

BUREAUCRACIES REMEMBER, POST BUREAUCRATIC ORGANIZATIONS FORGET?

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the hypothesis that post-bureaucratic forms of organization perform less well than traditional bureaucracies with respect to organizational memory – and therefore learning from experience. First, it discusses the meanings of the main terms and concepts to be used in the argument, and delimits its domain. Second, it identifies a series of mechanisms which are likely to bring about memory loss. Third, it examines the empirical literature in search of evidence to confirm or disconfirm the existence and effects of these mechanisms. Fourth, it considers limitations to the strength of the arguments advanced here. Finally, it sets out some conclusions and broad reflections on the state of organizational memories in the public sector. Overall the aim is to develop new theory, identify relevant generative mechanisms, set this model alongside such evidence as is available, and suggest lines for further research.

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‘The new men of the Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that, before it is finished, it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble’
(J.M.Coetzee, Waiting for the barbarians, 1980, p26)

1. Introduction

A considerable literature has grown up concerning general trends in the development of organizational forms, and especially the transition from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic structures and processes. Within this body of work - which spans both public and private sectors – there are many points of fierce debate. These include the very definition of ‘post-bureaucratic’, the extent to which post-bureaucratic forms are actually coming into existence (or not), the possibility of hybrid forms, the relative efficiency of the different forms, the condition under which each form of organization best prospers, the ethical implications of such a shift, and so on (Alvesson and Thompson, 2004; Christensen and Lægred, 2007; Du Gay, 2005; Goodsell, 2004; Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Hughes, 2003).

The present paper deals with an aspect of the bureaucratic/post-bureaucratic transition which has, as yet, received very little attention. It analyses the probable effects of post-bureaucratic organizational innovations upon organizational memories. Whilst there is a large and growing literature on organizational learning it is not matched by any substantial work on organizational forgetting (Pollitt, 2001). Having identified the key processes which are likely to influence organizational memories the paper proceeds to examine some of the hypothesized consequences of post bureaucratic ‘reforms’ in the public sector. These seem likely to influence both the external, public accountability of organizations and their capacity to learn from experience. The main contribution of the paper is thus theory development, including the identification of generative mechanisms and a preliminary review of a sample of relevant evidence.

2. Hypotheses, terms and concepts

2.1 The hypotheses

The first hypothesis is that public sector bureaucracies tend to have better organizational memories than the main types of post bureaucratic organization that have, in some parts of the world, wholly or partly replaced them.

The second hypothesis is that this relative loss of memory is likely to have deleterious consequences for the formation and implementation of public policies and programmes.

This paper is mainly about the first hypothesis, and only begins to sketch the second. Let it be made immediately clear that the first hypothesis (and therefore the second too) has a limited domain. It does not posit a generic, and certainly not a uniformly globalized phenomenon. It applies mainly to those sectors and states where intensive 'modernisation' has taken place. Specifically, this means administrations such as those in the UK, New Zealand, and some parts of the United States, where (at least for some prolonged periods) reform has followed reform, relentlessly. It also includes some of the transitional states of eastern Europe (where rapid reforms have been attempted by local elites and international actors) and possibly some developing countries (ditto).

Before going further, however, we need to define at least *bureaucracy*, *post-bureaucratic organization* and *organizational memory*.

2.2 *Bureaucracy.*

The Weberian ideal type can hardly be avoided. Thus, a 'pure' bureaucracy would possess the following features (Albrow, 1970; Meier and Hill, 2005):

1. There is a clear hierarchy of offices
2. The functions of each office are clearly specified
3. Officials are appointed on the basis of a contract
4. They are selected on the basis of a transparent set of requirements for certain levels of education/training
5. They are paid a salary, linked to hierarchical position, and accrue pension rights
6. Their posts are their sole or major occupations
7. There is a career structure, and promotion is by seniority or merit (or some mixture), decided by the superior ranks
8. Management of the office relies upon written files – decisions are inscribed in an official record
9. The official may not appropriate the post or the resources which go with it
10. The official is subject to unified control, and a disciplinary system
11. The whole organization is rule-governed, and those rules are law or law-like

Thus a bureaucracy is not a temporary organization, and most of its staff are not temporary either. It is a career organization with a continuous central authority. The written record is at the core of operations, and hierarchically-defined rules and precedents are the bedrock of continuity and consistency in bureaucratic decision-making.

2.3 *Post-bureaucratic organizations.*

By this term we mean an organization which has been put in place as a conscious replacement for a traditional bureaucracy. That is, it represents a reaction against the traditional bureaucratic form. Post-bureaucratic organizations are supposed to be faster, more efficient, more flexible, more committed and more outward-looking (Salaman, 2005, pp141-145). Typically they aim to achieve these improvements by moving away from the bureaucratic characteristics listed above. Thus the shift to post-bureaucratic

forms typically involves one or more of the following departures from the bureaucratic features listed in 2.2:

1. Hierarchies are flattened. Team working becomes the ideal. Horizontal connections are emphasized (see especially Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994)
2. Significant parts of the organization's activity are no longer conducted by specific 'offices' with a fixed place in the hierarchy, but rather by temporary teams or networks (which may include outsiders of various sorts). Additionally, and going far beyond greater *internal* fluidity, a major change in many public sectors has been the widespread shift to *outsourcing*. Thus many public sector organizations have contracted out their building management, their salary payments, their vehicle fleets, their catering, their office supplies management, and so on. Even more importantly, some of the most intensively reformist regimes have massively contracted out the purchase, operation and maintenance of their IT systems (Dunleavy et al, 2006)
3. Officials are still appointed on contracts, but the nature of these contracts becomes more variable. More and more are temporary or short term, and are tied to the achievement of specified goals (rather than being couched in terms of the discharge of given responsibilities and the correct conduct of procedures).
4. Appointments may still be made on the basis of transparent criteria (though not in the case of the increasing numbers of political advisers that populate several government systems) but the variety of criteria for the variety of roles becomes greater. All sorts of specialists may be hired on all sorts of specialist or local terms. This may well weaken the general sense of uniformity and hierarchy. Indeed, in several core NPM countries it has been thought necessary to launch second-generation reforms aimed at reviving the sense of a unified public service (e.g. Chapman and Duncan, 2007, p16).
5. Salaries also become less uniform and less predictable. Top executives may be paid spot salaries to 'reflect the market' (therefore, *inter alia*, more and more top public service executives earn considerably more than the ministers they serve). And at all levels of the hierarchy performance-related pay (PRP) means that competitive elements are injected alongside the traditional hierarchy.
6. At all levels, there is more part-time and temporary working. For many in the post-bureaucratic organization their 'post' may be only one of the things they do.
7. There is a career structure, but it may involve jumping from organization to organization, from public sector to private sector and back, in order to 'get on'. This therefore alters patterns of loyalty and the depth of experience high-flyers get of individual organizations.
8. The principle that decisions should be recorded is maintained, but the way in which such recording takes place has become more varied (and obviously is often electronic rather than being written on hard copy).
9. The individual still may not appropriate the post or its resources. On the other hand the increasing rate of movement between organizations, the increasing rate of part-time working for more than one organization, and the growing participation of for-profit companies in the delivery of public services combine to create larger possibilities for conflicts of interest (Craig, 2006, pp155-168; Saint Martin, 2005)

10. The official is subject to control and discipline, but 6, 7 and 9 above all tend to weaken the effect of these controls on a significant proportion of staff.
11. The whole organization remains rule-governed, but a) at least rhetorically, flexibility and initiative are said to be prized more than 'rule-following', b) more of the rules are likely to be 'soft' (e.g. codes of practice; guidelines) and c) the rules are likely to change more quickly (which also makes them harder to learn and internalize)

A problem here is that post-bureaucratic organizations can take many forms. In this paper, however, we will make a major simplification of this possible variety by confining our discussion to just two forms – the New Public Management (NPM) and Public Service Networks (hereafter PSNs). [In their pioneering collection Heckscher and Donnellon mention that they almost called their model of post bureaucracy the 'network organization' (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994, p10)]. The justification for this simplifying move is that we cannot here analyse all the possible varieties, but these two appear to be easily the most discussed and adopted successors to traditional bureaucracy.

2.4 *NPM*.

Even in its English mothertongue, there have been considerable definitional disputes and ambiguities about the NPM. 'There is now a substantial branch industry in defining how NPM should be conceptualised and how NPM has changed' (Dunleavy et al, 2006, p96; see also Hood and Peters, 2004). To survey the range of this academic industriousness would be an unduly space-consuming process, so I will instead simply refer to one of the best recent discussions – that of Dunleavy et al (2006, pp96-105) and to my own earlier and simpler discussion (Pollitt, 2003, chapter 2). Taking these together, the working conceptualization will be that the NPM is a two level phenomenon: at the higher level it is a general theory or doctrine that the public sector can be improved by the importation of business concepts, techniques and values, while at the more mundane level it is a bundle of specific concepts and practices, including:

- Greater emphasis on 'performance', especially through the setting of goals and the measurement of outputs. Hence less emphasis on precedent, and more attempts to link rewards to measured performance (e.g. PRP). The near future becomes more important than the past.
- A preference for lean, flat, small, specialized (disaggregated) organizational forms over large, multi-functional forms
- A widespread substitution of contracts for hierarchical relations as the principal co-ordinating device
- A widespread injection of market-type mechanisms (MTMs) including competitive tendering, public sector league tables and performance-related pay (PRP).
- An emphasis on treating service users as 'customers' and on the application of generic quality improvement techniques such as TQM

Dunleavy et al have usefully summarized this as 'disaggregation + competition + incentivization' (Dunleavy et al, 2006).

This means, incidentally, that, at least for present purposes, NPM is NOT certain other things which are occasionally thrown into its portmanteau. Thus, for example, in my terms, it is *not* partnerships, or networked governance, or joined-up government. All these fall within the concept of a Public Service Network (PSN), which is discussed in the next paragraph. The objections to including PSNs within NPM are twofold. First, some of these ideas originally emerged in key jurisdictions precisely as a reaction *against* the excesses of NPM. Second, if we put all these dissimilar things into the same conceptual bag we steadily diminish our scope for making important distinctions and for noticing alternative agendas and change. If NPM means almost everything then it means almost nothing.

2.5 *Public Service Networks (PSNs).*

Here the central idea is that more and more policies and programmes are not (and cannot) be run from within single organizations. Instead they are evolved and delivered by more than one organization, linked in networks or partnerships. ‘Horizontal networks replace hierarchies’ (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004, p3). Alternatively, in the words of one of the leading US network scholars, networks are: ‘The process of facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organization’ (Agranoff, 2007, p3). The resulting ensemble - or process - lacks one of the defining characteristics of a bureaucratic hierarchy – the ability of a central authority to compel performance (Meier and Hill, 2005, p61). It consists of set of nodes, with inter-relationships, in which resources and information are exchanged. Its members are mutually interdependent (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). In its wider manifestations such networks qualify as examples of ‘governance’ (Frederickson, 2005). Networks are certainly not new, but most network theorists claim or imply that they have become more numerous and more prominent since the 1970s.

A huge literature has swiftly arisen around networks (for an authoritative review see Klijn, 2005, for a more jaundiced assessment, Pollitt, 2003b, pp52-82; for an overview of networks in public management, Agranoff, 2007; or a collection of contrasting perspectives, Salminen, 2003). Networks can be large or small, they can consist of similar organizations (networks of primary schools) or very different ones (urban re-development networks embracing local authorities, citizen groups, non-profits and profit-oriented development companies). They can be quite formal (with closely defined membership and procedures) or highly informal (with members coming and going and behavioural norms shifting rapidly over time). There are academic controversies over definitions of networks (Börzel, 1998); about whether networks can be ‘managed’ at all; about whether they are more or less ‘democratic’ and ‘accountable’ than conventional hierarchical arrangements: about the conditions under which they become more (or less) flexible and effective than conventional bureaucracies, and about other issues. Many commentators have noted that, far from standing in some sort of pure distinction from, or opposition to, hierarchies or markets, networks frequently embody elements of both (e.g. Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Newman, 2003). Therefore it very difficult to generalize about them, and to some extent their strongest definitional characteristic is what they are not – monocratic hierarchical bureaucracies. Put more positively, they are ‘self-

organizing' rather than 'commanded' (Rhodes, 1997) although, as soon as one has written that, one has to acknowledge that the self-organizing is not some natural, spontaneous process but frequently requires a strong push (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). Certainly, many collaborative ventures, whilst they may have originated in a spontaneous coming-together, require strenuous efforts to keep them functioning (Huxham and Vangen, 2004).

