood 1991). One can to some extent see in these reforms glimpses of public management's past, both in its early twentieth century concerns about issues such as performance monitoring, incentives, and labour discipline which recall scientific management, to the subsequent shift of attention to how managers practice and should practice what Lynn (2003) described as their 'craft', in order to maximise the performance of their organisations, germinating from private sector experience. But NPM clearly drew on more than these already familiar ideas, including organisational restructuring on a dramatic scale, a greater emphasis on internal and external competition (i.e. guided by the philosophy of the market) through contracts and outsourcing, which were generally sparked by cost/benefit worries about the efficiency of government bureaucracy. Understanding the mixture of reforms does then appear to require some reference to the political and economic climate under which NPM reforms arose.

It is generally accepted that the adoption of NPM reforms did not conform to a blanket of consistency across the nations in which these were introduced, which prompted Pollitt (2003, 36) to argue that NPM was not caused so much as it was 'chosen'; and where according to Ferlie et al (1996, 10) NPM actually represented a collection of models reflecting distinctive features which to some extent did not appear readily compatible. The most dominant of these models was termed 'the efficiency drive', followed by 'downsizing and decentralization', and thirdly 'in search of excellence', which although essentially an offshoot of model one's introduction of a more entrepreneurial

management style, accentuated the behavioural role of management and managers within organisational settings.

Of note in Ferlie et al's (1996, 12) description was their reference to a potential incompatibility between the efficiency drive's requirement of performance accountability enforced from the top, i.e. the political level, and model two's break-up of large government bureaucracies accompanied by greater managerial discretion and authority to run these. Hood (1991, 5) referred to this aspect of NPM as a 'marriage of opposites', which on the one hand spoke to the efficiency drives' need to reduce organisational waste and enhance economy by drawing on earlier ideas from public choice, transaction cost and principle-agent arrangements, while on the other hand drawing on the earlier craft-oriented perspective emphasising managerial responsibility and problem solving, which necessitated 'high discretionary power' to achieve results. Hood (1991, 6) also expressed scepticism about this relationship by suggesting that '[w]hether the partners in this union were fully compatible remains to be seen. "Free to manage" is a rather different slogan from "free to choose"'. Christensen and Laegreid (2002, 270-271) also remarked on a potential conflict, describing a 'tension' in the NPM literature between a need for greater 'managerial discretion' on the one hand, and the need for a 'greater degree of accountability' on the other.

There is an important linkage between the kind of prescriptive-oriented research that Kelman associated with public management emanating from academia in the 1970s, which centred on managerial practice, and what NPM more dramatically advocated in practice. This pivoted around a relatively narrow preoccupation with measurable and monitorable performance achievement that could yield efficiency gains. The linkage was nicely described by Virtanen (1996), who wrote that '[i]t [referring to NPM] is a doctrine which emphasises the instrumental competencies of public managers rather than their value competencies'. But what about the neglected 'value competencies' of public managers, in light of the fact that in the online debate concerning what distinguished public management from traditional Public Administration, Jones (2003, 13) proposed that 'PM tends [sic] to place emphasis on value and management changes that increase or reduce value to citizens, government entities, agencies, managers and employees.' Having said this, his characterisation of 'value' could be mistaken for exhibiting a more instrumentalist hue, where 'PM tends to look at value production from the perspective of value chain analysis...The concept of cutting rules, procedures and process that do not add value to the production of the outputs/outcomes that satisfy the mission of the organization or government ...' (ibid). What this description and the online debate in which it occurred didn't take into account was the emergent critical literature re-examining the concept of value in a post-NPM environment.

POST-NPM AND THE EMPHASIS ON PUBLIC 'VALUE' MANAGEMENT

The agenda and practice of NPM reforms has elicited strong criticism about its effects on public accountability. This stems in the latter case from a relatively narrower emphasis on economic rationalism and instrumentalism, which as some commentators have noted has had the effect of reducing the policy space for directing government actions.

This has had consequences for issues such as democratic accountability, public interest, and equity, which is at the core of the recent 'value' critique of NPM and public management more broadly (Schwartz 2002, 64, 79; Pollitt 2003, 46).

