Aristo tells a pretty story of a fairy, who, by some mysterious law of her nature, was condemned to appear at certain seasons in the form of a foul and poisonous snake. Those who injured her during the period of her disguise were forever excluded from participation in the blessings which she bestowed. But to those who, in spite of her loathsome aspect, pitied and protected her, she afterwards revealed herself in the beautiful and celestial form which was natural to her, accompanied their steps, granted all their wishes, filled their houses with wealth, made them happy in love and victorious in war. Such a spirit is Liberty. At times she takes the form of a hateful reptile. She grovels, she hisses, she stings. But woe to those who in disgust shall venture to crush her. (Macaulay, 1854, p.19).

Synopsis of presentation

Public Administration in the English-speaking world has been informed by the common law tradition of limited government. Since the Eighteenth century there has been a creative tension between the need for democratic accountability and the dynamic for efficiency and effectiveness. The quest to reconcile this tension has been at the centre of a generation of administrative reforms and will prove to be the enduring challenge of the future. The presentation, therefore, will place public administration within the context of this democratic ambiguity. It will then explore the influence of representative democracy and the common impact of the reform agenda over the last twenty years, before discussing the issues raised by this. The presentation will conclude by asking what may succeed the New Public Management agenda currently dominating public administration.

The context of public administration

There are many metaphors to describe a country’s bureaucracy, its public administration. Some commentators speak of it as though it was a machine; indeed, the British Cabinet Office has a unit concerned with the machinery of government. More recently the analogies have been updated and we now hear talk of public administration in terms of it being the software or the wiring that when programmed and booted-up runs the processes of the state. But perhaps the most telling is that used by the American analyst, Don K. Price; he refers to administration as ‘the seamy side of sovereignty’ and of politics (1983), it is what makes constitutions actually work.
The tradition in the English-speaking world and in North America in particular is to recognize the potential power of government, and to beware of the opportunity to abuse that power. As such government is limited, indeed fettered. The various countries that comprise the Old Commonwealth and the USA (Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand) are liberal democracies, an organizing principle enjoyed by them for many generations. As such it is accepted, indeed is usually part of the constitution, that there are proper limits to the size and scope of government, the notion of limited and accountable government is a defining characteristic of these states. As is the application of Common Law, indeed the precepts of English Common Law inform and give structure to the constitutional conventions of these countries and the day-to-day application of those norms and practices (Hogue, 1986).

The events in North America and Europe that took place during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries enshrined in Britain and the USA the foundation of an established system of checks and balances upon unfettered royal/executive authority. It was a separation of power which ‘originated in fundamental beliefs’, especially that of the Puritans in the ‘depravity of mankind’, which prevented the establishment or maintenance of an institutional structure ‘with absolute political authority’ (Price, 1983, p.150). While the American Revolution ended the formal constitutional ties between the UK and the US, continuities remained in the form of close philosophical links between the two administrative systems (Massey, 1993, p.2). These rejected a traditional establishment or theology that justified authority and ‘politically inoculated’ the two systems against the kind of political tyranny then found on continental Europe and elsewhere (Price, 1983, pp.151-2; Massey, 1993, p.3). In both countries, and then throughout the Old Commonwealth, the public sector came to regard itself, to a greater or lesser extent, as a neutral layer between the government and the governed. The administrators saw themselves not as the unfeeling implementers of executive orders, but one among many essential checks upon arbitrary rule.

**Democracy and reform**

From the beginning of the modern era, therefore, there were tensions built into the public administration systems of these countries (see Hood, 2000). The desire of the executive to implement, that is to deliver its policies, often caused elected politicians at times to experience frustration with the recalcitrance or reluctance of public officials to simply do as they were told. Public officials, however, evolved the concept of public duty (O’Toole, 1997) that is the belief that although they must serve the government of the day to the best of their ability, this was not an unswerving loyalty, quite the contrary. Elected politicians were viewed as ephemeral creatures with attachments to passing fads and fancies, the public sector, therefore, had a wider democratic duty to serve the public as a whole. There began to be developed what the Dutch academic Mark Bovens has referred to as ‘active responsibility’ in complex public sector organizations, with the personal and civic responsibility of bureaucrats sometimes becoming at odds with their professional responsibility (to their peers) and their duties as employees (to ministers) (1998, pp143-175). The notions of legal and illegal orders, due process and equity of treatment have been consciously and conscientiously developed.

Added to these philosophical conundrums were the more practical issues of money, especially the modern version of the old parliamentary doctrine of *the redress of grievance before the
granting of supply. In the USA for example, although the President, as the country’s only nationally elected politician heads the federal executive, only the legislature may raise and spend money. Congress uses the power of the purse to assert its right to hold the public sector’s departments, agencies and bureaux to account and to influence policies of its own constituent (often parochial) factions and lobbies. Much has been written about this complex relationship, and it is a constant factor to be taken into account by those who would reform US public administration. Indeed Aberbach has argued the power and interests of Congress often conflict with those of the Presidency to the extent that both are played off by experienced and knowledgeable senior officials. Thus severely limiting the ability of reformers to implement New Public Management, or indeed any other major reform without considerable difficulty (see Aberbach, 1990; Aberbach and Rockman, 2000).

The growth of welfare services and the military industrial complex between the end of the Second World War and the oil price shock of the 1970s saw the apparently inexorable rise of public expenditure as a major constituent of GDP. There was also an increase in the sheer numbers of people employed in the public sector. There were many critics of this, especially from what became known as the Public Choice school of thought in the US, influenced by the Austrian and Chicago schools of economics (Olson, 1982; Denham, 1996). The leading theorists here included Tullock, Buckanon, Olson and Friedman. From small beginnings and fears about the fiscal crisis of the state, New Public Management was born (although in the US it is often referred to as Reengineering or Reinventing Government).

