

FABRICATION, FASHION, FORGETFULNESS, FUZZINESS: FACTORS IN DEBATES ABOUT ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANISATION

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Preamble

An advantage of coming late into this panel is that I have had the opportunity to read most of its other papers as I write my own. This has shown me where I might have overlapped to some degree, and also – I say this particularly in relation to Christopher Pollitt's paper – saved me from trying to cover some matters far less expertly than others have done.

As I contemplated the matching of public sector reform and organisational amnesia in the panel title, I found myself in difficulty trying to balance what I saw as two related but still separate sets of issues, one probably of more immediate concern than the other, but the other very important for the status of longer-term understandings. The panel title obviously draws on the frequently heard allegation that the types of reform we have experienced in the recent period contribute to organisational amnesia. Pollitt wants to test that allegation, and so it should be tested. But I guess I have been sufficiently convinced that there is much substance to it. And my two issues arise from that acceptance:

- first, how actors within government systems (especially leading politicians and officials) are affected by the reform-induced amnesia, so that our governance is the poorer; and
- second, how scholarly understandings of developments and trends in administrative organisation may be compromised by too-ready acceptance of reformist claims, and perhaps also by too-little careful attention to administrative history.

I confess that, in developing the paper, I have not been able to sort out these issues properly, and I welcome feedback that will help me overcome this dilemma and, of course, draw my attention to other problems with the paper.

In the first section I comment on the matter of language and its effects on understandings about administrative organisation.¹ The second section looks at views about fads, fashions and cycles and their effects. There are factors under both these heads, I suggest, that significantly obstruct capacity to remember accurately information about past arrangements that might be useful in shaping new arrangements – and this presents a serious challenge for the sub-discipline of administrative history. The third section then considers the importance of good archival and record systems, to be seen as investments in good memory. I thought initially that I would need also to consider seriously the many ways in which reform practice contributes to memory deficit, but I note that Pollitt's paper does that very effectively, so I skate over it lightly. I conclude by referring to some

tensions that have occurred in the recent period within developing 'agencification theory', and speculate on the historical and semantic factors that have operated to enhance (or cloud, depending on where you stand within the debates) understandings in that area. In parts, the paper will necessarily have an Australian flavour.

Language and its effects: From George Orwell to NPM

To illustrate the matter of language and its effects, I go back to George Orwell and his famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-four*. I then connect with the real-life administrative changes that came to be understood as the NPM transformation. For present purposes *Nineteen Eighty-four* was essentially a study in semantic fabrication; in NPM I suggest that fabrication, fashion and forgetfulness are all involved, with fuzziness an inevitable outcome.

When Orwell first published it in 1949, *Nineteen Eighty-four* was seen almost as an exercise in science fiction. It projected the minds of people in the early Cold War period -- obviously with Stalinist Russia as an incipient real-world model -- ahead to an imaginary time when an all-powerful 'big brother' ruling elite would systematically use 'newspeak' processes like 'doublethink' and 'thoughtcrime' to subjugate the residents of their state. 'Newspeak' was Orwell's term for new language made up out of old but with distortions deliberately introduced to change meanings of words and deny the validity of old ways of thinking (Orwell 1949: esp. appendix).²

In 1991 Christopher Hood published the 'public management for all seasons?' article that has recently been described as 'probably the most oft-cited analysis of the emergence of the so-called New Public Management (NPM)' (Hood 1991; Talbot & Johnson 2007: 1). A year before that, and before I was aware of the NPM descriptor for the new paradigm that was emerging, I had been so impressed by developing distortions in the public administration language I had grown up with that I tried to show how a version of 'newspeak' was affecting until-then commonly understood meanings in the discipline. Candidates I focused on particularly (Wettenhall 1990a) were:

- the shift from 'administration' to 'management', which Robert Parker had recently described as an 'intriguing change in vocabulary' (Parker 1989: 342);
- 'department head' replacing the old 'permanent head', when all right-thinking people should have known that ministers, not officials, headed departments;
- loosely-used 'devolution' smothering the earlier and much more systematic and discriminating use of 'delegation', 'deconcentration', 'devolution' and 'decentralisation';
- 'corporatisation' restricted to government-owned companies and seeming to deny (ridiculously) that governments had ever used corporate bodies before.