Over the past decade critical appraisals have been produced on the accountability deficits of NPM reforms, and how these can be rectified. A central feature of this literature has seen NPM's accountability conundrum recast or problematised in the language of public management 'values'. An early example of this is Kernaghan's (2000) analysis of the value implications of introducing public management reforms, including NPM, in moving towards the 'post-bureaucratic organisation'. His is a response to attempts to 'reconcile traditional [i.e. bureaucratic] public service values with "new" values arising from new approaches to organizing and managing public organizations [i.e. linked to private sector experience, inc. NPM]', where values refer to 'enduring beliefs that influence the choices we make from among available means and ends' (Kernaghan 2000, 95). To examine this, he outlines a classification of values pertaining to public organisations on the basis of three interrelated fields: ethical values, referring to integrity and fairness; democratic values, referring to impartiality and the rule of law, and professional values, relating to effectiveness and service. He argues that this three-fold classification can facilitate attempts to scrutinise the impact that public sector reform efforts can have on the relative character and emphasis associated with their value proposition, i.e. emphasising market-inspired professional values defining effectiveness and service and associated with NPM reforms, while being cognizant of the effects on maintaining ethical and democratic accountability (Kernaghan 2000, 97-98).

Stoker (2006) promotes the idea of 'public value management' (PVM) as a competitor to, on the one hand, traditional public administration characterised by bureaucracy, and on the other hand, the 'narrowly utilitarian character of new public management'. In PVM there is an important shift from what constitutes a value resulting from shifting management reforms as discussed by Kernaghan (2000), to a focus on the processes through which value is created and the involvement of government officials therein. Stoker (2006, 42) describes this as follows:

Public value is more than a summation of the individual preferences of the users or producers of public services. The judgment of what is public value is collectively built through deliberation involving elected and appointed government officials and key stakeholders.

Focusing on the process of collective deliberation for defining value in public administration, according to Stoker (2006, 41), presents an opportunity to coherently frame and navigate through the complex process of 'networked governance', referring to increasingly diffuse processes of decision-making involving a wide array of participants in an uncertain environment. While Stoker concedes, as have others (see Kernaghan), that PVM blends together characteristics of traditional public administration and NPM, it is in relation to the 'role of [public] managers' that a distinctive break from these conceptions is said to be based. This principally includes 'play[ing] an active role in steering networks of deliberation and delivery and maintain[ing] the overall capacity of the system' (Stoker 2006, 44). This contrasts with a manager's role in traditional public administration, which centred on following organisationally-prescribed rules and proce-

dures, and in NPM, requiring defined performance targets to be met. In terms of latter, this speaks to earlier NPM critiques about the diminution of the policy space in the process of identifying and critically examining options for government action.

O'Flynn (2007) extends Stoker's focus on the practical manifestation of public value management. Her description of public value encapsulates the main themes articulated by others, where it centres on '...collectively expressed, politically mediated preferences consumed by the citizenry-created not just through "outcomes" [a criticism of NPM] but also through processes which may generate trust or fairness' (O'Flynn 2007, 358). In the latter case, O'Flynn (2007, 360) outlines the consequences of a public value approach for managers, in contrast to an emphasis on performance-oriented goals by NPM and traditional bureaucracy's dependence on prescribed rules and procedures. Public managers are now said to be responsible for 'multiple goals which, in addition to achievement of performance targets, are more broadly concerned with aspects such as steering networks of providers in the quest for public value creation, creating and maintaining trust, and responding to the collective preferences of the citizenry in addition to those of clients.'

The practical implications of this definition are nothing short of ambitious, which requires an expansion of managerial accountability beyond what has typically been mediated by political and organisational demands, i.e. in performance agreements, towards satisfying the expectations of clients/users and the citizenry more broadly (O'Flynn 2007, 360-361). Alford and Hughes' (2008) emphasise a more 'pragmatic' approach to public value management. This recognises that 'different circumstances demand different managerial tools', which, when assessing the likely level and degree of trust and cooperation between public managers and external providers or partners, influencing decisions about the extent of the latter's involvement in service delivery, should take cognisance of the prevailing accountability environment in which public managers function. This includes factors such as 'the extent to which the government agency will allow autonomy to those of its staff who represent it in the relationship with the external party', and 'the extent to which accountability requirements will allow the representatives some flexibility in the relationship' (Alford, Hughes 2008, 141-142).

