

Chapter 1

Public Administration: Not Entirely of the Past and Not Yet of the Future

If you do not know where you are going, any road will get you there...and if you don't know where you are coming from, you may end up where you began.

Lewis Carroll (paraphrased from) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Public administrations have existed since antiquity. From China to Egypt, from Persia to Rome, kings and emperors have relied on public administrations to transform their ideals about society into reality and to oversee the affairs of government. Public administrations have taken different shapes and forms in various parts of the world but they nonetheless have much in common. They contribute to shaping societies. They give shape to concepts and values about the exercise of power in society. They give form to the role of government and definition to the functioning of public institutions and organizations. Public administrations embody a concept about the relationship between people and government from subservient vassal to an expanding concept of citizenship. In short, public administrations embody concepts, principles, conventions and values.

Periodically, profound changes emerge in society, and new sets of values come to the fore that transform the role of government and the practice of public administration. Recent decades have been marked by profound changes and a deep transformation of the world we live in. The last 30 years have witnessed an increasing number of global cascading failures, like the collapse of the real estate bubble in the USA and the resulting financial crises of 2008, the effects of which were felt around the world; events with unforeseen consequences, like the 2010 eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland that brought air traffic in most of Europe to a halt; and unpredictable natural disasters, like the 2011 tsunami along the northeast coast of Japan with its devastating consequences for towns and lives, for public health and the Japanese economy. Powerful and unexpected social unrest in the Middle East and North Africa, facilitated in part by modern social networking

These events are powerful reminders that uncertainty, volatility and complexity are characteristics of today's world. They are the result of the growing interdependence and interconnectivity of many of the systems societies depend on, such as food, energy, water supply, banking, communications and transportation systems. They are the result of the changes brought about by the "connected republic"¹ we are part of and of the global stresses caused by a growing world population on a fragile biosphere. Governments are called upon to serve in an unpredictable environment and to address an increasing number of complex public policy issues.

We live in a period of unprecedented potential. As old ways become unstuck, new ways of thinking and new approaches to governance are emerging. Public administrations are in flux. Past practices are insufficient to meet some of the challenges of the 21st century, but a unifying set of principles has not yet emerged to guide practitioners. This provides an opportunity to modernize the intellectual framework of contemporary public administration and to propel it forward as a discipline.

Countries supported by public administrations fit for the 21st century will have a significant comparative advantage. They will be best positioned to anticipate what might be, and influence the course of events in their favour.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Public administration is both a domain of practice and a field of study. As a field of study, it is barely more than a century old, having taken shape in the late 19th and early 20th century.

As a young academic field, public administration is still plagued with internal debate and dissent on the extent and scope of the field and its relationship to other disciplines, such as political science and public law.

For the purpose of exploring *A New Synthesis of Public Administration*, I propose that, as a field of study, public administration is primarily interested in understanding the relationship between government, society and the people it governs.

Public administration is about transforming political will into public results or, to put it differently, "the translation of politics into reality that citizens see every day."² It is interested in how to make feasible what is judged to be politically desirable. This leaves conveniently open the questions: Who has the authority to decide what is desirable? What political process granted this authority? How is the choice of desirable outcome reached?

Public administration is an integrating discipline that draws from many other disciplines, including sociology, political science, administrative law, public finance, economics and more recently, complexity theory, dynamic system theory, organizational development theory, etc.

The study of public administration is not limited to democratic societies. In fact, important lessons may be learned on how societies governed through other means achieve results and ensure social cohesion. However, the foundation of public administration as a field of study can be traced to Western Europe in the late 19th century and to the United States of America during the early 20th century. As a result, the discipline bears many characteristics of the prevailing thinking in societies that were undergoing a dual transformation process of democratization and industrialization.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

As a discipline, public administration took shape in a period characterized by rapid change associated with the industrial revolution, economic development and the building of modern states in the late 19th/early 20th century in Western Europe and North America. The “Classic” model of public administration, as it is frequently called, was founded on a number of conventions including respect for the rule of law, a strict separation of politics and administration and a meritorious public service operating under the principles of anonymity and political neutrality.

