

Book Review

Christian Bason.

Leading Public Sector Innovation: Co-creating for a Better Society.

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Everybody knows that it is important to listen to the people (though it is usually possible to ignore what they say). Yet the factors arrayed against necessary change, Bason realizes, combine to establish a toxic climate for innovation in the public interest.

Very often, when authors are said to be on the “cutting edge” of thinking, or when their actions are commended for “keeping ahead of the pressures of social change,” the intent of the person proffering the accolade is merely to say that the writer in question is accurately anticipating the next *crise de jour* and staying one step ahead of an oncoming political agenda. The facts of the situation and the inflexible circumstances that define the range of available options are deemed inelastic. Public administration must, it seems, always react to political, demographic, economic and ecological forces. Above all, the public sector must be flexible and creative in response to an inflexible social and material environment. The best that can be expected is for policy makers to make correct predictions about the extent of certain problems (e.g., the impending stress of an aging population on health services) and plan so that the pernicious effects of the “crisis” may be ameliorated.

Over the past three decades or so, commentators have almost inevitably used words of ostensible praise to remark upon public sector innovators who have deferred to what is, who have either buckled under or enthusiastically embraced the preferred strategies of the “new public management,” which has mostly been application of the “old private management” to the public sector. One pertinent effect is the substitution of market-driven, cost-effective and nominally efficient innovations, even when those costs and efficiencies have been won on the backs of those who need public service the most.

The ideas developed and articulately argued by Christian Bason may or may not meet someone’s standards of economic efficiency (though I see no obvious reason why they couldn’t); they will, however, go some distance toward inspiring change that can be assessed according to somewhat different, more humane and, in my opinion, more efficacious standards.

It is commonly said that the antique image of public service has not only died, but has been deeply buried, so that not even a wisp of its spirit can be detected by anyone passing the cemetery, whether whistling or not. Instead of moving beyond the fastidious, sometimes officious, occasionally patrician, self-consciously professional and oddly underpaid public servant class of old toward some more generous and successful state of being, however, the new public service appears to have aspired merely to mimic the manners and morals of the private sector. Citizens have been redefined as clients and consumers, services have been transformed

into commodities and the standard of excellence is no longer the satisfaction of a public need, but the achievement of a quantifiable objective that was reached with a high measure of transparent accountability and preferably accomplished under budget.

These standards, of course, have seldom been applied to military, police and other social control functions, but that's another story.

Whatever benefits might have been forthcoming from exercises in planning, programming and budgeting, it was certainly no way to run a railroad, especially if the "railroad" was intended to meet public needs equitably and affordably. Health, education, transportation, communications and sundry social services could not be adequately provided and administered under a management model as spare and unforgiving as this.

If both the old-fashioned public service mentality and the more recent businesslike orientation are inadequate to deal with what some (perhaps with short memories) see as an unprecedented degree of economic tumult, ecological degradation and political uproar seldom experienced before, what is to be expected? If the neoliberal agenda that has dominated Western societies at least since the era of Reagan-Thatcher is now displaying its innate contradictions and limitations, what is to be done?

For some, the future is an inevitable dive to the bottom. The inventory of communal goods is declining in quality and quantity, while governments contemplate a range of draconian measures such as reducing income taxes (mainly for the already well-to-do), privatizing services and increasing consumption taxes, user fees and other impositions on the working and middle classes. As Stan Laurel said to Oliver Hardy: "This is another fine mess you've got us in."

Moreover, just as the bad is threatening to be replaced by the worse amid inchoate intimations of anger, frustration and very bad thinking on the part of self-appointed pseudo-populist demagogues who purport to speak for the ordinary people of increasingly destabilized Western industrial economies, a small number of rare but rather bright ideas have unexpectedly begun to shine. Christian Bason has one, and he would like to share it. If we are half as bright, we will consider it seriously.

This is it: democracy.

For Plato, his philosopher-kings, guardians and other authoritarians (not least his mentor Socrates), democracy was literally "mob-rule." It was perhaps the most malevolent and miserable form of governance. For Aristotle, democracy was majority rule, but of the bad sort, since it allowed the people to govern selfishly and foolishly. (Aristotle also had a notion of "good" democracy, which was called "polity," but the term has generally been expunged from our vocabulary.) It was, therefore, only when Thomas Jefferson and an unruly band of American slave-owners with a less than half developed idea of equality, began to allow partial notions of natural rights to take a prominent place in the pantheon of political virtues that democracy gained a toehold on the imperious wall of respectability. Since the brave words in support of the human rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were shouted out in the American *Declaration of Independence* and the subsequent French additions of *égalité, fraternité* (never quite as well

received), we have not moved very far ahead since the late eighteenth century. Indeed, in some of the most venerable liberal democratic governments, it seems that we have slipped back a little on “liberty” and did not progress very far on “equality” and “fraternity” (which I’d prefer to translate as “solidarity” ... but that’s another story.