2.6 *Organizational memories*

Here we refer to the organization theory and more recent knowledge management literatures, and conceptualize organizational memories as consisting of a range of 'storage' locations (see, e.g. Agranoff, 2007, pp125-129; Stewart, 2001; Walsh and Ungson, 1991; Van den Broeck, 1994; Van der Bent, 1999). Principal among these are:

- The experience and knowledge of the existing staff: what is 'in their heads'
- The technical systems, including electronic databases and various kinds of paper records
- The management system. Organizational routines and standard operating procedures commonly build in knowledge acquired from previous operating experiences
- The norms and values of the organizational culture. These can function as a sort of memory – certainly as an element of continuity: "this is the way we do things around here".

Thus any change in one or more of these locations could (only could) pose the threat of memory loss.

3. Mechanisms of memory loss, and their relation to post-bureaucratic reforms

There are a number of mechanisms, each of which can act with greater or lesser force. The following are not an exhaustive list, but will suffice to illustrate the kinds of processes which are at work. In each case we will briefly examine the way the mechanism operates, distinguishing where necessary between NPM regimes and PSNs.

3.1 Repeated organizational re-structuring, leading to a higher proportion of relatively 'new' organizations, which rapidly lose touch with both their predecessors' records and personnel.

Restructuring can affect all the four locations of organizational memory. It can result in staff being moved or made redundant. It is highly likely to result in changes in management systems, and, possibly, technical systems also. Change in the organizational culture may be an explicit aim of the reorganization, or an unintended by-product. Repeated restructurings are characteristic of the most intensive NPM regimes (Greer and Jarman, 2007; Moran, 2003; Pollitt, 2008a). In the UK, for example, there have been recent comments by senior insiders about the disruptive effect of rapid personnel changes in the Home Office, education and health care (respectively, BBC, 2007; Wolf, 2004 and Ham, 2007). Here is one description of British policymaking early in the 21st century:

‘Policies that were tried and trashed a while back resurface, gleaming and newly hatched. Yet not only the ministers but the civil servants are completely unaware of this fact. Many civil service departments have no institutional memory. Those responsible for turning ideas into detailed policies are often young and new to their area. Indeed, if they do not move fast they start to worry. Rapid changes in responsibilities and ministries are the key to a successful career. Moreover, their predecessors leave nothing behind them from which they can learn.’ (Wolf, 2004, p13)

In a different way, PSNs also undermine the idea of a ‘central memory’, unless, that is, all the parties can agree to set one up. Often they don’t – they have more important things on their minds when drawing up initial partnership agreements than who is going to keep the records (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). And network players may never even think to ask the question of who is supposed to be the memory keeper. So records evolve in a fragmented way, and some may be effectively lost once particular actors leave the partnership or network (which in many cases they do with high frequency – Kouwenhoven, 1993; Huxham and Vangen, 2000, 2004). Even if good records are kept, standardization may be far more difficult to achieve than in more monolithic organizations. This, in turn, may have implications for equity. Agreement on which methods yield reliable knowledge - on what the ‘scientific facts’ actually are – frequently proves elusive in networks, where there is no central authority to pronounce on what information is to be accepted and what not (for vivid examples see, e.g. Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). It should be added that, although contemporary ICTs may hold out the possibility that actors in a network can share information more easily than ever before, this potential often goes unrealized. Information exchange is frequently a politically sensitive issue, and technological possibilities may remain unexploited for long periods. One example was the development of a Dutch national academic library catalogue. Early initiatives were launched in the late 1960s, but the project was not realized until the late 1990s. While the difficulties and delays were sometimes said to be technological a more persuasive interpretation is that the project threatened something at the heart of the librarians’ profession – cataloguing practices (Homburg, 2007)

3.2 The decline of the bureaucratic ‘career’.

The fragmentation of careers, so that staff move around faster between posts, organizations and even sectors, clearly threatens the first component of organizational memory. Of course, it may also have benefits, in the shape of wider knowledge of alternative methods of organizing, different organizational cultures, and so on. Thus a number of analyses cite ‘the frequent rotation of managers’ as a plus factor for organizational learning (Osborne and Brown, 2005, p41). Much depends on how much local contextual and technical knowledge managers need, and on the frequency of rotation. The higher the importance of ‘local lore’ and the shorter the intervals between rotations, the more dangerous the situation becomes. Even where the benefits of changing personnel are held to outweigh the losses of ‘local knowledge’, those losses are nonetheless real. The diminishing proportion of an organization’s staff who are ‘there for life’ may well also begin to influence its culture.

In intensive NPM jurisdictions this acceleration and fragmentation has happened both near the summits of ministries and agencies (where top managers may come and go in short cycles) and at the lower levels (where temporary staff or agency-hired staff are increasingly seen as the cheap and flexible option). ‘Downsizing’ through early retirement is another contributor. As one senior Canadian civil servant put it “Some of the grey matter of the public service has disappeared” (Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1998). Similarly, a senior manager in a UK Next Steps executive agency described the process of budgeting as follows:

‘Each year we have to argue the same case with the Department as to why we have this money. There is no chance of a learning curve with the Department because they keep changing the staff’ (quoted in Hogwood et al, 1998, p19)

Several further examples of rapid change of senior personnel were cited in 3.1 above.