The model was widely accepted and its adoption spread to countries undergoing similar change and to some developing countries (sometimes voluntarily, sometimes enforced by colonial powers) with mixed results. Public administrations shaped around this model share many characteristics. Government is seen as the primary agent responsible for serving the public good. The power structure is vertical and hierarchical. The public service is governed by precisely prescribed rules and is accountable to elected officials. Public servants are expected to exercise minimal discretion in the provision of services.

Some characteristics of this model represented significant breakthroughs. One of its most important foundational contributions was the rule of law.

The Rule of Law

The Classic model of public administration affirmed the dominance of the rule of law. This concept is at the origin of “L’Etat de droit” to designate societies governed by the rule of law. The concept encourages a separation of powers among the legislative, executive and judiciary to provide checks and balances in the exercise of authority and protect society from too much concentration of power. Today, this principle and its associated practices are embodied in most democratic societies.

The rule of law provided the stability and predictability needed for emerging industrial economies to flourish and contributed to social peace. No one, rich or poor, was above the law that granted equal protection to all. Public administrations operating under the rule of law valued impartiality, due process and compliance. These values were well suited to the times, considering the relative youth of many democratic governments during this period. Public administrations operating under these principles contributed immeasurably to the success of countries undergoing industrialization and democratization during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

While some characteristics of the Classic model are of enduring value, from time to time, it is necessary to ensure that they live up to the initial aspirations. For instance, laws are difficult to change and their cumulative impact may have perverse effects. The challenge is to preserve the merit of a regime of law while avoiding the rigidities that an accumulation of laws, norms and rules may create over time. Nowhere is this effect more visible than in the public sector.

Today, some characteristics of the Classic model act as barriers as governments try to adapt to the changing reality of the 21st century. Different times require different approaches. Past practices need to evolve to take new realities into account. Chief among these practices are a dualistic mental frame and a heavy reliance on scientific management that are ill suited to addressing many of the complex issues characteristic of the 21st century.

Dualism

The Classic model of public administration reflects the dualistic way of looking at the world that was predominant in the 20th century. This view would see a matter as being either public or private. A private matter would be left to the market and individual initiatives. Government would worry about public matters. Once a matter was in the public domain, the role of government would be to contain demand and ration the use of public resources in a fair and equitable manner. As a result, efficiency is the guiding principle of public administration, and performance is improved through controls.

Nothing is as simple in practice. A number of issues overlap public, private and civic interest: they require a pluralistic view of the world and a multifaceted approach to bring about viable solutions.

In fact, this dualistic view lies behind some of the intractable problems that many countries have experienced in recent years, such as increasing health costs due in part to an aging population and the rising cost of medication and new technologies. More public funding does not necessarily mean better public results. Sometimes, finding a different way of framing the issue is the most important step towards finding a viable solution. This may entail a different sharing of responsi-

bility between government, people and society. Countries with the highest level of total spending, the highest level of public spending or the heaviest reliance on market forces do not necessarily achieve the best public health results, including a long life expectancy and a low rate of child mortality. Japan spends significantly less on healthcare per capita and less public funds as a percentage of GDP than the United States,³ yet it outperforms the United States in most measures of public health results.⁴ Healthy life habits at home and in the family and a reasonable standard of living have a significant impact on public health and on public health costs.⁵ Multidimensional issues such as healthcare require a multifaceted way of thinking and pluralistic solutions.

Looking at the world through a dualistic mental map is imbedded in the public administration model inherited from the 20th century. It is reflected in the conventional separation between politics and administration and between policy decisions and their implementation. Actualizing these principles in practice has never been as simple as it sounds, and their strict adherence may even lead to significant policy failures.

Public policies are experiments and works in progress. Some start as broad political aspirations that something should be different in society. Reducing poverty or energy dependency, eliminating a deficit or improving public health, for example, are all worthwhile goals. However, leaving the simplest public policies aside, most do not emerge fully formed. They take shape through multiple interactions inside and outside government on possible courses of action and involve decisions at multiple levels.

The choice of delivery instrument sets the contours of the balance of responsibilities between citizens, civic society, the market and the state. Choosing between direct delivery, tax transfers to individuals or transfers to other levels of government has significant consequences on the way societies are governed and leads to very different results.