Yes, we encourage a list of freedoms, most often copied from the *Constitution of the United States* and sometimes whimsically expanded as in the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. We are also more-or-less willing to allow governments to be elected through some sort of popular franchise. With some striking exceptions, most obviously since the initiation of the “war on terror,” we at least pay lip service to the Rule of Law. Seldom, however, do we think beyond the minimal political and legal rights associated with representative government since the glory days of John Stuart Mill.

The assurance of the right to vote and the unsystematic and often contested application of specified civil liberties seem adequate to allow us to relax in smug complacency, and to extol the delights of freedom and democracy as we understand and sometimes fail to appreciate them. In reality, however, we are not much farther ahead from the time when women were granted to right to vote, mainly after World War I. Instead, we generally accept governance by political parties that obey what Robert Michels famously called the “iron law of oligarchy,” and are themselves controlled by, and reflective of, the interests of the plutocracy. Thus, democracy is reduced to elite-dominated pluralism in which we may choose among candidates for office whose differences normally go little beyond the carefully crafted personalities of their leaders and their campaign managers’ relative skills in designing attractive advertising and promoting their “brands.”

Christian Bason is a professional lecturer, government advisor, author and the Director of MindLab, a cross-ministerial unit in the government of Denmark. He has a better idea of democracy. In *Leading Public Sector Innovation*, he takes a refreshing turn. Arising out of his work at the Danish “MindLab,” a “cross-ministerial innovation laboratory, which is both a physical space and a research and facilitation unit,” and drawing from self-consciously designed co-operative innovation programs in Brazil, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, he outlines an approach and cites promising experiments in the creation of public sector cultures of innovation. What’s more, off the drawing board, they appear to have remarkable results.

The aim? To make society better—which is a significant step up from cheaper.

The essential theme? Co-creation: a model of innovative design in which “solutions are conceived and constructed *with* people, not *for* them.”

As Bason sees them, co-created innovations provide two crucial benefits. One is “divergence,” by which he means the inclusion of citizens in the definition of problems and the design of solutions—a process that allows diversity of thought and encourages a certain energy and amenability to adventuresome experiments along with the exposure of previously suppressed insights from the margins. The other is “execution,” a term that presumes that people who are authentically involved in innovation will not be resistant to it. Resistance, of course, is a

complaint usually expressed by people who seek to impose new policies and practices on people, but who are inexplicably surprised by the defiance of both public sector workers who were to implement the changes, and the public who were ostensibly to gain from them. This resistance is commonly attributed to irrational individual fear and innate organizational inertia, when it more likely arises from a sensible suspicion and a structural alienation from the political and administrative process. Christian Bason seems to understand, more fully than most, that overcoming sullen resistance is not a matter of better communication and sales skills on the part of “change champions.” It requires authentic inclusion and genuine consultation at least, and actual power sharing at best, if optimal results are to be expected.

Bason, however, is driven by more than the democratic impulse. He also has a sense of impending calamity. It is a deep motivator. He understands that our species is confronted by all manner of problems, many of which are deathly serious, and most of which call out for “radical” solutions. He is acutely aware of the limitations on public resources as well as the public lack of confidence in the capacity of governments to solve problems. The factors arrayed against necessary change, he realizes, combine to establish a toxic climate for innovation in the public interest.

Yet, he remains optimistic. His hopes are vested in co-creation. What is it? What are its promises, and what are its limits?

One of Bason’s first prescriptions is to drop the mind-set that leads to undifferentiated pessimism and may ultimately lead to nihilism. He admits that there are real barriers to public sector innovation—organizational, psychological, economic, ideological and the like. Still, he insists that we look again. Innovation takes place every day, in the pleasantly Darwinian-sounding manner of “random incrementalism.” If nothing else, we can be confident that we have not yet descended into organizational entropy.

Change, he suggests, is not normally accomplished from the top down through loudly heralded plans and massive efforts to achieve some major cultural shift. The problem for us is whether we can sensibly await the evolutionary process if we are to survive looming challenges—real and imagined, environmentally imposed or artificially induced—that are available in abundance: think Thomas Malthus and unsustainable population growth; think Karl Marx and the growing asymmetry of wealth and power both domestically and globally; think climate change, human migration, civil liberties in an era of mass surveillance, technological dehumanization. Think immediate problems in geriatrics and early childhood education. Take your pick or add to the list.

When you do, Bason is waiting for you. In addition to the successfully adaptive “natural evolution” of public sector organizations in the process of ongoing adaptation to external change, Christian Bason argues that there is an almost desperate need for a “more explorative, open and collaborative process of co-creation that can deliver more radical change. Government,” he says, “needs both.” He tells us explicitly and with geometric logic exactly what co-creation is.

