

should be applied to all public management organizations everywhere. There is no NPM research of the NPM of which I am aware that can justify those claims. Scientific research is very good at helping us describe what is, but it never can justify our normative and value judgments on what we want in the future. That is the challenge of design.

What remains to be seen is whether researchers who create and test theories about NPM and advocates who create new models of what public management should be in the future can ever share an understanding of NPM. Is it a theory that can be tested (if so what is the theory and its basic tenets) and has testing demonstrated the theory to be generalizable and universal or limited by some specific scope conditions? Or does NPM represent general concepts (like a house) that are designed and redesigned for every situation and condition or what in design is described as the “unique particular” (Nelson and Stolterman 2012, 32)? Could it be that the results of the NPM research study that are less than clear and the implications for design practice that are less than satisfactory all emanate from the same source? We have little agreement on what NPM is and what it is supposed to be.

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### Note

1. We have some common understanding of a “house,” but we also understand houses have many designs depending on location, climate, customer preferences, etc.

### Reference

Nelson, Harold G., and Erik Stolterman. 2012. *The Design Way*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

*A Government that Worked Better and Cost Less? Evaluating Three Decades of Reform and Change in UK Central Government*. Christopher Hood and Ruth Dixon. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$50 (cloth).

On the heels of momentous developments, including civil rights, massive student protests and wars of liberation, a major historic event of cataclysmic proportions in the early 1990s drastically modified both the map and the balance of power in Europe and the World. The sudden messy implosion of the USSR and dismantlement of Yugoslavia did not merely presage the establishment of 20 new republics and UN Member States; they also signified the collapse of an ideology and related governance systems, which on the morrow of the Second World War were widely viewed as a likely way to the future. Soon enough, the fall of the USSR was taken to signal the dawn of a new era. It was as if the failure of the socialist model of government had proved beyond all doubt the triumph of its rival. Though isolated voices ventured dissenting opinions at international fora, they were drowned in a chorus praising of the New Public Management (NPM). Among the very first, the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS), in 2000 and 2001, warned against the risks of yielding to the blandishments of NPM (IIAS 2002). From 2005 to 2015, a series of publications of the IIAS (see reference list below) cast doubt on the veracity of the euphoric claims advanced on both sides of the Atlantic; however, they did so to little effect, given the weight of the opinions expressed with singular force by both scholars and practitioners.

Contrasting “old” and “new,” the advocates of change described the ongoing “transition” as a “*paradigm shift* from a bureaucratic model to a ‘market model of management closely related to the private sector’ ” (Hughes 1998, 242). For close to two decades, the ascendancy of this model, the hegemony of the markets, and other main components of the “Washington Consensus” were taken as axiomatic; truly as facts of life, that one would be ill-advised to ignore or to dispute (World Bank 1994). It seemed to matter little that NPM reflected the results of experiments begun in a limited number of countries that, in terms of both governance and culture, shared little with the bulk of UN Member States. NPM was sold to the world as science-based “best practices” that, therefore, should be accepted as universally valid (Heady 2001, 391). With strong support from leading financial institutions and management consultant firms, NPM ideas and market practices spread widely in the 1990s and the first decade of this century. None of this was very new. It harkened back to the dawn of the twentieth century, with Taylor and Fayol on Scientific Management and Hayek or von Mises on Economics, during the heady 30s. Discounted in the 40’s and during the postwar decades, neo-liberalism surged at the turn of the century, when “new” and “private sector” were uncritically accepted as synonymous to good; “public,” “state,” or bureaucratic were dismissed as *passés*. Neo-liberal thinking carried NPM in its trail (Argyriades and Timsit 2013; Fraser-Moleketi 2005).

There can be little doubt that the spread and rapid progress of NPM were due to circumstances. Its success in some parts of the world came from appeal to values and puritan virtues like discipline, hard work, and self-reliance. These were couched in slogans and soundbites, like “*lean and mean*,” which made “austerity” policies sound eminently righteous and manifestly sound. NPM prescriptions followed. Replete with monitoring and quantitative measurements, they encouraged “the ritualization of performance and tokenistic gestures of accountability . . . to the detriment of real effectiveness” (Dimier 2014, 188). “Public management” replaced “administration” in the official terminology. Concurrently, economics ousted politics and law from the core of what had previously been called “administrative sciences.” “Service” was exorcised (Frederickson 1996, 265), “empowerment” much preferred. Combined with fiscal discipline and an addiction to numbers, the thrust of public management soon came to hail a “government that cost less and functioned better.” A novel management culture won the day, which even the debacle that marked the Great Recession could not dislodge (Kim and Argyriades 2015).