Policy decisions take shape and become real through an implementation process. New knowledge acquired in practice transforms the initial policy intentions as well as the methods of achieving them. There is no strict separation between public policy decisions and implementation. Both form part of an integrated, experiential learning process in which politics and public administrations share responsibility for the ultimate results.

The Classic model has internalized and institutionalized a dualistic view of the world reflected in multiple separations between means and ends, facts and values, thoughts and actions, policy decisions and implementation.⁶ Today, government needs a multidimensional view of the world to address some of the most intricate and complex problems of our times.

Scientific Management

Scientific management was a strong driver of efficiency for organizations and countries undergoing industrialization. Its influence was first felt in the private sector, but was quickly adopted by the public sector. Scientific management contributed to the view that there is “one best way” of achieving results. By breaking down complicated operations into simpler tasks, measuring routines, codifying the most efficient ones and applying rigorous process controls, it was thought possible to improve performance and achieve better results in most, if not all, circumstances.

Scientific management in public administration contributed to the efficient mass production of standardized public services; payments to veterans issued on time and with minimal errors, public works projects undertaken according to plan, standardized curricula in public schools, efficient tax-collection agencies free from corruption or leakage of public funds, etc.

The approach contributed to the efficient functioning of public organizations, and was particularly appropriate for managing tangible public services provided directly by government agencies without intermediaries. Scientific management works best in relatively stable and predictable environments.

Scientific management remains valid today for predictable services that lend themselves to precise routine, repetition and codification. However, these types of service represent a declining fraction of government services. Today, an increasing range of public services are information- and knowledge-based. They require direct interaction between user and provider. The quality and the nature of the service depend on the accumulated knowledge and know-how of the public servant providing it. They defy codification, except in the broadest terms. They require the exercise of a high level of discretion that the Classic model was trying to prevent.

Going Beyond

The Classic model inherited from the 20th century provided a solid foundation for modern public administration, which includes the primacy of the rule of law, a commitment to due process in serving the public good, a concern for efficiency in service delivery and for probity in the use of public funds. It laid the basis for a strong system of accountability that runs through every level of public administration.

Public administrations moulded on this model have proven remarkably stable in different circumstances around the world. But the test of a strong theory is not just its staying power: it is its resilience, which implies an ability to adapt to new and unforeseen circumstances. *Public administration as a discipline lags behind the changes taking place in practice.* It needs to integrate the foundations inherited from the past, the lessons learned over the past 30 years and the imperatives of serving in the 21st century.

THIRTY YEARS OF REFORMS

The current practice of public administration draws from the Classic model of public administration discussed above; the neo-bureaucratic model, built upon rational decision making; the institutional model of the 1950s and 1960s rooted in behavioural sciences; and the public choice model, with its reliance on political economy.⁷ In the 1980s, a new generation of reforms took shape, which became known as New Public Management (NPM).

There is no particular need to unpack the underlying principles of each model. Generally, they are an extension of the Classic model. NPM raised to new levels the separation between politics and administration and between public policy-making and its implementation. NPM intensified some aspects of scientific management, leading to a substantial increase of *ex ante* controls and *ex post* quantification.

Public sector reforms during the 1980s and 1990s showed some important similarities. Some focused on restoring the fiscal health of government or rebalancing the role of government in society. Some attempted to seize the benefits of globalization while mitigating its negative impacts; but most focused on improving performance, efficiency and productivity. They encouraged integrated service delivery and paid attention to user satisfaction. They adopted various e-government approaches to leverage the power of information and communication technologies.

More recently, some reforms started to explore a different relationship between the state and its citizens. They are experimenting with hybrid models of co-operation that bring together the public, private and civic sectors.⁸ They include various approaches to citizen engagement and various forms of co-creation and co-production between public agencies and users.

*The reforms of the past 30 years had a number of positive effects, but they represent an incomplete journey because they did not solve some fundamental problems that stem from living in a post-industrial era.*⁹ Public organizations are not yet aligned, in theory or in practice, with the global context or with the complex problems they are expected to address.¹⁰ To serve in the 21st century and to meet the challenges of our times, we need a different way of looking at public administration—one that resonates more meaningfully with our experience and the world we live in.