Co-creation is an approach that appears to have much in common with the bulk of standard “theoretical” works on public sector innovation. Attention is paid, and familiar graphics give

expression, to the commonly identified systemic factors that frame most discussions of change. Attractive figures comfortably display the “innovation ecosystem,” a conjuring that is comprised of nicely alliterative C-words: consciousness, capacity, co-creation and courage. They relate, of course, to concepts of awareness, structure, process and leadership.

Courageous leadership, I am pleased to report, comes last and gets the shortest space, a scant fourteen pages compared to a substantial one hundred and three for co-creation, an ample eighty-two for capacity, and a modest nineteen for consciousness. This is significant. Most calls for creativity, cleverness and conversion to a new “paradigm” focus on leadership, which is usually the least important part of the picture. While not at all discounting leaders, more attention is paid to other matters.

Bason also downplays the primacy of perception. Material changes do not come fully developed from the head of some well-publicized genius. So, the chapter on consciousness involves only an introductory discussion of the origins of innovation and the importance of “mapping the landscape.” It includes a brief but salutary exploration of the centrality of “value” in his construction of what are basically the tried and untrue “systems models.” These have been the stock-in-trade of bureaucrats and students of bureaucracy since David Easton purloined the vocabulary of engineers to generate “input-output-feedback” diagrams for social systems over fifty years ago. The resulting fashion has done more to obfuscate than to illuminate organizational behaviour. I am, however, prepared to cut Bason some slack in this regard. The reason is that he insinuates into this “paradigm” a novel respect for the pachyderm in the parlor—the people themselves.

In recent decades, the best that the public seems to be able to expect from government is the common collection of marketing tools in the form of opinion surveys, roadshows for the many and focus groups for the few. These amount to what is called “consultation” and “research,” but they reinforce rather than remove the barriers between government and citizen, while reifying the citizen as client-consumer. Bason adds to these tools. He advocates concepts such as “professional empathy,” calling on public service innovators to find and release their “inner anthropologist.” It is essential, in his view, to see the public service from the perspective of the people it is intended to serve.

Anthropologists have long spoken of the “etic” and the “emic” points of view. The first involves the perceptions of the allegedly “objective” external investigator who sees a society from the outside. The second represents the apparent “subjective” consciousness of the subjects being studied. What a ritual or event for the dispassionate external analyst may differ greatly from the experience of the person whose understanding is deeply embedded in her culture.

Western social engineering has typically regarded the recipients of public goods and services from the etic perspective, assuming that experts of various sorts know better what is good for the people than do the people themselves. What’s more, the professional helping classes are also aware of the nature and extent of available resources; they know the litany of “best practices”; and they are best positioned to construct the optimal programs within the limits imposed by circumstance.

Christian Bason wants to amend this formula; but, he is also a realist. He thinks that it is not power and authority, but perceptions that must be shared. Those who endure the culture of poverty, the experience of illness or the state of ignorance have much to teach social workers, physicians and educators; however, Bason does not urge the takeover of the factories by the workers, the schools by the students or the hospitals by the patients. Instead, he endorses the development of what German sociologists used to call *verstehen*—the deep understanding of experience from the standpoint of those compelled to live it. Such awareness does not detract from professional competence, but is essential to it.

Leading Public Sector Innovation includes a number of exemplary cases in which public sector innovators have supplemented traditional techniques of problem identification, strategic thinking and program performance measurement with citizen perception as an integrated part of the design and delivery process. Co-creation is neither citizen control nor participatory democracy in the sense that critical political theorists of the pre-Thatcher-Reagan era meant it. It is, however, a good deal closer to it than most of the instances of public management theory and practice that have been forthcoming in the recent past. Absent some transformational politics, it is a good start.

In the end, Christian Bason emerges as a passionate moderate. Cynics may say that they have seen all this before, that Bason offers nothing fundamentally different from a dozen volumes on “customer satisfaction,” and that everybody knows that it is important to listen to the people (though it is usually possible to ignore what they say). What makes Bason different and therefore worth reading is the fact that he *means* what he says. Sceptics will not be persuaded that much can change through the encouragement of attitudes that are already known to be helpful. Detractors will hang on to the belief that the public is not capable of being energized, and that the opinions of ordinary people merely delay action. Democracy is messy and apparently not built for speed. These, however, are little but the banalities of exhausted elitism. Bason’s prescriptions will not satisfy those who crackle with a rebellious spirit, and they may seem overly idealistic to patricians and technocrats. Still, as a call to make the existing system work better, and to put normative concepts of improvement in the quality of people’s lives first, this book is compelling. Bason appears to really mean what he says, and that is enough to make him well worth reading.

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