Book Review

Jacob Torfing and Peter Triantafillou, Eds.
Enhancing Public Innovation by Transforming Public Governance
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

The Crimean War and, especially the Battle of Balaclava, might not have yielded much of military importance. They did, however, provide a boost for the careers of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and subsequently Rudyard Kipling as they indulged in patriotic poesy inspired by the "suicide attack" of the far-famed "Light Brigade." They also enhanced public awareness of Florence Nightingale (who almost died there) and contributed to the recognition of the valor and the crucial importance of the nursing vocation. They should also, however, go down as a matter of importance in the history of the public service.

At least partly as a result of the debacle in the southern reaches of Russia and also of a general feeling of unrest with the competency of the public service—both in the professional civilian and the military ranks—a cry went up in Parliament for change. The term "modernization" has been used frequently to describe what was needed. So, on June 15, 1865, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1874: 10), one of the leaders of the movement for civil service reform (and the novelist who gave us the excellent opening line, "It was a dark and stormy night …" and other key phrases such as realistic "pursuit of the almighty dollar" and the aspirational "pen is mightier than the sword"), rose in the House of Commons to denounce appointments being made on the basis of aristocratic family connections with no thought of merit. The civil service, he said, was a place where the "unambitious, and the indolent or incapable" scions of the upper classes "may obtain an honourable livelihood with little labour and with no risk; where their success depends upon their simply avoiding any flagrant misconduct, and attending with moderate regularity to routine duties."

> Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is "dehumanized," the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation. – Max Weber

Such privilege might be benign in times of peace, prosperity and tranquility when little was expected of the public service apart from tending to the accounts and delivering occasional reassuring reports that all was well in the land. In times of hazard and of transformative change, however, leaving the affairs of state to a collection of third-rate toffs with first-rate pedigrees would simply no longer do. The Industrial Revolution was such a change. The administration of an Empire was such a hazard. So, rigorous examinations were mandated not merely to clear out well-connected ineptitude, but also to recruit the growing number of quick-witted and highly motivated young men from the rising middle classes.

History (or, rather, historians) will judge how great an improvement has been made with such measures over the past century-and-a-half, but what cannot be disputed is the fact that, following 1855, a detectable shift in organizational culture changed (or appeared to change) the British civil service and the public service of all who came under its sway forever. Thus was born the ideal of the dedicated, knowledgeable, committed public servant doing important though often thankless tasks in the non-partisan pursuit of the common good. There also can be found the crucial elements which Max Weber (2015) studied and endorsed in his definitive work on bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy was not, we must recall, a term of opprobrium. In contrast to the imagery of French "red tape," the public service was and was expected to be the embodiment of the "rational-legal" model of authority which would bring order, responsibility and trust to public affairs and the business of the nation. If it did not always work well or according to plan, it nevertheless aspired to such goals and standards. Though it might have slipped a bit in, for example, the episodes of the "Cambridge spies," it still represented a noble ambition.

Indeed, the so-called "classic public administration model" (CPA) was in place for over 100 years. No one affirms (successfully or with a straight face) that the model's descriptions and expectations were wholly met. Enough examples of political influence, nepotism, incompetence and arrogance can be found in the public service of any country to provide cynics and comedians with ample material for satirical romps at the expense of the public sector. That said, however, it also cannot be denied that the ideal was kept in place as a standard for exemplary character and performance in most circumstances.

For what little anecdotal evidence may be worth, I have worked at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government in Canada in jobs varying from painting fire hydrants to assessing international research projects and have taught at public colleges and universities in Canada and the United States continuously since 1963. My experience and that of the bulk of my co-workers has uniformly been framed by a sincere dedication to the public good as the foundational rationale and ethic of public duty. Or, at least it did until roughly 1980.