After fully three decades, a new book has come to prick the bubble of this mantra and thus dispel a myth, replete with spin and soundbites that NPM represents. The merits of the book deserve to be spelled out because it has accomplished a truly Herculean labor. It has turned NPM on its head and, to disarm its proponents, employed the very weapons they used to make their case. Rich in statistics and graphs, the book sets out to prove that, contrary to myth, NPM has not produced “a government that costs less and works better,” quite the opposite, in fact. To back their argument up, the authors of the book have taken pains to explain their methods and approach and how conclusions are reached. Last but not least, they have not shied away from exploring the wider implications of the NPM offensive, in historical perspective. The readers of this book—both scholars and practitioners—will be able to draw on data, quantitative and qualitative, that flow from an analysis of three decades of change. They will draw their own conclusions. However, most importantly, they will be able to know to what extent and why they agree—or disagree—with findings in the book.

The book is clearly focused on the United Kingdom, partly because to the authors, it represents the “vanguard,” as well as “poster-child of the New Public Management” (15). The period covered stretches from Thatcher through Blair to Cameron, with

sidelong looks, however, to parallel developments in the United States and major Commonwealth countries, where NPM struck roots. Throughout, as they have put it, new managerialism . . . presented itself as a hard-headed, business-minded, cost-conscious and data-driven approach to government makeover. So it deserves a correspondingly hard-headed . . . assessment of its results, confronting received claims . . . with systematic quantitative evidence from the past three decades. (15)

The authors explore the shift to “new managerialism” within broader epochal changes. In chapter 2, in particular, they outline the transformations in the U.K. central government. These touch *inter alia* on:

- the growth in the number of full-time politicians;
- the place of the bureaucracy in the political system; and
- the IT revolution and its impact on the government.

In particular, the authors dwell on a forceful shift from the “*public bureaucracy state*” of former years, to the new “*contract state*” that emerged with NPM, a move in the direction of a new public service more closely intermeshed with party politics, and “rolling back” the government though, according to all accounts this, in the final analysis, remained less fact than rhetoric, more illusion than reality (33). Last but not least, the authors make a point of underscoring the effects of this transition and related transformations on prevailing public attitudes, both in the public service and society at large. Recalling public attitudes, in the immediate postwar years, one may be shocked to find that public trust has “plummeted,” notwithstanding official pronouncements purporting to promote transparency, accountability, and “open government,” with the help of IT. Indeed, after reading the book, it is hard to escape the conclusion that decline of public trust has occurred largely on account, not in spite, of government claims and reports that, in a number of cases, were seen as “burying the evidence,” in fact, going so far as to “*destroy* that . . . evidence for efficacy . . . by changing administrative record-keeping in ways that made it impossible to make before-and-after comparisons . . . about ‘what works’ ” (45).

The thrust of chapter 3 goes far in the direction of disproving the contention of NPM that quantitative data had demonstrated “what worked and what did not.” It sheds light on the “Paradox of Evidence-Hunger Combined with Evidence Destruction in Government and Public Service” (44). According to all accounts, decline of public trust is hardly an exclusively British phenomenon. Rather, it is a trend of almost global proportions (De Vries and Kim 2014; Newland 2015, 39–63). The book under review warns against the dangers of rushing to conclusions from ambitious cross-national studies, which often base their findings on highly “elusive concepts” like “efficiency” or “running costs” (67–69, 70–74). Still, while cross-national studies, which deal with concepts and values, ought to be used advisedly, the trend is too generic, too global in its scope to be either dismissed or discounted. Though widely varying factors play out in distinct cases, there can be little doubt that the abyss separating rhetoric from reality and government pronouncements from hard facts may account for “plummeting trust.”