If we now turn to PSNs, the evolutionary and voluntary aspects of networks are, in principle, great strengths. They permit adaptation to emerging pressures and opportunities. However, the downside is often that individual members experience fluctuating levels of commitment and involvement over time (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; 2004). Indeed, it is not uncommon for there to be no clear picture of exactly who is and who is not a ‘member’ at a given moment, and it is certainly very common for different network members to have sharply differing time perspectives, many of them not at all ‘career-like’.

The specific network form that is a partnership is frequently expressly time-limited. There is some form of contract or agreement, with a beginning and an end. So for employees the situation is very different from that in a department of state, where the presumption usually is that this is an organization with a long past and an unlimited future. Some studies have shown that contractors take advantage of the time-limited nature of their relationship by ‘loss leading’: providing good quality services at the beginning of the contract and then progressively reducing effort as the end approaches. Equally, individual employees may well gauge their inputs and commitment (and record-keeping) according to the stage reached in the life cycle of the partnership.

3.3 The popularity of ideas of radical, unceasing change, as a badge of managerial or political virility

For many years now airport bookshops have bulged with popular management texts promising ‘breakthroughs’, ‘transformations’, ‘good to great’ and so on. One of the central images in this still-expanding library is that of the relentlessly innovatory CEO, who seizes every opportunity to thrust the company into the future. In core NPM countries (but much less so elsewhere) we now have strong public sector echoes of this private sector literature. Both politicians and senior public officials deliver speeches, reports and books testifying to the need for unceasing change, and for a focus on future opportunities rather than past traditions or achievements (see, for three different expressions of this general sense of urgency/impatience, Abramson et al, 2006; Barber, 2007; Prime Minister and Minister for the Cabinet, 1999). The general picture put

forward is that ‘Public sector organizations are now under ever-increasing pressure for more profound changes...’ (Abramson et al, 2006, p7). Perhaps the most radical statement of the irrelevance of the past comes from the founding fathers of business process re-engineering (a technique widely adopted in the public sectors of the ‘core NPM’ countries):

‘Re-engineering is about beginning again with a clean sheet of paper. It is about rejecting the conventional wisdom and received assumptions of the past...How people and companies did things yesterday doesn’t matter to the business re-engineer’ (Hammer and Champy, 1995, p2)

It is very easy to drift from a (perfectly justifiable) focus on future possibilities to a (dangerous and unjustifiable) enmity or contempt for the past. The past becomes no more than a source of constraint, ‘old-fashioned’ practices and organizations, conservative cultures and so on (Pollitt, 2008b; chapter 1). The recent testimony of the Head of Prime Minister Blair’s Public Service Delivery Unit models this attitude:

‘Most of all, there is the danger of underestimating the extraordinary deadweight force of institutional inertia’ (Barber, 2007, p72)

‘Senior civil servants...generally recognized the need for change, but found it hard to bring it about – the deadweight of the culture held them back’ (ibid., pp124-125)

‘Bold, sustained leadership is a pre-requisite for transformation; professions left to themselves rarely advocate more than incremental change...’ (ibid. p144)

And so on. There is, from such a perspective, little respect for traditional bureaucratic attention to precedent, caution or balance. Instead, one seeks lessons from American change management textbooks (enthusiastically cited by Barber) and from last month’s performance indicator data – not from any sources further into the past, and not from the accumulated experience of the professionals who are actually delivering many of the public services (because they are seen as being trapped in the traditional culture). At the extreme one may even embrace the preference of management guru Tom Peters for ‘thriving on chaos’ – managing by deliberately encouraging constant change and movement (Peters, 1988).

The link between doctrines of permanent managerial revolution and PSNs is significantly less strong than the link with NPM. Nevertheless, there is *some* connection.

Theoretically, Heckscher and Donnellon claim that interactive networks are far better suited to continuous improvement than bureaucracies (1994, p44). They are more responsive to the constantly-shifting environment (ibid., p51). Thus one would expect a high rate of change in open, interactive PSNs. In the action research of Huxham and Vangen (2000; 2004) this expectation is amply fulfilled. Network agendas, memberships and domains are constantly shifting. Similarly, in a review of more than a dozen US public sector networks Agranoff notes that:

‘The challenge of KM [Knowledge Management] within networks is compounded by the constant intergovernmental changes of the past half-century, shifting policies and actions of state governments, and changes in such policy areas as economic development, environmental protection and developmental disabilities.

As polices, programs and venues shift, so do the KM demands...’ (Agranoff, 2007, p129)

Meanwhile Skelcher et al (2005) conclude that partnership-type organizations privilege future delivery of goals over traditional due processes. To put it starkly, ‘networks don’t need memories because they are future oriented’ (Skelcher, 2007).

Continuous, radical change, in so far as it is actually realized, will impact on all four of the storage locations for organizational memory. Most obviously, perhaps, it will re-shape the organizational culture and repeatedly adjust the management systems.

3.4 *The wider cultural trend towards the compression of time for high level decision-makers*

In his book cited in the previous section, the Head of Mr Blair’s Delivery Unit proudly recorded that he regularly worked 15 hour days. This is not unusual among senior officials, indeed to be working long hours has become a badge of importance, and not to be doing so is faintly suspect. A Dutch culture scholar has labeled this state of affairs ‘time compression’:

‘This sense of the word includes the political use of pressure, the strategic application of ‘haste’, the delegation of time-consuming tasks to others (who are supposed to “have” more time), and a perceived understanding of what people may perform within time frames – that is, the status attached to ‘haste’ and ‘being busy’ (Sabelis, 2002, p91)

From her interviews with a range of Dutch top executives (from both public and private sectors) Sabelis connects the growing phenomenon of time compression with ‘leaving things aside or out’ – coping with impossible workloads by suppressing a variety of normal practices and states of mind in order to focus on the ‘headlines’. She finds that this high selectivity affects memory as well. ‘It seems that remembering is a time-consuming activity and not appreciated, or maybe not functional’ (Sabelis, 2002, p97). Certainly the notion of a ‘seasoned judgement’, well-marinated in the past, does not appear to be part of this compressed world. In her book Time: the modern and postmodern experience Nowotny (1994) sets all this within a much broader canvas. She tells a historical story of changing cultural constructions of time. In this tale recent developments have led to an ‘extended present’ characterized by a process through which the present eats up much of the future and some of the past (see also Elias, 1992). The future as a loosely-defined space in which ‘progress’ would occur and utopias could be constructed has, according to her, been partly replaced by a sense of a future full of problems – problems which have to be controlled by planning for them *now* (hence the ‘extended present’). These problems include global warming, new epidemics, the long term management of ever-growing quantities of toxic wastes, changing demographics and their negative impacts on the welfare state – and so on.

