Alternative Futures for Public Administration

B. GUY PETERS

There have been any number of predictions about the future of governing and public administration. Some of these now appear quaint or totally realistic, but others have become standard practice in the public sector. The simplest and most accurate prediction is that the future of the public sector will be very much like its past, given that most of the same programs, and many of the same ways of delivering those public services will persist. Despite generations of reforming government much of the structure and process remains remarkably unchanged, even if the tasks are performed by computer rather than by hand. Thus, when we make our brave (or more probably foolhardy) predictions about the future, we should be careful not to assume that everything is easily mutable.

The above having been said, there have been, and continue to be, genuine changes in governing, and those changes in turn may be producing the necessity for even greater changes. And government does not function in a vacuum, so that any emerging patterns of governing must reflect changes in the socio-economic, fiscal, and political environments, as well as changes in the technological possibilities for governing. Further, some reforms in the public sector will be the product of changing ideas about how best to govern society (see Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Therefore, to make any accurate predictions about directions of movement in the public sector require an extreme degree of good fortune.

One way to enhance the possibilities of making accurate predictions about

the future of public administration is to make several simultaneous estimates of future changes. In the present case this is not just an attempt to be at least partially correct but rather is an attempt to reflect the complex reality of the contemporary public sector, as well as of contemporary politics. On the one hand, there are continuing pressures to move away from conventional hierarchical, command and control instruments for government toward the instruments of "New Governance" (Salamon, 2001). The changes proposed in this style of governing reflect continuing moves toward involving the private sector more directly in governing, having been characterized as "citizen engagement", "partnership" "Burgernahe", "stakeholder democracy" and a host of other names. The general pattern has been to decentralize, devolve and generally to make the public sector closer to the public.

The other contemporary prospective change in the public sector may appear to be almost diametrically opposed to the movement toward "New Governance". Governments have been moving control down to lower levels within public organizations, as well as out to stakeholders and to autonomous public organizations (Verhoest, Verschuere, Bouckaert and Peters, 2004) in order to enhance democracy, as well as to leverage private resources for delivering public services. While those reforms have produced real benefits for government, and for the society, they also have produced real problems of control and accountability at the top of government. While service delivery is

important for governing, so too is coherence, coordination and strategic direction, and those virtues have been undermined by the continuing movement toward governance at the bottom.

Therefore, we need to think about these two alternative directions in governing, and perhaps more importantly think about the ways in which the two directions of change can be knit together to provide a more coherent system for providing direction and control to society. While this may not be the hierarchical, "top down" government that was typical of the past, on the other hand it will not be the highly decentralized "governing without government" that some critics of conventional mechanisms of government have advocated. Rather it will represent some attempt to reach a balance between the two directions for change and provide also a comprehensive and coherent system of governance.

The concept of governance is one means of integrating these two dimensions of change in the public sector (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Kjaer, 2004). Governance implies the capacity of the public sector to steer society and economy, and to provide some more or less coherent direction. How that steering is actually placed into operation is an empirical question, and may be achieved through the types of decentralized and delegated methods. On the other hand, the coherence and control function almost of necessity must come from the center of government, so that at the same time that power is being delegated, some aspects of control may have to become more

centralized, and move back toward presidents and prime ministers. Some scholars (see Kickert, Klijn and Koopenjaan 1997) have discussed the possibilities of "steering at a distance", but it is important that steering and governance is indeed performed, and that all the emphasis is not placed on the "distance", de-centered, aspects of the process.

The remainder of this paper will first examine these two simultaneous drives for reform in the public sector as sources of new styles of governance. After describing each of the varieties of reform separately, I will proceed to discuss the ways in which these two alternative futures can be joined, and the role that leaders in the public sector can play in bridging the gaps between changing forms of service delivery and changing forms of strategic management and strategic governance at the center. This latter aspect of the reform process is that which is least developed, and which will require the greatest use of political and administrative skills.

The New Governance

The shift toward the "New Governance" is discussed more often than other changes in the public sector, and in many ways has become well institutionalized in the public sector, and has become to sense the conventional wisdom. This change is in part related to the more general transformation associated with the "New Public Management", given that one of the most important tenets of NPM was that

government should "steer and not row", meaning that governments should directly deliver relatively few public services but instead should attempt to use other actors, whether in the market or the not for profit sectors as their agents. The assumption of this approach was that government was relatively poor and inefficient at delivering services and they should be contracted out.