WIDENING GAPS

While most people would agree that one model cannot fit all situations, in reality, this is frequently what happens in the public sector. The public administration model that emerged in Western Europe and the United States of America at the turn of the 20th century has been framed as a set of ideas and prescriptions expected to suit most circumstances.

According to this view, the public sector, private sector and civil society operate in separate spheres, each with its own norms and values. Government operates at a relative distance from society and citizens. In democratic societies, citizens have a periodic connection with their government during elections, which creates the possibility for change and adjustments.

For the most part, our systems of governance are conceived as a relatively closed system where public organizations exercise public authority, and politics are bundled into public institutions. Public institutions contribute to the stability and predictability of life in society. However, they also have the effect of hollowing out politics from society by bringing inside the decisions that give meaning to living in society.

By design, public organizations inherited from the 20th century have a low adaptive capacity. They were built to mass produce public services and achieve predetermined results. They were not expected to adapt to changing circumstances on their own. They were not wired to innovate or discover new ways of fulfilling their missions. In general, public organizations have a low tolerance for risk. Their internal systems cause them to adapt slowly and even to resist change.

Public sector leaders who have led public sector reforms are very familiar with these characteristics. In spite of the unprecedented pace of reforms over the last 30 years and of the heroic efforts of some political leaders and administrators around the world to bring about change, many reforms have come and gone without leaving much impact as the traditional ways reaffirm themselves over time.

With few exceptions, in most countries the fundamentals of public administration today remain more or less the same as at the turn of the 20th century. This is a precarious position for government to find itself in. The gap is widening between theory and practice, between practice and people's expectations and between collective aspirations and the collective capacity to bring about viable solutions to the issues of our times.

Practitioners know about these widening gaps from experience, and a number of scholars have reached similar conclusions by analyzing the situation from different perspectives.¹¹

A useful way of appreciating the widening gaps between theory and the reality of practice is to compare, even if cursorily, some of the underlying assumptions of the Classic model with what is happening in practice.

Citizenship

Beginning at the turn of the 20th century, a movement progressed across many democracies that made citizens the bearers of equal rights and obligations under the law. This was a major accomplishment. The law grants the rights and defines the ob-

ligations associated with citizenship. These rights include the right to vote and to select those who represent the interests of citizens and make decisions on their behalf.

The traditional approach to public administration “crowds out” the contribution of citizens¹² in many ways. It undervalues the role that people, families and communities play in producing public results and creating a society worth living in.

Today, citizenship has taken on a broader definition and meaning. Citizenship is an integrating concept.¹³ People are simultaneously members of their family, community, country and chosen communities of interest, no matter where those communities reside.¹⁴ In the connected world of the 21st century, we are all citizens of the world.

Citizens are political beings. The politics of citizenship is the politics of participation¹⁵ when people act as members of a community to achieve results. Modern communication and information technologies are transforming the relationship between citizens and the state. They are allowing people to interact with their public institutions in new ways and to ensure that their voices are heard. As some countries have recently discovered, the politics of the connected world cannot be contained within public institutions. The notion that citizens are not merely the users or beneficiaries of public services but value creators and co-producers of public results is turning public administration on its head.¹⁶

The Public Interest

Under the Classic model, political authorities determined the public interest. Their decisions amounted to carrying out the public will. In this regard, citizens played no direct role once they elected their representative (in democratic contexts) or once they conferred legitimacy on or submitted to the rule of political authorities (in non-democratic contexts).

Today, the public interest can best be described as a collective enterprise that involves government and many other actors. Governments achieve results in a world characterized by a broad dispersion of power and authority involving the public sector, the private sector, civil society and citizens.¹⁷

No government and no country controls all the tools or has access to all the levers to address the complex problems people really care about. Most government activities and services are not final results: they are intermediate steps in long chains of activities involving many organizations working across government and across sectors toward achieving desired public outcomes. Co-ordinating vast operations that extend beyond the control of government is one of the trademarks of public administration in the 21st century.