APPROACHES TO PUBLIC MANAGEMENT THINKING AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 inherited the challenge of re-integrating a hierarchically-ordered, racially fragmented, and inordinately complex and inefficient public sector consisting of national, provincial, and 'homeland' administrations. The homelands were creatures of the apartheid system; regionally-based enclaves that were intended to allow Blacks political autonomy, and which had evolved large bureaucracies employing hundreds of thousands of people second only to the national level (Mentz 1993, 448). The prevailing management paradigm in this system favoured centralisation and control.

Very shortly after the 1994 transition, the policy discourse on public management began to signal a move towards a post-NPM emphasis on public value-although the term was

not explicitly used; and although in practice the language reflected a mixture of NPM and post-NPM tones. The first major public sector policy pronouncement addressed management reform, in which a more 'pragmatic' approach to management was pitted against a historically centralised and control-oriented approach; and where the former would be more open, flexible, participatory and consultative, envisioning client responsiveness and inclusion of non-governmental actors in administrative decision-making (DPSA, 1995). The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service also spoke of 'managerial leadership', 'devolution of decision-making'; and a

move towards the devolution and decentralization of managerial responsibility ... complemented by the creation of more open, flexible and participative management structures ... these structures will concentrate less on the application of rules and more on the creative use of consultation and teamwork.

Despite these intentions, there are doubts about whether this discourse corresponds with the reality of managerial functioning in the public sector, which in practice contains a confusing and directionless mix of traditional control and unconsummated NPM features. This can partially be attributed to the fact that South Africa's experimentation with public sector reform occurred late (e.g. in the 1990s) in the evolution of management thinking, in which a mixture of approaches were already known and latched onto by policy makers in an effort to urgently 'transform' the public sector. More importantly however, this is consistent with the experience of non-OECD developing and industrialising countries which have struggled to liberalise public management practices. In this section I will draw on the literature on management reform experimentation in developing countries, specifically NPM, to analyse South Africa's efforts.

The experience of NPM reforms in developing countries has exposed the limited impact of these efforts, which has highlighted the incongruent relationship between managerial deregulation and the character of public management in these climates. The South African case is not generally different, although it does present some unique qualities as a result of the degree of administrative estrangement wrought by apartheid's institutional racism. This has moreover fuelled a policy rhetoric which, as McCourt (2013, 2) described in his presentation of multiple models of public sector reform characterising administrative problems of developing countries, seems to reflect an "I want it all!" attitude amongst policy makers, or perhaps more aptly, a "We need it all!" belief. The reality of this dictum has however resulted in a confusing and seemingly dysfunctional blend of management philosophies. Below I will isolate three specific elements which have contributed to this state of affairs in South Africa, drawing from a matrix model of management reform readiness employed by Manning (2001) to review the record of NPM in developing countries. These elements are capacity, commitment and capture.

Capacity

The first element concerns the 'capacity' to effect management reform in South Africa, moving from traditional to NPM and through post-NPM approaches. McClennan and Orkin (2009) have usefully contextualised this issue in their retrospective review of management development efforts in the country. They observed that approaches to management development have roughly approximated stages of public sector reform

following South Africa's democratic transition. The first of these is what they term the 'policy state' (1994-1999), characterised by policy, programme and organisational reviews; and in which the dominant model of capacity-building seemed to correspond with early functionalist notions of management associated with PA, as discussed by Jones. They describe the 'prevailing management development paradigm' during this transitional period as being based on 'scientific administration, commonly known as the generic process approach'. Cameron's (2013, 570) assessment of the character of public administration scholarship prior to South Africa's democratic transition also described this as a 'variant of scientific management', focusing on the specification and regulation of internal work processes. McLennan and Orkin (2009, 1031) add that '[t]he most effective management development mechanism was (and still is) the induction of new personnel into the culture of the public service, in terms of establishing set procedures and approaches to work'. This implies that there was little room for an entrepreneurial model of public management.