Modern ICTs have played and continue to play a central role in changing perceptions of time, particularly in inducing a sense of simultaneity – of everything being connected or connectable in the present moment – a sense which progressively undermines the distinctiveness of local times, seasonal cycles and other protected or sacred concepts of

time. Further, the time-is-money equation of capitalism now demands continuous innovation, continuous consumption and continuous destruction/disposal of ‘obsolescent’ goods and services – and ideas (Nowotny, 1994, pp11, 73). This is, in fact, the same world of ceaselessly transforming and innovative organizations that we have noted in the management literature cited earlier. Yet alongside this market-shaped version of time there continue to co-exist a number of other ‘times’, including an increasingly popular notion of ‘personal’ or ‘proper’ or ‘family’ time, during which we can, as individuals, ‘really be ourselves’ (ibid., pp36-37). A political discourse is growing in which people claim to have a right to such ‘quality time’ – a proposition that would have made little sense in former historical periods, when ‘individual’ or ‘personal’ time scarcely existed as a separate category from the collective time of the family or community. The tension between Sabelis’s time compression and Nowotny’s ‘personal time’ is obvious.

Nowotny and Sabelis are both centrally concerned with organizational cultures. It is culture as storehouse for organizational norms and values which is most obviously affected by time compression and the growth of the ‘extended present’. Beyond that, however, such changes are likely to have knock-on effects on management systems and staff turnover – thus influencing two of the other locations for organizational memory.

If the interpretations of Sabelis and Nowotny are accurate one might expect time compression to influence both the NPM and the PSN form. Both are carried along by the wider tides of cultural and economic change. Both must meet the current demands for innovation and 24/7 availability.

3.5 *Methods and mechanisms.*

A point of some importance is the difficulty of finding research methods to detect the foregoing mechanisms in operation. Even if all these mechanisms are credible, they are by no means all easily or equally visible. The first (restructuring) and second (fragmentation of careers) are both tolerably accessible to standard social science techniques of discovery and measurement. The third (the popularity of ideas of radical change) can also be charted, by literature surveys, documentary and rhetorical analysis. The fourth is quite elusive, although one can tap the presence of it through interviews or rhetorical analysis.

4. Illustrative cases

4.1 The UK *National Health Service* (NHS) and, within that, the UK Department of Health, offers a clear, large scale example of several of the mechanisms identified above. After its creation in 1948 the UK National Health Service (Western Europe’s largest organization, with more than one million employees) survived for 26 years before undergoing its first major re-organization (1974). Further significant re-organizations followed in 1982 and 1984-6 but change intensified after Mrs Thatcher’s Working for patients white paper of 1989. This introduced the idea of an internal market with hospitals (‘providers’) competing to sell their services to District Health Authorities (‘purchasers’). Most of the hospitals became trusts, with their own boards and budgets.

At the same time the 14 Regional Health Authorities were replaced by 8 Regional offices. In 2001 these 8 were themselves replaced by 4 Regional Directorates of Health and Social Care, only to be replaced two years later by 28 Strategic Health Authorities. In 2006 these 28 were reduced to 10. Meanwhile, between 1997 and 2006 the Department of Health itself underwent three major re-organizations. By 2006 it had become what some regarded as a prototype for the future evolution of Whitehall departments – a stripped-down managerial core staffed at the top largely by managers and consultants rather than civil servants (Greer and Jarman, 2007). In May 2006 the occupants of 27 of the top 32 posts had been there for less than 5 years, and, in 17 cases, less than 3 years.

Even as early as 1998 the official NHS historian was moved to observe that:

‘the time intervals between structural reforms have progressively diminished to the point that the NHS risks becoming caught up in a vortex of permanent upheaval’ (Webster, 1998)

The vortex was not confined to the strategic and regional levels in the NHS hierarchy. Among the providers there was a continuing process of merger and consolidation over from the mid 1990s onwards (Fulop et al, 2005). Currently this system is being thoroughly re-organized once more by the rolling out of ex-Prime Minister Blair’s favoured concept of ‘Foundation Trusts’. In parallel, serial re-organizations have transformed the purchaser side of the internal market. Mrs Thatcher’s Fundholding General Practices had travelled through several rule changes before being re-formed, under New Labour, into Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), replacing the former District Health Authorities as the principal purchasers. However, constant worries about whether PCTs were properly sized, co-ordinated and equipped led to equally constant re-organizations – for example a reduction from 303 to 152 Primary Care Trusts in October 2006.

Another dimension to the restructuring was the creation of an overseeing layer of regulators. To begin with, the Labour government inherited an elaborate system of government-determined performance indicators, which had been under continuous development since 1983. This underwent several further rounds of improvement and produced a system where any citizen with internet access could check the performance indicator scores for all the hospitals in the NHS. The government introduced an aggregating system of stars, where three stars denoted a hospital of high across-the-board quality and no stars could mean the termination of the chief executive’s contract. That certainly got managerial and media attention. The search for quality and cost-effectiveness also bred a bewildering series of special bodies at national level. In 1999 the government set up the powerful National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Commission for Health Improvement. NICE was given authority to approve particular treatments as cost-effective, support particular clinical guidelines and approve models of clinical audit that would then become mandatory. CHI would conduct rolling reviews of the management of individual hospitals. In 2001 NICE and CHI were followed by the National Patient Safety Agency, then (2002) the National Clinical Assessment Authority, the (2003) the National Care Standards Commission and (2004) the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health. Many of these were abolished in 2004 in favour of a new ‘super regulator’, the Healthcare Commission. In 2005 it was

announced that the Healthcare Commission was itself to merge with the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