Over the last 30 years, a recurring theme in public sector reforms has been the

growth of non-traditional, non-hierarchical and often non-governmental approaches to service delivery.¹⁸ Hence, indirect tools such as grants, loans, insurance, transfers to other levels of government and tax credits account for the bulk of government spending today. These instruments break the link in the traditional accountability model between funding decisions and service delivery since they put public resources in the hands of individuals and organizations thought to be in a better position to achieve the desired public outcomes. New forms of accountability for results are needed to take account of this situation.¹⁹

We are a long way from government acting as the primary agent in providing direct and tangible public services. Public services today are increasingly indirect, intangible and intermediate steps in achieving complex public results.

The Role of Government

The Classic model saw government as the primary provider of public services. This no longer resonates with the array of roles most governments are called upon to play in the 21st century.

One of government’s key roles is to define and search for ways to balance the authority of the state with the reliance on the power of others to advance the collective interest. In other words, its role is to integrate the contribution of government, people and society in a common system of governance able to adapt to changing circumstances, and where government co-evolves with society.²⁰

The role of government transforms society and society transforms the role of government. Government forms part of a vast ecosystem where the economic, social, technological and environmental systems are intertwined.

OPEN SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE

Public organizations exist to serve the public good and the collective interest. This is the normative foundation of the state and the public sector apparatus. However, in today’s changing reality, which includes a global economy, networked societies and a fragile biosphere, there is a need to explore anew what it means to serve the public good and the collective interest.²¹

From Closed Systems

A system is a group of elements or units that have a common purpose. Open systems interact with other systems and with their external environment. Closed systems have relatively little interaction with other systems or with the outside environment.²²

Applying ideas about open and closed systems to public organizations has its limi-

tations, but it can be helpful in breaking away from conventional ways of thinking to explore new ideas.²³

A closed-system perspective would view public organizations as operating relatively independently of one another and of their environment. In this context, a department or public agency would be expected to operate on its own with minimal interaction with others. As a closed system, a public agency would focus on managing internal matters, such as production, technology, personnel, equipment and finances. All systems have boundaries. In the case of closed systems, the boundaries provide a firm delineation of roles and responsibilities. Something is either in or out.

Closed-system organizations pay little attention to external factors or to their potential impact on the organization because they do not expect these factors to be directly relevant to how the organization functions. Closed-system organizations assume that they do not require complex interactions with their environment.²⁴

The public sector was designed and has operated as a relatively closed system, with the political system and the electoral process being its most open parts. This goes some way to explain why public organizations find it difficult to evolve as changes occur in society, why issues reach crisis proportion before corrective measures are introduced and why public sector reforms require heroic efforts. A closed system has great difficulty detecting the early signs of change. It does not have the built-in agility to adapt with ease and parsimony of effort to changing circumstances.²⁵ This does not bode well for what lies ahead.

To Open Systems

The concept of open systems originated from the natural sciences and has been used in organizational theory since the 1960s.²⁶ Understanding a concept is one thing; changing things in practice is quite another.

An open concept of governance would see the economic, social, political, technological and environmental systems as intertwined and interdependent. Open-system public organizations would continually exchange with their environment. They would take in information, ideas, energy and resources and then transform and release them with reciprocal effects on the environment.²⁷ In this context, organizations are part and parcel of their environment.

Open-system public organizations have form and order. This is not a chaotic vision of how government may function. They have sub-systems to manage the multiple interfaces and exchanges across multiple boundaries; exploratory and adaptive systems to collect, process and make sense of information on changing circumstances; management systems to resolve conflict, and allocate resources; boundaries that display flexibility to interact with others; and plasticity to connect and reconnect parts, units and functions as needed.

The main difference between closed and open systems is the complexity and density of the interactions with their environment. The choice between open and closed systems comes down to a judgment about the complexity of the world we live in and a view about the need for governments to acquire new capacities to be fit for the times.

The participants in the New Synthesis Project share the view that the Classic model of public administration inherited from the 20th century is insufficient to prepare governments to face the challenges of the 21st century. The key questions then become What does it take to solve peacefully some of the toughest and most complex problems of our time²⁸, and What can we do to prepare governments to face the challenges of these times?