The second phase of reform was described as the 'implementing state' (1999-2004), characterised by an increased emphasis on the managerial capacity to deliver, influenced by NPM. This was followed by the 'developmental state', in which there has been a post-NPM emphasis towards viewing public managers as 'leaders' engaging in more complex and co-ordinated decision-making processes with internal and external actors. This is exemplified by the Office of the President discussing the objective of improving government performance by retaining the familiar NPM staple of 'value-for-money' and doing 'more with less', whilst promoting other post-NPM ideas. These included enhancing inter-organisational work, enhanced citizen oversight by publishing data on government outcomes, enabling 'robust engagement with service delivery partners', and requiring a greater degree of responsibility and initiative to be adopted by senior public managers, or 'leaders' (The Presidency 2009, 13, 18).

The rhetoric of developing and promoting a managerial model consistent with post-NPM characteristics have been hampered by strategic and institutional instability³, coupled with weak pedagogical planning to define the leadership competencies of public sector managers. McLennan and Orkin (2009, 1041-1042) conclude their appraisal of management development efforts in South Africa by arguing that '[a]lthough descriptive leadership and management competencies have been prescribed, there has not yet been a co-ordinated attempt to define how and in what ways public managers are best *enabled* to lead development in complex and uncertain contexts'. This would clearly impair substantive movement towards a management approach driven by public value.

Although management philosophies and their associated capacities can be said to have evolved, at least formally, roughly in step with stages of public sector reform in South Africa, other assessments of management capacity have revealed a less evolutionary movement in practice and a more conflated and confusing mix of approaches. Let us start from a comparative footing with an observation by Manning (2001: 302), who questions the capacity for reform in developing countries and specifically asks whether the capacity to effectively institute public management reforms à la NPM presumes the existence of a bureaucracy equipped with traditional Weberian attributes of order, compliance and trust, referred to as the 'Old Public Disciplines'. Manning (2001: 306) later

characterises South Africa as an 'incapable but motivated' reformer, employing a matrix of reform adapted from Girishankar (2000) and the World Bank (2000) which highlights deficiencies such as 'little administrative competence'. Deficient capacity to effect management reforms resulting in the introduction of 'capacity-building' efforts also represents what Polidano (1999: 4) refers to as reforms that are simultaneously introduced alongside NPM but which are unrelated to its principles, similar to the earlier reference to McCourt's multiple reform models.

Polidano's argument can be understood as follows: the introduction of NPM reforms presumes a requisite administrative capacity to competently assume increased managerial responsibility and accountability. According to Polidano (1999: 16), developing countries differ from their industrialised counterparts in relation to capacity-building by their degree of need, or what he describes as 'severe capacity limitations'. These limitations do not simply consist of low skill levels amongst bureaucrats, but comprise systemic weaknesses in human resource and budget management, as well as politicisation—which I will return to later under the issue of 'capture'. Despite this, Polidano acknowledges that training has tended to be the preferred means of building capacity.

Efforts to introduce robust training interventions specifically targeting public sector managers are not only evident in South Africa, but also display multiple management philosophies. Schwella and Rossouw (2005) undertook an assessment of 'core management competencies' contained in a 'Performance Management and Development System', introduced in 2001. On the basis of the title alone, we see in the PMDS a marrying of NPM's focus on performance with traditional public administration's expectation of capacity. This is further evident in the inclusion of a 'personal development plan' as part of the performance appraisal process, together with performance-related rewards (Schwella, Rossouw 2005: 766). More revealing still is the authors' comparative assessment of the CMCs against management competency criteria employed in OECD reformers: the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Whilst this comparison does not, in and of itself, expose the multiple management philosophies apparent in the CMC, it does bring this into sharper relief. In comparison to these OECD countries, the CMCs are more functionally-oriented and include criteria that can clearly be regarded as traditional management competencies. This is in contrast to a smaller list of competency criteria in the OECD countries that are generally more goal-oriented. For example, the list of eleven CMCs includes 'programme and project management', which I would submit exemplifies task management; 'financial management', and 'honesty and integrity'. The traditional management nature of these three criteria is, I suggest, evident in Schick's (1998: 130) discussion of why most developing countries should not try New Zealand-style NPM reforms. The author states that:

... politicians and officials must concentrate on the basic process of public management. They must be able to control inputs before they are called upon to control outputs [I would argue that this relates to task management]; they must be able to account for cash before they are asked to account for cost [financial management]; they must abide by uniform rules before they are authorized to make their own rules [relates to honesty and integrity]; ...

Substantial attention has been directed at reforming the management ranks of the South African bureaucracy since 1994, which has seen an over one hundred percent increase in the number of senior managers between 1995 and 2005, in comparison to reductions in production line public sector workers such as teachers, nurses, and police (Hassen, Altman 2007, 15). This dramatic increase has however been attributed to reforming the personnel system by rationalising the rank and grading scheme, rather than a mass injection of new managers.⁴ In addition, a ‘senior management service’ (SMS) corps modelled on special dispensation regimes to attract, retain and improve the state’s management capacity was introduced in South Africa in 2001 (DPSA Not dated). The SMS consists of the top four employment categories in the public service. Despite these efforts, the capacity of public managers leaves a lot to be desired from the perspective of more than one management philosophy.

Despite the creation of the SMS to improve management capacity, concerns have been expressed about the qualitative improvements that this has generated in practice. Cameron (2009, 926) cites official reviews which have acknowledged a lack of ‘soft skills such as discipline, communication and team work’ amongst the management corps. The former is relevant to traditional management’s control-orientation and the latter two would appear to be important for engaging intra, inter and extra-organisational counterparts and partners as envisioned by public value. The DPSA (2007, 5, 46) also made repeated references to ‘poor’ and ‘weak’ communication by managers, adding that senior managers were not adding ‘value’ and critical input in departmental decision-making processes, in contrast to playing a ‘rubber stamp’ function. The same report also proposed that senior managers needed to have greater exposure to front line service delivery, and should assume responsibility for mentoring as a core competency (ibid: 13, 32). This also speaks to public value’s emphasis on steering networks of delivery, but also weaknesses in South Africa’s NPM-inspired ‘batho pele’ citizens charter-inspired service delivery improvement policy. Finally, in a review of the training needs of SMS members, the Public Service Commission (2008a, 15), a statutory body, observed that against ‘core management criteria’ a majority of senior managers cited financial management, a feature of traditional management, and, more tellingly from a public value perspective, ‘strategic capability and leadership’ skills.

Although the creation of the SMS was meant to facilitate the state’s ability to attract and retain scarce managerial talent in numbers, notwithstanding the intention to but shortcomings sustained in achieving qualitative improvements, the opposite has occurred in reality, with departments showing high levels of vacancies in senior management posts (Naidoo 2008a, 122). This, however, seems to run counter to the substantial increase in management-level officials referred to earlier. The vacancy picture may be partially explained by confusion in the number of funded posts created by departments, in contrast to unfunded or redundant posts that haven’t been decommissioned. Moreover, my own comparison between vacancy rates and changes in post establishment found that the great majority of national departments showed an increase in post establishments between 2004-2006, with double digit increases in at least a third of departments. (Naidoo 2008a, 123-124). Future research that can produce a time-series picture of changes in post-establishment and the factors affecting this could help clarify the vacancy prob-

lem and provide a more accurate picture of management capacity. Another factor that may be exacerbating the degree of management scarcity experienced by some departments (i.e. vacancy levels vary across departments) is inter-departmental competition, with the Public Service Commission (2010a, 18) citing research showing a high level of internal mobility of senior managers attracted by and able to obtain better offers. A more worrying view on managerial mobility, which some have described as 'excessive', are concerns that an overly rapid movement of officials from junior to senior management ranks appears to be occurring at the expense of acquiring a minimum level of fitness to effectively discharge management functions (Sangweni, Mxakato-Diseko 2008, 44; Sing 2012, 383). This may be detrimental to empowering managers à la NPM if there aren't enough managers to begin with.