> "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem*;* government is the problem." – Ronald W. Reagan

With the ascent of political leaders such as Ronald W. Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the ideology of neoliberalism increasingly influenced the corporate culture of public sector work. Borrowing boldly from the rhetoric of private firms, citizens became "customers" or "clients," emphasis was put on measurable performance indicators, attention was given to a narrow form of "accountability," and innovation became a necessary claim for programs to justify their continued existence, much less to expand. A focus on the financial bottom line and one or more of the available rubrics of public satisfaction sharpened and, with them, came a tendency to more and more rigid top-down managerial techniques. Technology—especially electronic information and communications technology—was celebrated as an essential factor in building a leaner, more effective public sector and, wherever possible, machines were put in place to do the work of people as efforts were made to downgrade the human component where it could not be wholly eliminated.

So it is, therefore, that in my principal occupation of education, about 70% of all teaching in colleges and universities in North America is now done by "contingent" faculty with the massive intervention of "technologically enhanced learning." Reliance on a permanent part-time labour force has obvious financial benefits and equally obvious losses in terms of academic quality and integrity. Nonetheless, there are few apparent misgivings throughout higher education elites; accordingly, it is safe to say that the worst has yet to come.

In other domains, some public sector leaders are beginning to understand that there are limits beyond which the importation of the manners and morals of large-scale industries concerned with the distribution of goods and services cannot be pushed without undermining both the quality and also the basic purpose of the enterprise. So, while it is no great chore to come up with ways to reduce labour costs and to increase technical efficiencies in public spheres from transportation, postal delivery, weather forecasting and industrial safety regulations to policing, health care, social work and education, it is next to impossible to do so without risking the distortion, the deformation and ultimately the delegitimation of the central mission of the enterprise.

> "Innovation has recently moved to the top of the agenda in many public sectors around the world. Innovation may be regarded as a magic concept with a strong normative connotation."
> - Torfing & Triantafillou."

It would seem, then, that an opportunity for thoughtful changes—not to say a "crisis"—in approach to innovation in the public sector is at hand. In this case, however, innovation will mean something more and something different than adopting a business model, shaving costs and reaping organizational and fiscal benefits. Ronald Reagan's mantra (1981) that "government isn't the solution to the problem, government *is* the problem" may now have passed its peak effectiveness notwithstanding recent surprises in domestic, regional and global politics. The apparent and possibly temporary popularity of "populism" as code for anti-state ideology and, too often, ethno-religious bigotry if not quite neo-Nazism presents a plain and possibly imminent threat to social stability and well-being and it is required of public sector innovation that, without ballooning in size, it undertakes a positive, creative and crucial role in social development.

This is where ideas like those offered in Torfing and Triantafillou's anthology, *Enhancing Public Innovation by Transforming Public Governance* are being offered and are receiving an informed and enthusiastic welcome. In what might be mistaken for a bit of Hegelian dialectic, their guiding thesis is that an honourable and effective public service model was confronted by the late-capitalist antithesis of the private-sector corporate model, and that from this clash in competing philosophies, a new approach is emerging. If this were so, then the residual virtues of the old would merge with the innovative advantages of the new to provide a third way, "going forward."

There can be little doubt that the traditional public administration model came under relentless attack and was subjected to successive waves of humiliation, degradation and reorganization by the imposition of new processes and practices. Among the innovations were outright privatization, contracting out essential services, and transforming internal

employer/employee relations so that formerly permanent employee positions were replaced by independent contractors, many of whom (expert consultants aside) received less pay, fewer employee benefits, and neither job security nor effective rights and remedies in the face of mistreatment and exploitation.

This was the New Public Management (NPM) model which operated under a version of "free market" principles, dispensed with overarching ethic of responsibility for the public good, and, in the process, loaded layer-upon-layer of managerial expertise in the form of internal human resources professionals, core competency and career coaches, and masters of efficiency to micromanage immediate supervisors and staff. Now, it seems that we are being presented with the initial intimations of a synthesis in the form of New Public Governance (NPG).

Or are we?

NPM initially supplemented the CPA as a method of increasing efficiency along neoliberal lines, but it did much more. The CPA was intended to oversee public regulations and provide public services in a rational, legal and democratic system of representative government. The primacy of democratic institutions, whether in parliamentary or presidential systems, was foundational. The public sector functioned as an instrument of the Crown or of "the people," but it was meant to be disinterested, impersonal and apolitical. It provided advice to the government, but its main responsibility was to serve faithfully its masters—ultimately the citizens of a liberal democracy.