But the concerns about using non-traditional instruments for service delivery extends beyond contracting with non-governmental actors. The underlying logic is one of moving away from hierarchical instruments toward more collaborative instruments, and also using more autonomous public organizations "agencies" that can be more efficient in delivering programs, in part because they would be expected to concentrate on delivering a single program or service. In addition, the ideas of New Governance involve collaboration and cooperation with actors outside government, and the creation of a variety of relationships unlike those traditionally expected in the public sector.

Another way of describing these changes has been as "soft law", involving the use of guidelines, agreements, benchmarks, and other instruments that do not command so much as cajole elements in society to follow the principles set forth by government (Morth, 2003). Further, this softness extends to relationships among governments themselves so that multi-level governance becomes a more apparent feature of governing even in nominally unitary

states. One of the clearest manifestations of soft law has been the Lisbon process within the European Union, and the Open Method Coordination that has to some extent evolved from Lisbon has carried the practice into a range of policy areas (Borras and Jacobssen, 2004).

The implications of such a shift are rather obviously that government will be a different institution than it has been in the past. Rather than being in essence a hierarchical organization attempting to control society through command and control instruments the public sector is becoming a more collaborative set of organizations attempting to control, but to do so in a less single-minded manner. This "softness" in the style of governance can help to legitimate actions, but it also places greater demands on government for effective monitoring and some capacity to retain some control over the frameworks created, often through the budget.

In addition to the actual changes in service delivery there will also have to be analogous changes in other aspects of governing such as accountability (Mulgan, 2000). Accountability will become a much more complex problem than was true in conventional parliamentary notions of governing, in which civil servants were responsible to ministers, and ministers to parliament, for the delivery of services. Now accountability must be extended not only upward toward parliament but also downward toward clients and outward to members of networks, partnerships, and other "stakeholders" in the process. This governance world is therefore more complex and more difficult than the old system.

This style of governance will place public servants even more in the center than had the conventional system. The public servant is typically the person responsible for negotiating contracts, establishing partnerships, and interacting with networks. If the "new governance is to be successful, it will depend very heavily on public servants who must develop a somewhat different set of skills than they had in the past. Perhaps most importantly, they must develop a set of political skills to deal with society in ways that are not typical for the usual conception of what a public servant does. But going along with those political skills are skills in managing networks so that they are effective ways of coping both with inputs about policy and actual delivery of public services.

As noted, in many areas and in many political systems this style of governing has become well institutionalized to the point of becoming the new conventional wisdom, but both ministers and many civil servants have yet to internalize these changes and deal with all their implications.

The need to "steer at a distance" and to govern through less direct means may be difficult for politicians who find they are being held responsible in public for outcomes over which they have relatively less direct control than in the past. In addition, civil servants may need to undestand that their role in linking state and society is more crucial, but also more political, than in the past and hence may have to alter some of their self-conceptions.

Back to the Center?

A great deal has been written about the movement into the range of alternative mechanisms for service delivery discussed above. Relatively less has been written about the perhaps less obvious shift of control over policy back to the center of governments. Politicians have often complained that although they have been elected to make policy that once they are in office they find such control difficult. This is true for ministers and agency heads, but also has been true for presidents and prime ministers who appear to find themselves at the head of large and complex systems of government but with relatively fewer levers at their disposal to control that system than they might have liked.

The need to think about the antithesis of the reliance on decentralized solutions is more than a political requirement, however. It also reflects a genuine need in governance to create greater coherence and coordination in the public sector. The numerous reforms of government during the past several decades, whether coming from a managerialist perspective or a more participatory perspective (Peters, 2000) have tended to drive control away from the center and to empower individuals as well as more or less autonomous organizations, whether in and out of government.[1] These actor believe that they have the right, and in some cases almost the obligation, to make their own decisions and to implement programs in the manner they consider most appropriate. Likewise, the emphasis on

performance as a means of assessing these organizations and their managers tends to make them focus on their own narrow set of goals rather than to think about government-wide approaches to policy and steering society. The obvious result of such an approach to governing is considerable inconsistency and a need for improved coordination.

Coordination is a crucial value for government, but it is also to some extent retrospective, looking at what governments have done or are doing, and trying to correct the problems associated with inconsistencies in the approaches of different programs. Governments are also finding that they need to be more prospective and more strategic in how they choose to intervene in society and economy. To some extent the need to be more strategic reflects prior failures of coordination and the need to make governments more effective in the eyes of citizens. It also reflects the increasing fiscal problems of many governments, squeezed by demands from rapidly aging populations, activated interest groups with increased demands, and public resistance to increased taxation. Governments now need to make more strategic decisions about what they want to do and how they want to do them.