Commitment

The second element behind South Africa's confusing and dysfunctional approach to management reform relates to the commitment of its policy makers. Political commitment to reform has been explicitly referred to in several appraisals of NPM in developing countries (Larbi 1999; McCourt 2013; Polidano 1999; Turner 2002). Although Manning (2001) does not employ the term 'commitment', he does speak of 'motive' or 'motivation' for reform through employing a matrix of the 'motive and capability for public management reform'. It can be suggested that motive for reform is somewhat different from commitment to reform, as the former implies what lay behind the initial impulse to pursue management reforms. This is in contrast to commitment, which denotes having already outlined some agenda for reform, and then sticking to it. I mentioned earlier that South Africa had clearly embarked on and therefore demonstrated a motivation to pursue NPM-style reforms. Moreover, I have already referred to Manning's classification of South Africa as an 'incapable but motivated' reformer, in which I would largely support the incapable label. But, however motivated, can South Africa be considered a 'committed' reformer?

I would submit that South African policy maker's commitment to NPM reforms, let alone moving to a public value footing, can be questioned because of a failure to fully and appropriately delegate or decentralise decision-making power to public managers. This has resulted in an uncondusive environment for enabling public managers to facilitate public value; recalling Alford and Hughes' (2008) caution about the extent to which public managers enjoy decision-making autonomy and flexibility in creating public value outcomes through steering collective decision-making processes. Furthermore, although a reluctance to decentralise decision-making power is consistent with NPM practice in other developing countries, the seemingly unique aspect of the South African case lies in the possible motives behind this. Firstly however, I will turn to the evidence of failed managerial decentralisation.

In Cameron's (2009) analysis of the take-up of NPM reforms, the author concluded that the reform agenda has produced mixed and inconsistent results, and in other cases superficial commitment. Cameron (2009: 916) specifically observed that despite a framework sanctioning decentralisation of authority for human resource matters to public managers, only limited delegation from elected officials/Ministers to managers had ac-

tually taken place, amounting to a twist of conventional NPM logic or what he referred to as ‘a situation of “let the politicians manage” – in contrast to what Hood (1991) described as public managers being ‘free to manage’. The South African government’s own fifteen year assessment of public sector performance made similar findings on delegated authority to managers, which included delegations ‘existing on paper only’, as well as an unclear role delineation between ministers, deputy ministers and heads of departments (DPSA 2007, 34, 49). The report also touched on some of the apparent consequences of this situation, including delays in decision-making, and a need to ‘empower’ managers to ‘take work forward in their branches’ (DPSA 2007, 46).

Despite these findings, there has been a confusing and contradictory two-track approach emanating from the government on this issue. In the first instance, a National Development Plan (NDP), prepared by the National Planning Commission, an executive body in the South African presidency, has recently confirmed the present state of delegations, and has recommended ‘greater and more consistent’ devolution of authority over HR functions from political heads to senior public managers, including through legislative amendment (NPC 2012: 415). The Plan has also been formally endorsed by the Cabinet. In the second instance however, the government has quashed attempts to vest HR powers with senior public managers, thereby undercutting attempts to achieve managerial empowerment. This was evident in draft legislation presently before Parliament, in the form of a Public Administration Management Bill (Republic of South Africa 2013). The Bill was first introduced in 2008, shelved, and then reintroduced. A comparison between the two versions shows that provisions in the earlier bill equipping top public managers (heads of department/directors-general) with wide-ranging powers⁵ over organisational structure, delegated decision-making, staff establishment, appointments and discipline, have been removed from the current bill. This is noteworthy given the emphasis placed in the memorandum to the 2008 bill on the ‘significant change’ being proposed by vesting human resource powers⁶ in top public managers to match the powers they already possessed in financial management. The draft 2013 version of the Bill has since passed into law, as at the end of 2014.