At that time (in the early 1990s) it seemed that the semantic shifts were so substantial that it was like trying to change whole systems of organisational classification, as if 'invaders' from disciplines like economics or computing were determined to deny horticulturalists the right to view apples and oranges as members of the fruit family. In this passage, of course, the horticulturalists were my metaphor for the by-now old-fashioned public administrationists.³ I reckoned then that those shifts were part of a process of rebelling against old teaching styles, necessary for the marketing of a new paradigm and for conveying the message that the 'new scientists' have a superior wisdom and are better

attuned to coping with modern needs – so let's bury the older understandings! As Pollitt and Bouckaert pointed out almost a decade ago – but well into the NPM era – 'the 'very language of change – "reform", "transformation", "re-engineering", "modernization" – is suffused with assumptions about the speed, nature and value of what is being described or represented' (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000: 18). However there was a significant danger not only that wrong courses were being embarked upon but also that much useful knowledge that could have pointed towards wiser courses was being lost.

Now, you might think that it was just forgetfulness that valuable insights and experiences were no longer available to guide policy-makers when they might have been extremely useful. But it was a forgetfulness that was, at least to some degree, created by the developers and promoters of the new paradigm. Often they got rewarded as innovators, and their cause required the smothering of as much as possible of the old. I guess that is true of doctrinal innovators everywhere: as Hood and Jackson explain in *Administrative Argument*, 'administrative doctrine is a function of its credibility, not necessarily of its truth', and what makes new ideas stand or fall is 'the persuasive power with which [they] are argued'. You measure them by the degree of acceptance they win, which may or may not correlate with 'proving their claims on the basis of irrefragible evidence' (Hood & Jackson 1990: 10-11).

But of course the 'oldies' do not all fade away as conveniently as the innovators would like. There will inevitably be tensions as representatives of older traditions vie with those pushing the new paradigms: as Rod Rhodes and colleagues pointed out not so long ago, traditions change when new experiences and/or new beliefs create 'dilemmas' for those committed to old traditions, and force changes in belief systems (Bevir *et al* 2003: 9-10). A question remains, however, about the extent to which the new beliefs and the teachings based on them accurately reflect real-life situations. Maybe they reflect some but by no means all of those situations, with fuzzy understandings the inevitable result as new belief systems accord only in part with the realities they are seeking to portray.

What Hood did in his much-acclaimed 1991 article was to portray the reformist trends appearing from the late 1970s as 'a marriage of opposites', notably (1) the 'new institutional economics' based on public choice, transactions cost theory, and principal/agent theory, and (2) a 'managerialism' that wanted to import private sector behaviours and techniques into the public sector. Hood identified seven 'doctrinal components' emerging from this marriage but was at pains to point out that they weren't necessarily consistent with each other, and that they were never likely to be adopted across all favourably inclined countries as a single coherent package (Hood 1991: 4-5). Accordingly, subsequent wise analysis has regarded NPM as a tool-box from which particular tools could be drawn and applied as required in particular cases. But there has also been too much less-wise analysis that takes a 'one size fits all' approach, and expects the whole box to be taken up in every case. Indeed, this approach leads to a theoretical urging that everything in the box is good and that anything not in accordance with it is bad, outdated, and to be dismissed as unworthy of consideration. New terms are devised, older ones are thrown on the scrap heap, and newspeak is again alive and well.

But of course other factors are at work which may be thought to have a 'more natural' providence. So I move on to consider the effect of cycles in administrative thought and practice, the importance of good archival and record-keeping systems, and briefly the

often-negative effects of budget squeezes, frequent reorganisations and systemic workplace changes on the maintenance of those systems.

*Fads, fashions and cycles*⁴

It has long been understood that there are fads and fashions in thinking about administrative issues. I focus here on matters of administrative organisation, for that has been my own principal research area.

In exploring patterns of agency creation and choice of agency type, Hood (1978: 35) suggested, more than a decade before his important NPM contribution, that changes in these patterns often reflect a sequence of moods determined by 'opinion moving about (that) does not necessarily have anything to do with clear-cut differences in the actual problems or tasks faced by different agencies'. This was his 'fashions' metaphor; he also considered a 'roulette wheel' metaphor which suggested that the pattern was entirely random, with little or no consistency to be found.