Thus, from several perspectives governments need to marshal their resources for a more comprehensive and coordinated public sector. From the perspective of democratic governance as well as from a more managerialist perspective there is a need to move some degree of priority setting and issue management back into the center

of government and to make government a strategic actor. The trick, as already implied, is to accomplish this without also becoming a rather overbearing policy administrator as well.

Knitting Together the Public Sector

Although these two approaches to governance have been presented as being somewhat antithetical, they are in essence complementary. Each provides some virtues for would be governors, whether it is making implementation more acceptable to the public, and perhaps less expensive, or it is making choices about what should be implemented through those softer mechanisms. Effective governance can be assisted by both of these virtues, but they need themselves to be coordinated and made to work together.

Perhaps the major for coping with the two alternative perspectives on governance is not to recognize their virtues and the complementary nature. The real trick is to find ways to nit them together in a more coherent web. As implied above, this may not be easy, given that the actors involved tend to believe that they are empowered to pursue their more differentiated styles of governing (Peters and Pierre, 2000). Political leaders certainly believe they have been elected to provide direction to state and society, and want to overcome the blockages they perceive in that mission. Similarly, administrators believe that the continuing reforms of administration empower them to search

for new mechanisms for delivering services and more effective means of linking state and society.

Several programs have been developed in governments to attempt to make this linkage, or at least to minimize conflicts among the sets of actors. For example, the Finnish government has embarked on an ambitious program for managing issues driven from the center of government, but at the same time recognizing that the style of implementation for public programs has been altered significantly over the past decades, and that Finland has been one of the leaders in devising alternative forms of service delivery (Bouckaert, Ormond and Peters, 2000). Other countries such as Denmark have focused attention on a limited number of strategic and coordination devices- notably the budget- and allowed ministries and agencies to make many of their own choices within that frame (Jensen, 2004). Still others have attempted to emphasize the integrated nature of governing and to focus on government as a whole, rather than the many disparate parts comprising government (Laegried and Christensen, 2006).

In addition to procedures, the obvious source of integration in the public sector will have to be leadership. This is a rather old-fashioned virtue, and does not perhaps appear as innovative as some of the managerialist techniques that have come to dominate thinking about governing, but it is nonetheless crucial. Making the various components, and perhaps more difficult making the various ideas about governance work together effectively

requires individuals committed to those goals. These goals are more diffuse and less difficult to identify in practice than some of the elements of good practice in the public sector, but they are still very real, and crucial, for government to perform well as an entity.

Again, I should point out that many of the reforms of the past several decades make this type of integration of programs within the public sector less probable, and yet more necessary. Not only have there been structural changes that have tended to disconnect many aspects of governing, so too have there been a number of changes in personnel and management that also have tended to make coherence less likely. Perhaps the major source of the glue that could hold together the various elements of governance- the career public service-has been undermined and denigrated by many of the reforms associated with New Public Management (Campbell and Wilson, 1996). In addition, the tendency to shift from more organic to more mechanical forms of coordination among organizations in the public sector has tended to exacerbate differences, and to reduce integration.

Performance management has been lauded as a significant addition to the management tools available in government, and indeed it is, but it too can tend to exacerbate differences and to focus attention on the delivery of individual programs rather than on broader social goals. These performance programs tend to provide few incentives for collaboration and co-operation across programs, and make

managers focus on particularized measures of success and failure, for themselves and for their organizations. That having been said, however, if designed well performance management systems may be able to assist in integrating government. If system-wide goals can be identified, and measures developed for those goals, then performance measurement and management can identify how programs and policies fit together in more comprehensive packages.

The New Zealand government has been able to develop an approach to performance management that links individual program goals to systemic goals. This system depends upon identifying Strategic Results Areas (SRAs) for government as a whole, and then linking Key Results Areas for each program to the SRAs. This methodology points out that all major policy areas in the public sector involve a range of individual programs, and also that most organizations and programs contribute to a range of systemic goals. While this insight is hardly new, it is often forgotten in the concentration of most ministers and most managers on their quotidian tasks.

Local and Regional Government

Much of the above discussion has been focused on these two aspects of governance at the level of the national government. Those problems are very real at that level, but they are none less real for sub-national governments. Indeed,

several factors may tend to exacerbate the differences between the two types of governing in local and regional governments. One of the most important of those constraints is that sub-national governments are not fully autonomous, and may have greater difficulties in setting their own priorities and in deciding on governance strategies on their own. Local governments in Scandinavia have substantially greater autonomy and have more resources than do those in many other types of government, but they still face important constraints.