Given all this, it may have been something of an understatement when, in a presentation to the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in the Autumn of 2007, a leading health policy adviser chose as the first two of his seven key lessons 'Avoid structural change' and 'ensure stability in top leadership' (Ham, 2007)

4.2 The second specimen is the case of a *Dutch telecommunications regulations agency*. In the early years of the 21st century this agency was attempting to regulate the telecommunications sector, especially the recently privatised giant, KPN. A crucial part of its work involved fighting court cases with the phone companies, trying to get its regulations - and its interpretations of its regulations - confirmed as legal, fair and practical. To do this it was obliged to hire a good deal of high-powered legal help (mainly because the public service would not pay the sorts of salaries that would be likely to attract such high-flyers to work for the agency as a career option). So these lawyers would come in, master a particular case, take it through court, and then depart at the end of their contracts – a typical example of NPM contracting for an expert service. After a while the agency realised that it was losing much of the knowledge gained during these legal proceedings. The experts were leaving at the end of their contracts, sometimes taking their files with them. They moved to other parts of the network – indeed, they might work next for the telephone companies, poaching on the useful foundation of their knowledge of gamekeeping. Belatedly, an attempt was made to create a central electronic archive and to oblige the hired lawyers to deposit all their materials in the archive before the termination of their contracts.

Gradually the agency came to realize that, although all the short-term action revolved around winning or losing particular cases, there was a crucial longer term process underlying this, and one to which their human resource management and knowledge management policies were poorly adjusted. The agency would only be respected and effective if it built up a reputation for accumulated expertise and legal effectiveness over time. But its hiring policies and contract terms virtually ensured that this did not happen. It was, for a while at least, an organisation which had fragmented and externalised its own memory. It was learning fast and forgetting almost as quickly (Zonnevjlle and Pollitt, 2002). Nor was this an isolated example. Researching the UK telecommunications regulator, OFTEL, Hall, Hood and Scott discovered something very similar - a hectic 'meetings culture' in which no-one gathered, classified and stored episodic data. Whilst this fast-moving circus had some advantages, it is also led to 'weaknesses in its institutional memory sometimes reflected in a tendency to reinvent the wheel' (Hall et al, 1999, p53).

4.3 *The management of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster*. Reorganization also played an important part in this, my third case. The disaster led to the loss of more than 1000 lives and will eventually cost somewhere between \$100 and \$200 billion worth of redevelopment expenditures. The rescue effort was slow and ineffective because federal, state and local authorities failed to co-operate promptly or effectively. Why? There were

a number of reasons, some of them directly related to recent management reforms. Thus the relevant federal agency (FEMA) had recently been downgraded within the machinery of government, had received a number of senior political appointees with few relevant skills, and had lost some of their most experienced senior staff (Sylves, 2006; Waugh, 2006). FEMA had been absorbed within the gigantic, new, post 9/11 Department of Homeland Security. Its role in preparing for natural disasters had taken a poor second place to the overwhelming political interest in planning to anticipate further terrorism. This downgrading and de-experiencing of FEMA had happened at a time when the possibility and likely effects of such a storm were familiar to the experts and, indeed, when earlier hurricanes had given many object lessons in what might be required:

‘The vulnerability of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were certainly known well before Katrina began winding her way through the Caribbean. The hazard had been described in government reports, media stories and academic studies’ (Waugh, 2006, p13)

This vulnerability was not solely a matter of weak levees, weak planning regulations and the like. It was also a matter of some highly optimistic assumptions concerning the ability of the local residents to survive for a few days before they would be reached by the emergency services. Poverty, poor health, reliance on daily trips to the supermarket and the pharmacy, and other factors meant that:

‘The expectation that federal resources would not be needed for seventy-two to ninety-six hours was disastrously wrong. The scale of the disaster and the vulnerability of the population required a much faster response’ (Waugh, 2006, p21)

Furthermore state officials were confused by and unfamiliar with recently-introduced federal procedures and structures. The understanding of the old system had been lost, but not yet replaced with a familiarity with the new.

4.4 My fourth example concerns *the rapid ‘churn’ in public service performance indicator sets, and in accounting categories*. Individual indicators are re-defined or replaced, groups of indicators and aggregate indices are constantly altered or ‘improved’. Performance measurement and accounting reforms have been very central features of NPM reforms in many countries (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004; Bouckaert and Halligan, 2007). Together they enable the construction of a vision of an integrated, highly rational process of governmental steering, in which each organization and each programme has its own targets and indicators, hierarchically tied into the more general objectives of a strategic plan. Yet when we come to look at these indicators in detail, we find they are changing all the time. Talbot (1996) was an early explorer of the PIs used by Next Steps agencies in the UK, and found that only 36% of the 1995 indicators were directly comparable with those of two years earlier. In the NHS the first national PI package of 1983 boasted about 70 indicators, but by 1985 this had been revised to 450, and in 1987 the new ‘Korner’ PI set numbered well over 2000! A study of the development of performance indicator sets in New Zealand’s central government from 1992 to 2002 comes to the conclusions that:

‘...we found that output classes and performance indicators across output classes had been extremely labile over time’ (Lonti and Gregory, 2007, p470)

Alongside - and closely linked to - the development of performance management the core NPM countries also pursued accounting reforms, usually including a shift to accrual output-based (AOBB) systems. In a review of the Australian experience of this approach Carlin found that:

‘[The] ability to learn from experience is predicated on the assumption that the budget environment – the output groups, the outputs and the performance indicators – remains sufficiently stable to facilitate the generation of reflexive performance feedback loops. However, empirical evidence paints a disturbing picture of the degree of structural volatility evident in actual applications of AOBB systems’ (Carlin, 2003, p46).

The implications of high rates of churn in PIs and in accounting categories are several. Learning from experience is, as Carlin says, inhibited. Accountability trails become harder to follow. Staff are deprived of the possibility of steadily approaching a reasonably stable set of targets and are instead tempted to spend their energies trying to predict what new set of yardsticks and categories they will face next year or the year after, and then adjust their presentations accordingly.