This has been a rich area for metaphors: The pendulum swings which moved so many government functions from *ad hoc* boards to central departments in 19th century Britain, and then back in the opposite direction in the 20th century, were by now being seen as representing a 'tidal sequence' (Jordan 1976: 48; Hood 1978: 30; also Flinders 2004: 884).⁵ In the already-cited article, Talbot and Johnson (2007) regarded the recent substantial reversal of Britain's *'Next Steps'* policy of the early 1990s that saw the establishment of around 130 executive agencies as constituting a 'seasonal cycle' that has turned disaggregation into re-aggregation.

Caiden (1970: 33-34) noted the role of 'fad, fashion, and fantasy' in administrative reform, and saw this as probably containing a cyclical element; and, like Hood, Spann (1981: 14) noted the pendulum effect. Caiden and Spann were no doubt building on significant 1960s work by political scientists on the processes of centralisation and decentralisation -- work that recognised oscillations in the distribution of power, and pointed to the cyclical nature of administrative reform. Thus a sense of constant movement in the forms of governance was manifest in Carl Friedrich's 1963 observation that

decentralising patterns of the distribution of power (should) be considered as dynamic, rather than static, as continually evolving and oscillating between greater unity and diversity. This continual change is a matter of fact, but unless it is clearly understood and institutionally provided for, all decentralisation of power, but more especially the more rigid arrangements under federalism, are apt to become sources of conflict and tension (Friedrich 1963: 666-667).

Fesler (1964: 14) was soon indicating his agreement: he saw centralisation-decentralisation as a continuum between poles, with most systems mixed and in motion. And Macmahon (1961: viii, 17) was concerned with the question of 'the compatibility between autonomous devices and the integrative ideals of public administration' -- he made it very clear that there were both territorial and non-territorial (functional) bases for the interplay between the centre and devolved units. Scholars like Brian Smith (1967) focused on the territorial side of this equation; for others like Hanson, the context was now clearly functional, part of on-going debate about whether it was better to use ministerially headed departments or autonomous agencies for the delivery of many government services (eg Hanson 1959: ch.11; Robson 1962: 24-28; Rogan *et al* 1968).

Drawing on these sources and on some remarkable student insights, I wrote 40 years ago that:

there has always been, and always will be, rivalry between forces seeking greater standardisation, closer integration in the activities of government, on the one hand, and forces seeking greater flexibility, more independence for the various parts, on the other. Sometimes one set of forces gains the upper hand and sometimes the other, so that the real shape of the machinery of government is likely to be determined in pendulum fashion as the focus shifts back and forth between the unification pole and the diversity pole. Each pole contains within itself the seeds of counter-movement. The scattered system has its disorderliness and the standardised system its rigidity. Any final 'solution' at one extreme or the other is impossible; and no single point of compromise can be expected to win general acceptance (Wettenhall 1968a: 352-353).

I see no reason to vary that judgment today, except to add that movement will not always be consistent across whole government systems.⁶

So far I have argued that there may be an element of fabrication as new theories are developed, that the aim may in part be to remove older understandings of administrative reality, and that this all plays its part in the change process and so contributes to conceptual and semantic fuzziness.; also that fashions and cycles occur fairly naturally and in the ways indicated, and that they are likely to have similar effects. We may see good reason in a particular case either to maintain an existing arrangement or to change it in a way that accords with the needs of that case. But a new cyclical movement that has little or no interest in the needs of that particular case may confound us, and push in other directions. We may end up being confused, unwilling to accept the proposed or actual change, and still thinking and acting in terms of the old reality. Whether a new general acceptance can be achieved will depend on the strength of the rival viewpoints and their advocates, and clarity and certainty will be elusive for so long as the dialectic continues.

At the most basic level is a more objective question about the role of memory in administrative understandings. Turning away from attempts to establish new paradigms, cyclical movements and conspiracy speculations, it is clear that useful knowledge sometimes simply disappears because too often we do not rate its retention as a significant issue when we take action on other fronts.