NPM’s pronounced proclivity to hyperbole, coupled with faith in numbers and the “cult of the 3Es” (economy, efficiency, and effectiveness), explains its focus on values that could be expressed numerically to the exclusion of others that were considered “soft” because not readily measurable. With “results over process” on top, other values like due process, rule of law, respect for truth, equity, integrity, and consistency were placed in the back burner or indeed condemned to oblivion (IIAS 2002, 33). Soon, recourse to spin and soundbites became accepted practice. In the words of this new “book”:

By the 1990s, spin became a central theme of political commentary in both the USA and the UK with the idea that new and more powerful methods were . . . applied [in order] to present government leaders and policies in a favorable light. (12)

The word “spin doctor,” which is said to have been coined by novelist Saul Bellow, soon invaded the vocabulary. Exemplars of spin doctors, as well as examples of spin, abound throughout the world. Arguably, none stands out more emphatically than the notorious incident at the Security Council of the United Nations, when visual aids were crafted to “prove” to the world the production of WMDs in Iraq. Sadly, critical tools designed for the advancement of truth were used opportunistically—to make the case for war. That cast the shadow of doubt on processes and methods intended for good purpose in teaching and research.

Playing fast and loose with evidence developed *pari passu* with an appetite for numbers (“Evidence Hunger” the authors call it on pages 44–45). If clarity and precision *in tandem* with effectiveness had been the hoped-for outcomes, that was hardly what transpired. In three decades, assumptions that had been widely accepted as quasi-axiomatic were not borne out by fact (65). These touched on reputed advantages from the use of external consultants, the merits of *outsourcing*, devolution, and decentralization. Though rhetoric and spin continued to trumpet these merits, the accumulated evidence is inconclusive at best. On the strength of facts and figures, amassed and thoughtfully argued in this study, it would be hard to prove that 30 years of trying the ways of NPM had yielded significant progress, or had produced a government that “worked better and cost less.” The titles and subtitles of chapters in the book speak loud on the inconsistency of claims and facts on the ground. In chapter 4, for instance, we read:

4.2: . . . Hard Questions, Soft Facts

8: Government Processes: More Focused and Business-like or Heading into Chaos?

9: Not What Is Said on the Tin: Assessing Three Decades of Change

To do justice to a topic so complex as U.K. administration, the authors have produced disaggregated data, while limiting themselves to two major areas of governance: the collection of taxes (chapter 5) and the treatment of complaints. The latter, in particular, throws light on the question of quality, specifically, the meaning that we invest in “*working better*” in government (chapter 6). Regarding tax collection, the study could not find any dramatic differences between central and local levels, in terms of cost-to-yield (103–106); only the 1990s were something of an exception. Concerning “Consistency and Fairness in Administration,” the authors do concede the intricacy of designing and applying *performance indicators* across the board (109–111). Looking at recourse to justice, the authors find the levels of complaints rising sharply in the mid-90s and around the Iraq War, with a roughly similar trend in “. . . expressing dissatisfaction with government and public services along this high-cost route” (120). The authors conclude:

If evidence for government working better would be provided by unambiguous decreases in formal complaints and judicial challenges relating to government actions, that is certainly not what we found. (124).

They go further to suggest that the past 30 years have seen:

- more disorderly policymaking and less meticulous administration (158);
- a measureable increase in staff turnover in the public service (166–172); and
- overall, a sloppier administration (176).

All in all, it would appear that if more than three decades of NPM have failed to produce a government that “costs less and works better,” then surely the way out of this conundrum would not be to “try harder” (195). As the authors rightly see it, “public management reform is an ideological and visceral issue” (196). Right at the very outset, the authors make the point of explaining the dominant trend in public service reform, in the United Kingdom, as chiefly a shift away from a model inspired by Macauley—as well as Trevelyan and Northcote—to a Benthamite ideology (7). The values that this shift brought in its trail were primarily economic, with a thrust on cost effectiveness but with much less concern for equity, consistency, democracy, and due process. What the book brings out so forcefully is that “how well” a government performs remains an abiding concern but comes down to much more than an issue of dollars and cents (Pagaza and Argyriades 2009).

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*The Politics of Evidence and Results in International Development: Playing the Game to Change the Rules?* Rosalind Eyben, Irene Guijt, Chris Roche, and Cathy Shutt. Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing, 2015. 219 pp. \$37.95 (paper).

This is a constructive book solidly grounded in development experience and scholarship. Mostly directed to policy practitioners, it is the outcome of the Conference on