4.5 Organizational memories in networks. The burgeoning literature on public sector networks says remarkably little that is directly focused on their proclivities to forget or misplace information, fail to record relevant information in the first place, or gather information at one node but refuse or neglect to share it with other network actors who need it. The literature says much more about knowledge management and network learning (e.g. Agranoff, 2007, chapter 7; Choi and Heinrich, 2006; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004, chapter 8) but these discussions do not deal directly with record-keeping, archiving or the standardization of categories and procedures, without which data-pooling can be a hazardous procedure. Yet ‘learning’ is not enough: it is the net balance between learning and memory loss that determines the cognitive capacity of organizations. In this paper, therefore, we are obliged to weave a patchwork cloth, intertwining various insights and findings which pertain to network memory even though they were generated while the researcher’s principal attention was elsewhere.

Provan and Brinton Milward are among the best-known American network scholars. In a series of field studies they have emphasized the value of stability to health and human service networks, while, in contrast, they find that repeated rounds of for-profit contracting seem to lead to low investment in the network infrastructure. Thus, for example, ‘In a mental health system it takes time and effort to develop network-wide management systems to track the flow of clients and funding’ (Provan et al, 2006, p185). A somewhat similar conclusion is reached in Huxham and Vangen’s research into UK collaborative partnerships working on social issues. They stress the need for patient nurturing over time (Huxham and Vangen, 2000, p800). Their data includes numerous examples of rapidly changing memberships, structures and agendas, leading to a degree of confusion among participants on all these issues. Clearly, this is an unfavourable climate for good record-keeping. Furthermore, ‘If members are unclear about the structure of the collaboration, they cannot be clear where the accountabilities lie’ (ibid., p800). Agranoff addresses the issue of knowledge management more directly and

extensively. On the positive side, he points out that many participants in the 14 networks comprising his study stated that joining the network had raised their awareness of new databases and information sources (2007, p140). On the downside, however, he notes that:

‘Very little effort is made...to codify or add to tacit knowledge by organizing it in a formal way...different kinds of around-the-table discussions loom large but are rarely recorded’ (ibid., pp140-141)

More generally, Agranoff acknowledges that many aspects of knowledge management in networks were not captured by his research methods. Whilst generally optimistic about networks as ‘knowledge management communities’ he makes hardly any direct observations about their capacities to record their own actions, and his discussion of sharing databases does not assess how far these nominally available databases are actually used.

4.6 *Cases and mechanisms*

Many connections between the above cases and the mechanisms outlined in section 3 will already have become apparent. Nevertheless, it may be useful very briefly to summarize how the four mechanisms identified in section 3 are embodied in the cases.

The NHS story is one of incessant restructuring at every level – ministry, NHS trusts and regulatory agencies. Within that there is evidence of rapid movement of senior staff and the fragmentation – or at the very least segmentation – of careers. This applies both at the level of trusts and at the top of the ministry. There was also, at least in some quarters, a doctrinal commitment to continuous radical, management-led change. For example, two big NHS acute hospitals were the subjects of large and expensive re-engineering programmes, both of which generated huge organizational upheavals but neither of which achieved anything like their original transformatory objectives (Packwood et al, 1998; McNulty and Ferlie 2002). The case of the Dutch and British telecommunications regulators also embodies rapid staff movements and resulting loss of know-how. In addition, both organizations exhibited symptoms of time compression – hectic meetings, inadequate records, rush, rush, rush. The Hurricane Katrina case showed how the recent restructuring and the loss of experienced FEMA personnel could handicap a network of organizations when plans for emergencies were supposed to be put into action. The Australian, British and New Zealand evidence of continuous change in performance indicator sets and accounting categories represents volatility in technical and management systems, and thus a particular type of degradation of continuity and accountability. The material on network memories is fragmentary, but begins to suggest that certain types of network may be more prone to memory failure than others. Where membership changes rapidly and networks are held together by short term contracts both written records and accumulated experience are at risk. Where, by contrast, networks gain a measure of stability over time, and where mutual trust is able to grow, greater investment in informational infrastructures is likely, and, equally important, there will be a higher propensity to share the information possessed by any one actor. One might say that only ‘networks with careers’ are likely to develop strong collective memories.

5. Consequences

The second hypothesis with which this paper began was that: *the relative loss of memory [in post bureaucratic organizational forms] is likely to have deleterious consequences for the formation and implementation of public policies and programmes.* The cases examined above have already yielded some clear examples of negative consequences. Here we can briefly summarize them in a more systematic way.

The mechanisms of memory loss identified in section 3 lead to at least five types of negative consequence:

1. Past precedents, agreements and commitments may actually constrain what can be done now. An increasingly imperfect knowledge of the past of one's own organization therefore increases the danger of acting unrealistically, impetuously or even illegally.
2. Past experience may contain elements which are relevant to and informative about proposed new policies or programmes. Suitably contextualized, the past can function as a storehouse of useful evidence, 'tips' and warnings. 'Limiting discussion to the very recent past and neglecting the major historical traditions of thought in public management can narrow debate and criticism by implying that there is "no alternative" to whatever modernity is held to mean' (Hood, 1998; pp16-17). Decreased access to and/or attention to the past thus progressively diminishes the probability of learning from experience. Wheels will be re-invented, including the square one that was produced in the last-but-one policy initiative, but whose dysfunctionality has now been forgotten.
3. There may be elements in the *status quo* which are valuable, but fragile. Without a firm and detailed knowledge of the history and culture of an organization it is easier for new policies and programmes unintentionally to put these 'sleeping beauties' at risk.
4. Since policymakers frequently use historical analogies anyway, a good knowledge of the past can help as a corrective to the deployment of grossly over-simplified or stereotypical views of the past (Neustadt and May, 1986; Pollitt, 2008b, chapter 7). Thus Russian leaders who invoke the symbol of Stalingrad could well be reminded that during that battle thousands of their troops were executed by their own side, and Americans politicians who idolize the 'frontier spirit' could have it pointed out to them that the frontier was frequently a place of squalor, racism, unlawful violence and disease.
5. Last, but not least, diminished organizational memories diminish the scope and depth of democratic accountability. 'All democratic accountability presupposes a lasting organizational framework for ensuring that the fulfillment of today's promises can be controlled in the future and that politicians can be elected away' (Ekengren, 2002, p158).