On investing in good memory

When Theodore Schellenberg, a guru of the American archival profession, visited Australia as a Fulbright lecturer in 1954, he regaled his listeners with stories illustrating the costly results of failures to preserve important records of administrative developments, events, procedures and the like. He had recently spent three years as records officer at the US Office of Price Administration, where his task was to ensure that what happened in that field after World War I was not repeated. After the US entered that war, it had encountered many difficulties in establishing the required price control system. Then, with the end of that 'war to end all wars', it had destroyed all the relevant records. Just a generation later, in World War II, it faced the same challenge, but found that it had denied itself all the help that would have come from being able to study the successes and failures of the previous experience.⁷

That may not have been part of a deliberate effort to displace an older paradigm. But it was certainly deliberate destruction of a valuable memory bank, done out of a combination of a misestimation about the possibility of future need for those particular

records and a more general failure to appreciate the importance of preserving all records of significant happenings in the field of public administration.

Schellenberg's visit contributed positively to the process that led to the creation of the Australian National Archives service (Golder 1994: 24-26; NAA 2004). Archival services were developing similarly in all Australian states: indeed, in New South Wales and Tasmania, the states with the longest history of European settlement, these services were already well established, much used by historians, and recognised as repositories for the older records of government departments. They play a major role in the preservation of documentary materials relating to government, the economy, the national culture and society generally, and some of the best works in Australian administrative history reflect the close cooperation that has developed over the years between researchers and the archivists who maintain them.⁸

Many government departments have also developed their own libraries as repositories of materials relevant to their particular functions. Their primary purpose is to serve the information needs of policy-makers within the individual departments, but outside researchers have usually been welcome in them. It is likely, however, that they are not valued in the way the archival services are, and they are subject to the vagaries of many change processes within the bureaucracy as are the operating registries within the active, working parts of those departments. The recording of more recent events, including the treatment of particular cases in areas like welfare or pensions administration, is as necessary to ensure consistency across cases as it is to provide the basic materials for facilitating judgment when questions of accountability arise.

A few episodes and issues reflected in official reports, court proceedings and press reportage over the last few years reflect the difficulties experienced in maintaining secure and reliable departmental registry and library services.⁹ In 1998 an Australian Law Reform Commission report directed attention both to the 'parlous', 'fragmented' and 'mediocre' nature of paper record-keeping across Commonwealth offices and to the complications that came with new technologies for the electronic capture and transfer of records; and in 2002, reacting particularly to the second issue in relation to an immigration case, the High Court found, though not unanimously, that documents available electronically had the same status as hard copies. How were departmental registries and libraries and the archives service to handle all that? Also the speed at which critical issues arose and demanded decision, so frustrating any more orderly record-keeping processes, got attention in several very newsworthy cases: the ACT hospital implosion, the 'children overboard' case in the Commonwealth administration, the handling of the Rau, Solon and other notorious cases by the then Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), and others.

A good illustration of the counter-pressures that work to heighten the problems and contribute to the sense of organisational amnesia was provided when DIMA, already in bad odour because of its draconian treatment of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Solon, whom it had wrongly classified as illegal immigrants, decided in 2003 to reduce its library holdings by about 90%. The intention was to transform the library into a facility that would serve only as a provider of information that would support good management practice within the department. The then editor of the *Canberra Times* complained variously that the library belonged to the public and not just the department, that it held as a public trust the literature and records that captured half-a-century or more of Australian government activity relating to immigration, citizenship and population policies, that the disposal

reflected a professional movement within some library circles away from books and towards computers and computer information systems, that (reminiscent of Orwell) the language of the report that led to this decision was full of impenetrable 'technobabble and management-speak', and that, if it were determined to dispose of its books, DIMA should at least have found an appropriate alternative home for them (*CST 2003: Waterford 2003*).¹⁰

It is likely that several factors have been at work in determining these outcomes. Technological change certainly, with the computing revolution and the rise of emails as a quick, in many ways effective, but also eminently losable form of communication. Cost-cutting drives too, with competition always for funds to finance major core policy developments, and functions like record-keeping too often consigned to non-core status and often, indeed, contracted out to private operators with little or no understanding of the accountability requirements of government service.

Frequent reorganising also takes its toll. While a few Commonwealth portfolios have remained unchanged since the introduction of the megadepartments in 1986, many others have undergone several changes in what has often appeared to be a game of musical chairs orchestrated by prime ministers as they progress from one government to the next. Departmental titles change, branches and records groups hop from one department to another, and continuity and memory run together as frequent victims.