The seemingly ambivalent approach of the government to decentralising HR powers to public managers can be better understood when considering the changes that have occurred in the structure of political accountability since 2009. The details of this can be prefaced by recalling Hood’s (1991) caution about the compatibility between NPM’s twin drivers of facilitating managerial discretion (free to manage), on the one hand, whilst enforcing stricter political accountability (free to choose) on the other. Reforms introduced since 2009 (see the Presidency, 2009) which have made ministers directly accountable to the President for the performance of their departments through signed ‘delivery agreements’, in one sense represents a textbook case of NPM accountability through adherence to performance monitoring. In another sense however it runs counter to conventional NPM logic of letting the managers manage by essentially reinforcing Cameron’s (2009) point about a tendency to ‘let the politicians manage’. Crucially, it also creates a disincentive to resolutely divest politicians of HR powers and transfer these to public managers, given the nature of a performance contracting regime in which the head of state acts as principal and ministers act as agents. Having said this, and ac-

knowledging that in reality such a ministerial contract/agreement regime will inevitably cascade down to public managers, will this also incentivise politicians to try to micro-manage their departments, further endangering a commitment to managerial empowerment?

Finally, I suggested earlier that although research on NPM in developing countries has pointed to a reluctance to decentralise decision-making power to public managers, the motives behind this may differ from the South African case. A failure to decentralise powers has, in the comparative research, been essentially attributed to governmental distrust of public managers, who may abuse these powers to pursue clientelistic ends (Makumbe 1997 in Polidano 1999: 12-13; McCourt 2013: 6; Taylor 2001: 184, 189). This does not seem to be the case in South Africa, where on the contrary, another factor which might plausibly explain the reluctance to decentralise HR powers to public managers might be that it enables politicians to control patronage. Cameron (2009: 916) has traced this back to the particularities of South Africa's political transition, in which the incoming African National Congress (ANC) government did not 'trust white bureaucrats of the old order' who had by then entrenched themselves in the senior levels of the bureaucracy. Investing HR powers in politicians was therefore a key mechanism to effect racial transformation in the public sector. Twenty years hence, the policy rationale behind this mechanism has given way to vocal criticisms that the maintenance of the status quo has enabled the incumbent ANC and its political principals in government to politicise senior levels of the bureaucracy, not just to racially transform it. I deal with this under the final heading of 'capture'.

Capture

The third element which explains South Africa's problematic approach to public management reform relates to 'capture'. I employ the term from the matrix of management reform readiness cited by Manning (2001), in which the 'incapable but motivated' quadrant that he applies to South Africa contains a reference to 'medium state capture'. Manning's reference to capture, citing work by the World Bank, encompasses a range of actors such as private firms, interest groups, and political leaders, who seek to unduly influence the work of state institutions. The form of capture that is salient in the South African case pertains to party political capture, and corresponds with Polidano's (1999: 16-17) observation that administrative structures suffer from weak institutionalisation in developing countries, and are susceptible to "penetration" by party politics'. Although it is difficult to judge the degree of capture resulting from this in the South African case, i.e. high, medium, or low, due to a lack of empirical data, politicisation in the appointment and career management of top public servants has been clearly documented in the country (Cameron 2010; Kopecký 2011; Matheson et al 2007; Naidoo 2013).

Politicisation can generally be described as the 'substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining of members of the public service' (Peters, Pierre 2004, 2); and reflect the ability of political parties to appoint people to positions in the state (Kopecký 2011, 717). In South Africa, this has been enabled by the explicit policy of the governing ANC to 'deploy' partisans into state institutions. This practice has been widely criticised outside of the

party for compromising the quality and professionalism of public managers, and has even disconcerted some within the organisation⁷. The party's Secretary-General Gwede Mantashe has conceded 'mistakes committed by our structures in deploying cadres who do not even meet the basic requirements for the posts they are deployed in' (ANC 2010, in Potgieter-Gqubule 2011: 89). A similar observation was made as early as 1998 by a Presidential Review Commission (RSA 1998) tasked with reviewing the early strages of public sector reform. Although the Commission recognised that it was not surprising that the new ANC leadership viewed the apartheid bureaucracy which it inherited with suspicion, resulting in an attempt to control appointments to its senior ranks, it also questioned the quality of the candidates this was actually generating: '... some of those new appointees have not been able to offer much beyond political loyalty ...'

