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A Review of: "Transcending New Public Management: The Transformation of Public Sector Reforms edited by Tom Christensen and Per Laegreid"

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BOOK REVIEW

***TRANSCENDING NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: THE
TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORMS***
EDITED BY TOM CHRISTENSEN AND PER LAEGREID

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Transcending New Public Management: The Transformation of Public Sector Reforms. Tom Christensen and Per Laegreid, editors. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007, 288 pages. ISBN: 978-0754670711

Transcending New Public Management is a collection of papers about post-New Public Management (NPM) reforms in Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The aim of the book is to examine what has happened over time, what types of reforms have been added, and whether there have been some reversals with respect to the NPM reforms that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. The book is a continuation of the previous book by the same editors (Christensen and Laegreid 2001), which examined the NPM reform process up to the end of the last decade.

The editors position themselves in the “governance tradition,” looking more into political constraints and the dynamics of reforms in countries that followed different paths with regard to NPM than into the managerial detail, though they acknowledge the importance of the managerialist tradition for NPM. They claim to apply a “transformative perspective,” which sees reforms as the outcome of environmental pressure, polity features, and the historical-institutional context. They do not mention neo-institutionalism as their main theoretical approach but their “transformative perspective” is a mixture of neo-institutional components (Hall and Taylor 1996). External pressure is understood as the effect of isomorphic considerations, and the role played by myths and counter myths in NPM. The national historical-institutional context is related to “path dependency,” the roots and cultural compatibility of national reforms. The approach also takes into account how the form of government and the formal structure of decision making may affect a country’s capacity to realize reforms.

The book promises to bring new knowledge about the contents of the reforms, the similarities and differences between current and past reforms, and in the directions taken by countries that were not marching along the same path nor at the same

speed. In the first chapter, the editors already give some answers to those questions. The main issue is the change in emphasis from structural devolution, disaggregation, and single-purpose organizations, in the early period of NPM, towards “whole-of-government” (WOG) and “joined-up-government” approaches of the post-NPM era. This trend started in Australia and New Zealand, where fragmentation had been more extreme, but has extended during the post-NPM era to other countries that had been more reluctant to implement NPM.

The main question, as the editors recognize, is whether these developments are new or are just the old phenomenon of the pendulum swinging back towards more coordination at the central level, a classic issue in organizational theory that had already been observed for NPM reforms in other countries (Pollit and Bouckaert 2004). The authors maintain that it is a significant development reflecting a more holistic strategy that takes into account criteria other than efficiency and social sciences beyond economics.

The book is divided into 11 chapters, including the introduction where the editors present the theoretical approach and research questions. The three first chapters compare the paths and changes in direction in New Zealand, Australia, and Norway, analyze budget reform and performance management in Australia and New Zealand, and look at developments in New Zealand, Australia, Norway, and Sweden with regard to specialization and types of state organizations. Those three chapters are rather coherent with the plan of the book and fill in information gaps about those countries.

However, the following four chapters on telecommunications regulation, immigration public sector organization, central banking reforms, and health care audit, although loosely related to NPM, follow diverse logics and do not contribute to answer the questions the editors had advanced. More interesting from the book’s perspective are chapters on public-private partnerships in the Australian state of Victoria and in Denmark, and on outsourcing welfare services in Sweden and New Zealand. In the case of public-private partnerships, we see how whole-of-government activities may span all levels of government and also involve groups outside government, generating, as the editors had discussed, a movement of joining up, not only at the top but also on the front lines. In the case of welfare outsourcing, the authors signal the informal relations between purchaser and provider, and the confidence in professional knowledge as crucial factors in the “difficult art of outsourcing.” The last chapter by Robert Gregory is an interesting reflection on the unattended consequences resulting from NPM, viewed as an attempt to managerialize the political agenda. But again it is not clearly linked to the main concerns of the book except to tell us that post-NPM has attenuated this discourse.

Overall, the book is a significant contribution to the literature on public management reform and particularly to the “reform” of NPM. It provides a framework that can be useful for the comparative study of transformative processes on the basis of three factors: external pressure for similar organizational changes, national political and administrative structures, and cultural compatibility. It also gives an account of the responses and adjustments of various countries in the post-NPM era, from the radical New Zealand and the more pragmatic Australia, to the unified, integrated, and initially NPM-resistant Nordic countries. We understand that the first two

countries need more change in direction and increased coherence, while the latter have progressively, more slowly, adopted changes that are here to stay. The idea that NPM reforms penetrated Nordic systems of governance and that they had an effect on traditional Weberian values is not new, but this book brings some evidence of changes in various policy sectors.

However, this reader felt the book did not go far enough in looking at the micro level of reforms—and reactions to reforms—in the policy areas the editors choose to study. More work at this level would have been extremely useful to see the forest of post-NPM. There is undoubtedly a rebalancing movement, but it is not clear whether this changes NPM in any substantive dimension. The book does not have a concluding chapter integrating the results of the various studies. Nor does it justify either the selection of chapters, policy fields, or cases. It does seem as if some work was left to be done, maybe the excuse for a third book to complete the series!

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