Sub-national governments also are, in general, closer to the actual delivery of many public services, and also have closer relationships with their partners in delivering services. This proximity to the actual work of government and their contacts with clients can lead to their becoming absorbed with the needs of the community. There is nothing wrong with that concern, quite the contrary it is one of the virtues of decentralized local governance, but it does make more strategic approaches to governance more difficult. This may be especially true when the problems being confronted can not be contained neatly within the boundaries of the single local authority, as indeed few problems can be.

Associated with the above statement, local authorities may be especially interested in finding softer forms of governance to perform their tasks. This growing preference for more collaborative forms of service delivery is true not only so that local governments can conserve their scarce financial resources, but it is evident also because of the closer connections of this level of government with the community. Local authority leaders may be better able to identify the opportunities for implementing the less hierarchical forms of governance, and may also see more clearly the political costs associated with command and control instruments in populations with whom they must interact, often face to face, on a regular basis. Command and control forms of governance appear increasingly unacceptable to citizens, and apparently all the more so when implemented by friends and neighbors.

Their important role in service delivery does not, however, relieve local governments of some necessity for more strategic thinking about their role in governing. In part because their financial resources are often more constrained, and their autonomy also limited, effective local governments may have to be extremely careful about establishing priorities and using their resources in the most strategic manner possible. Some of the responsibilities presently undertaken by sub-national governments, notably local economic development, may require developing clear strategies and bringing together a range of programs and actors to achieve the desired goals. Even more traditional functions, such as effective management of transportation, may also involve making establishing clear priorities and making strategic trade-offs with other goals, e.g. environmental protection.

Summary and Conclusion

The above discussion has pointed to emerging trends of, and emerging requirements for, effective governance in the industrialized democracies. This discussion has pointed to the extent to which the two dominant strands in contemporary reform are apparently somewhat at odds with one another, one driving power downward and out to civil society, and the other tended to draw power back into the center of government. Both of these transformations are important for effective governing, and they need not be incompatible, but they are different and they do require developing means for drawing the two strands together. This knitting together of strands of governance will become perhaps the central challenge for most systems of governance.

Much of the discussion of effective governance, especially the strategic dimension, has been focused on the role of central governments, but the issues are hardly confined to that level, and sub-national governments have the same considerations about governing. The demands for softening their style of program implementation may be especially important for sub-national governments, given that they are generally charged with large volumes of program implementation- especially of social and educational services that affect many citizens directly. That having been said, however, the local governments can not avoid the demand to make strategic choices about what they want to do, and how they will do it.

References

Borras, Susanna and Kerstin Jacobssen, 2004
"The Open Method of Coordination and New Governance Patterns in the EU."
European Journal of Public Policy, 11(2): 185–208.

Bouckaert, Geert, Derry Ormond and B. Guy Peters, 2000
A Potential Governance Agenda for Finland. Helsinki: Ministry of Finance.

Campbell, Colin and Graham K. Wilson, 1996
The End of Whitehall? Oxford: Blackwell.

Christensen, Tom and Per Laegreid, 2006
"The Whole of Government Approach." Unpublished paper. Oslo: Institute of Political Science, University of Oslo.

Jensen, Lotte, 2004
Den Store Koordinator. København: Jurist og Økonomforlag.

Kickert, Walter J. M., Erik-Hans Klijn and Joop F. M. Kooppenjan, 1997
Managing Complex Networks. London: Sage.

Kjaer, Anne Mette, 2004
Governance. Oxford: Polity Press.

Mörth, Ulrika, 2003
Soft Law in Governance and Regulation: An Interdisciplinary Approach. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Mulgan, Richard, 2000
"Accountability: An Ever-Expanding Concept?" *Public Administration,* 7: 555–73.

Peters, B. Guy, 2001
The Future of Governance. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Peters, B. Guy and Jon Pierre, 2000
"Citizens Versus the New Public Manager: The Problem of Mutual Empowerment."
Administration and Society, 32: 9–28.

Pierre, Jon and B. Guy Peters, 2000
Governance, the State and Public Policy. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Pollitt, Christopher and Geert Bouckaert, 2003
Public Sector Reform: A Comparative Analysis, 2nd Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Salamon, Lester M., 2001
"Introduction: The New Governance." In Salamon, Lester M. (ed) *Handbook of Policy Instruments.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Verhoest, Koen, Bram Verschuere, B. Guy Peters and Geert Bouckaert, 2004
"Controlling Autonomous Public Agencies as an Indicator of New Public Management." *Management International,* 9: 25–36.

[1]The problem often is that these organizations are in part in the public sector and in part in the private, making exercising control over them a more difficult proposition, and one that to some against contradicts the logic of granting them autonomy in the first instance.