NPM altered that ideal. By dismantling much of the CPA's internal order and giving homage to the dynamics of the economic marketplace, NPM paradoxically undermined the (admittedly elitist) democratic principles that underlay CPA. Although the public service has previously been criticized on occasion for being a shadow government that could, more or less at will, weaken or even sabotage policies it did not like (ministers came and went, but senior ministry officials remained seemingly forever), the fact is that NPM gave new impetus to the claim that knowledge is power. So, in a policy climate where immense technical expertise is needed just to understand complicated public matters, to say nothing of addressing and resolving them, a good deal of the information and interpretation of policy choices is vested in the public bureaucracy. Political leaders retain the authority to choose, of course, and strong leaders can certainly put their stamp on administrations, but a good case can be made that NPM actually tilted the balance of power away from elected officials and their political ambitions and toward unelected officials and their economic priorities.

As Torfing and Triantafillou have said elsewhere, "NPM became the predominant mode of political governing vis-à-vis CPA … Accordingly, NPM spread to most Western countries in the shape of a series of diverse problematizations of CPA on the one hand, and a wide range of nationally specific reform programs and governing techniques on the other" (Torfing and Triantafillou, 2013; see also Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

Though the authors concede that NPG lacks a coherent theory, let alone a "philosophy," and remains an idea in process, it is at least clear that the main virtue of the NPG, the "new" new

public sector model is that its proponents appear to have detected some of the problems of NPM and are willing to go some distance to correct them.

So, for example, contributor Christopher K. Ansell advances the notion of "collaborative governance as creative problem solving." The concept relates to decision-making processes "where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or to implement public policy or manage public programs or assets" (Ansell and Gash, 2008:2). The authors correctly state that collaborative decision making is a high-risk venture, but they also affirm that the benefits are worth the risks. Unlike NPM, NPG encourages active participation by diverse but pertinent private sector and civil society groups which, they not unreasonably claim, "can lead to a deep and broad-ranging transformation of how stakeholders engage with each other … and produce creative solutions to challenging problems."

This is the good news.

In addition, however, concern is expressed by contributor Eva Sørensen, who reminds us that public confidence in the public sector is low and there is "general disenchantment with representative democracy" and politicians are especially distrusted. So, "the growing number of wicked and unruly problems that governments have placed at the top of the policy agenda, but are unable to solve, warrants intensive efforts to improve politicians' capacity for policy innovation." This is not a minor problem.

The obvious implication is that governments must reform their basic institutions in order to maintain social stability, let alone partisan support. If the assessment of alienation from existing institutions and resentment against dominant forces in society is accurate and democratic politics as usual is becoming dysfunctional, claims can be made that power should be taken out of the control of democratically elected political representatives and more widely distributed among a complex variety of public-private partnerships. In the process, the role of "public managers" must be recast as "entrepreneurial leaders of public innovation." This looks very much like NPM in a slightly new guise.

The recommended diffusion of power looks reasonably good on the flow charts and matrices which pop up in *Enhancing Public Innovation by Transforming Public Governance*. Each legitimate (which is to say, organized) participant is eligible to make the most of the opportunity to share in the crafting and implementation of policy. But what of the disorganized and the unorganized? And how are we to understand symmetrical power relations which reflect broader social stratification—even if we are preternaturally indisposed to talk in terms of conflict or social class relations? NPG is rightly to be praised for expanding the boundaries of political engagement. It is certainly more inclusive of groups *qua* groups and less interested in banal "customer satisfaction" as an aggregation of individual consumer choices. There is, I acknowledge, an unstated but nonetheless implicit assumption of at least rough justice; however, there is also a noticeable indifference to the likelihood that inarticulate demands and unexpressed interests are not merely marginalized for the time being, but may be wholly excluded from the game. In essence, what I fear we have here is a more subtly toned and updated iteration of a past exercise in democratic passivity.