President Carter in the US first enacted the reform agenda. It passed, with increasing pace to Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton, with the latter handing the implementation phase over to Vice-President Gore. In Britain Prime Minister Thatcher began the root and branch reforms carried on by both her successors and apparently with a new wave about to be unleashed by Mr. Blair. But to a greater or lesser extent Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many of the Scandinavian countries have implemented administrative reform (Pollitt, 1995). If one were to construct a continuum of degrees of reform, New Zealand would be at one extreme, Canada at the other, with the UK and US somewhere between the middle and the New Zealand pole.

The process of reform and its leaders have sought the growth of the importation of private sector practices into the public sector and the development of entrepreneurial officials. Key influences have included a clutch of reform gurus such as Peters and Waterman (1982) and Osborne (1992). Britain established a swathe of semi-autonomous (Next Steps) agencies run by chief executives and self-managing within overall policy guidelines and key performance indicators as set by Secretaries of State. Into these were decanted well over half of all civil servants.

In many countries in this group there were also large-scale privatizations. In the case of the public utilities, this led to concerns about the way in which the public interest may be maintained and protected, especially with regard to natural monopolies such as those found within the utilities. These and related issues were raised by the increased marketization of the provision of what had hitherto been public sector services. In Britain, for example, a new regulatory framework has grown up to address public concerns, overseen by non-ministerial government departments such as OFWAT, OFTEL and many others.
In this reform movement we have seen an increase in the private provision of state activities and the search for Best Value as part of the latest manifestation. As Hirst argues, “it involves a radically different conception of the relationship between customers and service providers from the conventional view of the relationship between citizens and the welfare state” (2000, p.18).

These reforms have their critics. Parsons has argued that New Public Management with its emphasis on efficiency, economy and quality, is:

> The nearest we have come (in Britain), for a few hundred years at least, to a kind of state religion. To question or deny its essential doctrines is to place oneself beyond the pale. To shout as it parades past that it is stark naked—that the emperor has no clothes—is to risk being bundled away or being injected with a tranquillizer or sent to a gulag (Parsons, 2000, p.7).

While Parson’s use of amusing hyperbole to illustrate his argument is justified, it should not be allowed to mask the underlying importance of his message. At the heart of NPM is situated the setting of performance targets and their measurement. Many of the changes wrought upon the public sector in many countries as a result of the attempted importation of quasi-business techniques into government bureaucracies are sometimes misplaced and misapplied, being based upon hunch, false assumptions and no systematic research into their efficacy (see Jordan, 1994). Few of us doubt the need for change and modernization to meet the new demands placed upon public servants; it is the nature of the change imposed through NPM that we must be sure to question.

Hirst has also noted the “practice of co-ordinating activities through networks, partnerships, and deliberative forums that have grown up on the ruins of the more centralized bureaucracies that have been reformed (ibid., p.19). Increasingly this too is linked to NPM. We find this at many different levels, at city, neighbourhood, regional level, and within the constructions of the state. Much of this change is global, but with very distinct national characteristics. What works in Chicago, does not necessarily work in Chichester and what works in New York does not always transfer to New South Wales. But there has been a global reform movement nonetheless.

**Issues for the future**

There is a wealth of work exploring the impact of the global economy upon individual states and the resultant loss of sovereignty. It manifests itself in terms of governance with the growth of supra-national institutions such as NATO, NAFTA, the EU and so forth. The challenge, as noted by Hirst, is to reform political institutions to take account of the need to engage in government through consent, while allowing decisions to be taken and implemented. Connected to this are advances in technology; the growth of information technology in particular have allowed the hiving out of governmental functions to multi-national corporations, such as the role the American company EDS have taken in providing computing services across the globe.

In part this along with NPM has led to a kind of MacDonaldization of public services, with large companies joining forces with certain states to demand a smoothing out of tax and governmental regimes for the conduct of business, similar laws, similar constraints, similar access to funding.
This has both benefits and disbenefits. The opponents of globalization point to the loss of sovereignty experienced by individual states and the problems of trying to make systems developed in one place apply to somewhere quite different. But the whole point of reform is to find a kind of ‘goodness of fit’, this is certainly what the systems of Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, and Malaysia have attempted with the adaptations they have instituted within their own reform programmes. And clearly the dramatic experiments that have taken place in New Zealand, although labelled New Public Management reflect more that nation’s economic problems and tiny population than a plan to be copied by larger and richer societies.

The globalization of the reform process clearly does have benefits. At its periphery it is a system that has even threatened the buccaneering tradition of offshore finance centres such as the Bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey. France, Germany and the Netherlands, not to mention the FBI have demanded the residual parts of the great Duchy of Normandy open their books for inspection and cease to be so recalcitrantly independent (Edwards, 1999).

Finally, the core of the reforms that have taken place in the English-speaking world over the last two decades have attempted to address the contradiction with which I began this presentation, namely the absolute requirement for democratic control and accountability combined with the desire for greater efficiency and effectiveness. The two do not always sit easily side-by side, but sit together they must. The devolved responsibilities and emphasis on delivery we find in the reforms have empowered the citizenry in many areas. This can only be to the good and indeed returns to the precepts set by one of the framers of the USA’s Eighteenth Century Constitution, Thomas Jefferson (who’s mother was from Shadwell in London). He argued we must learn to trust our fellow citizens to govern themselves. This does not mean anarchy and licence, but informed consent. This should be the aim of future reforms and act as a benchmark for good governance.

References


Parsons, D.W., 2000, *Public Policy as Public Learning*, Inaugural Lecture, Queen Mary College, University of London.