There is a counter-intuitiveness to what politicisation has yielded in the South African case. The process should in theory have resulted in a trade-off between technocratic capacity and greater stability and strategic coherence in the managerial ranks of the public sector, given the ANC's deployment policy coupled with its uninterrupted two decades in power. In practice however, politicisation has contributed to instability and seems to have exacerbated low levels of capacity and managerial empowerment. A 2010 report on the turnover rate of heads of department showed that 43% of posts were vacant in national departments (PSC 2010b). Other research by the PSC (2008b, x, 9) has also revealed that contract termination was the single biggest reason (59%) behind the departure of heads in the period between 2003/4 – 2006/7; and as much as 89% of current heads interviewed⁸ believed that their tenure was directly linked to their relationship with ministers. When this is read with another finding that 61% of current heads believed that a change in minister would precipitate a change in their positions, it is evident that party political instability has contributed to uncertainty of tenure amongst the management leadership of the public service (PSC 2008b, 20). It can be suggested that the ANC's commitment to its deployment policy is unlikely to incentivise its elected leaders to relinquish their control over HR powers, in order to maintain the party's direct control over the management of state institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has highlighted the incongruity between the politics and policy of progressive public management reform advocacy and its practice in South Africa. It has, in particular, sought to highlight the difficulties encountered in actualising a movement of the reform agenda from traditional control through to NPM liberalisation and post-NPM empowerment, due to the exigencies of public sector reform and party political interests. The result is that it will be difficult to move public management practice into the realm of post-NPM ideas about 'value', in the context of a poor, and presumably requisite commitment to embedding NPM principles such as decentralised authority to give managers the freedom to manage. This is also likely to encumber efforts to improve the stra-

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tegic coherence and impact of management development efforts. Finally, the net effect of this assessment of South Africa's public management reform experience seems to correspond with broader measures of the government's performance, which gives cause to consider the consequences of this trajectory. Data from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators 'government effectiveness' rating of South Africa, which measures⁹ criteria such as bureaucratic quality and satisfaction with various public services shows a general downward trend between 1996 and 2013, with a high of .88 down to a low of .33 in 2012 (The World Bank Group, 2014). The South African government's own assessment of 'government effectiveness' which measures¹⁰ public opinion on service delivery has also shown a downward trend between 2004 and 2012 in the percentage of respondents who believed that the government was performing well, from a high of nearly 80% to a low of about 50% in 2011 (DPME 2012, 97).

NOTES

- ¹ These included Steven Kelman, L.R. Jones, and Kuno Schedler.
- ² For example, Schedler (2003) notes that the distinction between public 'management' and 'administration' was not a feature of the continental European tradition.
- ³ The latest effort to strategically drive management development efforts in South Africa is the launch of a national School of Government in 2013. This was preceded by a Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy, which itself replaced a South African Management Development Institute.
- ⁴ I refer to this in Naidoo (2008a, 109), in which I cite analysis by Thompson and Woolard (2002), and an explanation by the Department of Public Service and Administration (1996)
- ⁵ It can however be asked whether the government was fully committed to empowering top public servants with HR powers given that the original bill also equipped the minister responsible for the public service with extensive regulatory powers over these matters (Naidoo 2008b)
- ⁶ This corresponds with an earlier reference to a recommendation in the National Development Plan that HR powers be legislatively transferred to top public managers, although it was suggested that this be effected through another legislative instrument: the Public Service Act.
- ⁷ I argue in a more recent article (Naidoo 2014) on the ANC's deployment policy that the party has been unable to centrally orchestrate and maintain discipline over the deployment of its partisans in state institutions, which has been subject to clientelistic and factional pressures.
- ⁸ Based on a 49% response rate
- ⁹ The score is measured on a scale ranging from -2.5 to + 2.5, where higher scores correspond with better outcomes
- ¹⁰ The percentage score reflects a rating of 'performing well' in the delivery of basic services based on a regular national sample.

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