I find it significant that Sørensen, for example, draws in links to the early nineteenth-century Utilitarians to the late-twentieth century democratic revisionist theorist Robert A. Dahl (1961, 2006) and makes them complicit in her argument. Dahl, especially, argued forcefully in favour of a pluralist model of democracy in which competing interest groups came to influence political life more or less behind closed doors, protected from the "unruly" citizenry whose participation in democracy, he felt, could be destabilizing and lead, in turbulent times, to extremism. Throughout, the emphasis is upon government's role in "the authoritative allocation of values." The phrase, of course, is David Easton's and Easton's systems theory (1965a, 1965b) is a constant presence in the book.

To their credit, the editors do not force a choice among the competing models. Picking a winner among CPA, NPM and NPG is deemed inappropriate; the jury is still out. Each approach has or, perhaps, had its strengths. Each attempts or attempted to rectify perceived weaknesses in the previous public sector principle and practices. CPA was initially responsible for taking the public service out of an antique past and giving it the means (and the morals) to manage profound change in the development of nineteenth-century modernity. NPM saw difficulties in CPA's ability handle the complexities of late twentieth-century political economy and forced changes of its own. Now NPG is said to be reforming NPM.

From my perspective, NPM is mainly a more nuanced, open and pluralistic/collaborative extension of the basic market-based, rational-choice model in which measurable systemic inputs and outputs are processed by a system to be assessed on the ease with which it keeps everybody (or everybody of importance) happy. In so doing, however, I am reminded of the tussles that preoccupied political scientists and others about the time that Easton was most active. Politics was then deemed a playful give-and-take among selfish, but also civic-minded, interest groups, each of which made demands on the political system, and most of which were content to achieve some or, better, most but not necessarily all of their goals. Losers were said not to be losers forever and were expected to rise again another day. Meanwhile government was thought best to act as a referee ensuring fairness in the eternal contest for scarce resources.

Experience gave short shrift to this comforting impression (Kariel, 1961; Kariel, 1966) and pronounced the "irrelevance of pluralist analysis" in an increasingly divided and divisive political climate. The growing sense of unease and the evident ideological, demographic and economic divisions within society gave pause to those who saw non-ideological competition as both the reality and the preferred norm in political life. In NPM and the more sensitive and capacious (non)theory of NPG, we see an effort to keep an unwieldy and fraught set of variables from upsetting an ongoing set of arrangements. The task of steering the ship of state through the various upcoming storms may be more difficult than the advocates of NPM expect.

The twenty-four authors who contribute to the volume write well and persuasively about the importance of innovation, the means to achieve innovation and the ways in which the imperative of public sector innovation can be managed to maximum material benefit. No one interested in public sector innovation would read the book completely and not learn something new and be compelled to think differently or at least more deeply about the issues involved. I suspect that more may be needed if the emperor's new clothes are to win praise.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches Cultural Anthropology and Modern Political Thought at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com

References:

Ansell C. & A. Gash. 2011. Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory,* 18(4): 543-571.

Bulwer-Lytton, E. 1874. *Speeches of Edward Lord Lytton now first collected with some of his political writings hitherto unpublished and a prefatory memoir by his son in two volumes*, Vol. 2. London, UK: William Blackwood and Sons.

Dahl, R. 1961. *Who governs? Democracy and power in an American city*. 1961. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dahl, R. 2006. *A preface to democratic theory,* expanded edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Easton, D. 1965a. *A framework for political analysis.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Easton, D. 1965b. *A systems analysis of political life.* New York, NY: Wiley.

Reagan, R. 1981. Reagan's First Inaugural: "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Retrieved November 16, 2016 from http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/reagans-first-inaugural-government-is-not-the-solution-to-our-problem-government-is-the-problem

Torfing, J. & P. Triantafillou. 2013. What's in a Name? Grasping New Public Governance as a Political-Administrative System. Retrieved December 4, 2016 from https://ecpr.eu/filestore/paperproposal/117b16b3-4dca-4657-bf64-178cbe1049dd.pdf

Pollitt, C. & G. Bouckaert. 2011. Public Management Reform, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weber, M. 2015. Bureaucracy. Pp. 73-127 in T. Waters and D. Waters (Ed). *Weber's rationalism and modern society: New translations on politics, bureaucracy, and social stratification.* London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.