Just as the mechanisms are of varying visibility (3.5) so (perhaps even more so) are the consequences. The first consequence is often difficult to detect because to do so, first, an organization has to be caught making the mistake and then, second, it has to admit that the reason is a lack of knowledge about its own past. This is not an everyday occurrence:

more usually organizations will do their best to obscure the fact that a culpable mistake has been made and, then, when obliged to admit to one, will advance the least damaging set of plausible reasons why it happened. Only occasionally, usually in histories or public inquiries, do we get a sufficient glimpse of the inner workings to see that a consequence of the first type has occurred. Thus, in Allison and Zelikow's classic study of the Cuban missile crisis, we discover that, while President Kennedy was astute enough explicitly to countermand the delegated authority of local commanders to fire nuclear-tipped Jupiter missiles aimed at the Soviet Union and based in Turkey and Italy, no-one apparently remembered that there were also quick reaction, nuclear-armed US aircraft in the European theatre that were subject to the same local autonomy (Allison and Zelikow, 1999, pp197-201).

There is also a particular problem with the second type of consequence (although the same difficulty may afflict, in varying degrees, some of the others too). It is that one is trying to detect and then estimate the consequences of an absence rather than a presence. To reconstruct what decision makers *might* have learned, if they had looked back, and then to assess what effects that *might* have had on the resulting decisions is a radically counterfactual exercise. Yet common sense and the occasional vivid anecdote tell us that failing to learn from available experience is both a commonplace and sometimes a highly consequential event.

Underlying these various problems sits a more pervasive and fundamental feature of the topic under scrutiny. Forgetting/losing records is almost always an *unintentional* process. The researcher can seldom ask people about it directly, because usually they don't know that they or their organizations have done it. This opens up the possibility that there is a great deal more of it going on than we customarily allow for.

Our five cases as yet furnish only patchy evidence of the above consequences. [This is very obviously an area where 'further research is needed'.] In the NHS case the experience of the Conservative internal market, 1989-97 might have suggested to the later New Labour government that serial restructuring was likely to be counter-productive, at least in the short term. Berridge (2007) also suggests that the New Labour advocates of a more mixed, public/private system could have looked back at what had happened to the mixed system which had existed during the 1920s and '30s (Berridge, 2007). Where the telecommunications regulators were concerned there is not more than the suggestion that their regulatory fortunes *vis à vis* the telecom corporations might have been improved if they had been able to keep better track of their own decisionmaking. In the Katrina case there appears to be distressing evidence of an unco-ordinated response in which officials did not know well enough what the relevant procedures were supposed to be, and could not communicate effectively with other organizational actors in the network. Finally the 'churn' of performance indicators and accounting categories clearly impacts on accountability. It means that it becomes steadily more difficult to trace the trajectory of performance of individual organizations – and sets of organizations – over time. Synchronic information may improve, but diachronic information deteriorates as the churn rate increases. It is a far cry from the old days of input budgeting, where categories altered slowly, and the procedures for altering them were quite heavy. This

case is reinforced by both Huxham and Vangen's work on collaborative ventures and Skelcher et al's research into collaborative forms of governance. Skelcher et al conclude that members of the studied partnerships quite quickly lose their previous notions of the need for transparency and public accessibility (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Skelcher et al, 2005).

Caveats and limitations

This paper has a number of important limitations. The first – to repeat an earlier point – is that the arguments are only intended to be applied to jurisdictions that have undergone intensive, prolonged shifts from 'traditional bureaucracies' towards post bureaucratic organizational forms. The second is that we have yet empirically to test the assumption that traditional bureaucracies do actually succeed in maintaining strong and reasonably accurate central record systems. Third – more broadly - the empirical evidence – though widespread and occasionally vivid – is not yet systematic. Governments themselves seldom measure the kinds of processes identified here as memory-damaging, and academic researchers have not paid frequent attention to them either. A fourth, and serious, limitation is that this exercise has been a preliminary one, setting up concepts, identifying mechanisms and looking for evidence to support the hypotheses. One next step would be to look equally hard for evidence that might *disconfirm* these hypotheses – and for good rival hypotheses that would counter the central proposition of failing organizational memories in a post-bureaucratic world. For example, one might be that the rapid spread of advanced IT has enabled organizations better to store and disseminate information about past performance. However, the investigation of such a rival hypothesis should focus on actual practice rather than just technological potential. Even a wonderful historical database will not function as such if a) there are no incentives for staff to use it and/or b) access is fragmented (or even forgotten about) due to repeated restructurings of the parent organization(s).

Conclusions

A *prima facie* case has been made for the proposition that the advent of post-bureaucratic organizational forms has tended to reduce both the potential and the actual influence of organizational memories. On the one hand, modern ICTs permit the storage and dissemination of vast amounts of data. On the other, however, the 'vortex' of restructuring and fragmentation, combined with the dominance of doctrines of ceaseless change and innovation, tend to produce compressed decision-making processes which are more careless of history and experience than was the norm under traditional bureaucracy. So the *potential* of contemporary ICTs is not reflected in the actual *practice* of policymaking and management. On the contrary, in the countries which have been at the forefront of NPM and PSNs, we have seen important cases of organizational amnesia and 'impatient', short-term and ahistorical policymaking.

The consequences of this trend are, admittedly, hard to measure and discern (and furthermore the academic community has not yet made much effort to do so). Nevertheless, a plausible case can be made that such consequences are both significant

and unwanted. For all their hypothesized benefits in terms of flexibility, post bureaucratic public sector organizations may well make more avoidable mistakes, unintentionally damage existing strengths, pursue false and glib historical analogies and muddy the trail of public accountability. Even if only some of these proposition turn out to be accurate, and then only occasionally, this still appears to be a subject deserving greater attention than hitherto.

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