Of at least equal significance is the impact of workforce change. Downsizing has meant significant memory loss as tens of thousands of officers, representing a vast store of knowledge about administrative practices, have departed the public sector. The rising tide of contract rather than tenured appointments to the public service has meant that people join at all levels without the basic public service preparation that used to come with a mostly youth-recruited career service, and often do not stay long enough to acquire career service-type knowledge. The matching system of contracting out so much public sector work – not just record-keeping -- to private consultants and contractors simply adds to a changed working environment in which good memories of past practices, past successes and past failures, and the reasons for them, are lacking.

Christopher Pollitt has dealt very well with a range of such problems in his conference paper, and I have no need to say more about them. We can take some encouragement from recent statements by system-minders in Australian Commonwealth government that messages about the high political cost of records failures in recent cases are being heeded. Thus, after observing that many 'agencies' have not been making an 'appropriate level of investment' in recordkeeping, Auditor-General Ian McPhee now believes that 'good recordkeeping is increasingly being accepted as an integral part of "doing business"' (McPhee 2007: 55; also MAC 2007).¹¹

I move on to consider a variety of positions that have developed in seeking to understand the reform processes loosely covered by the term 'agencification', an item in the new vocabulary that has come with NPM. Pollitt and Bouckaert comment generally on the development of this vocabulary in their 2000 textbook (p.150), but it is in other works that their particular contributions to the debate about agencification are to be found. To some degree the positions here contradict each other, and I believe issues of organisational amnesia are involved: what has been remembered, what

forgotten, by whom, and why? Several of the contributors to this debate are present at this conference, and this provides a wonderful opportunity for this exploration.

Agencification theory as a case-in-point

The issue has both Australian and international manifestations, and I deal with the Australian first. Here the debates were mostly provoked by the case of Centrelink, and Amanda Smullen has made an important contribution to understanding the main perspectives that have developed. Though at base an Australian herself, she approached the issue from outside and from a comparative perspective, and so to an extent has also been able to connect the Australian and international debates.

As Smullen writes in her Erasmus University PhD thesis:

There has been some disagreement in Australia as to whether Centrelink constitutes a new type of organization or rather reflects the long ongoing tradition of statutory authorities and corporations in Australia. Those who emphasise its agency-like character focus on the contract-like arrangements that the organization has pursued with a number of government departments (Smullen 2007: 272, citations removed).

As I understand it, at the more general level she wanted to explore a proposition (in part taken from Pollitt 2001) that convergence has occurred more in management talk than in management practice; that stories about reform have travelled more-or-less independently of actual contexts. Also as I understand it, her research has suggested that, notwithstanding this convergence of talk, what happens in individual countries is more likely to be a consequence of national styles than of international 'templates'.

I make seven points about the Australian/Centrelink position:

- Australian public administration has a long history of using of statutory authorities as a form of devolved public agency, and was in particular a pioneer in developing the incorporated form, the 'statutory corporation', so much so that its early corporations served as something of a model when others (especially the 'mother country') were looking for a similar way of administering particular public services 'away from the centre' (Wettenhall 1990b, 1996b).
- However, Australians were usually ready to take on board the rhetorical claims of others to have pioneered new forms even though they had much in common with the existing home-grown ones.
- Exhibiting a kind of cultural cringe, justifications for a number of Australian creations drew heavily on these claims even though the actual Australian 'copies' were based at least as heavily on the country's own models and experience. This happened eg when a federal government created the Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1932, and when a Tasmanian government created the well-known Hydro-Electric Commission two years earlier. Almost two decades later, those proposing creation of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electricity Authority similarly used overseas experience to justify their organisational arrangements. The overseas referents that locals used in these cases were the BBC, the Ontario Hydro-Electric Power Commission, and the Tennessee Valley Authority, but the creating statutes reflected great continuity in the evolution of a home drafting practice that had been producing scores of other Australian statutory bodies since the 1880s.

- When NPM-style conceptions and terminology burst out of Britain and New Zealand in the 1980s, they were taken up by already-active Australian reformers. It seems that 'corporatisation' came out of New Zealand,¹² while the Thatcher government's *Next Steps* report with its proposal for executive agencies attracted plenty of notice here, as did the rush to establish such bodies in Britain. Then came the local proposal for Centrelink, the statute in preparation adopted the term 'agency' as part of its title (it had been used before in naming several Australian statutory authorities), and some Australians took it for granted that we were modelling it on the UK executive agencies. Perhaps there was some of that, but my own investigation pointed to Canadian influence (Wettenhall 2003a). It was also clearly in the long legislative tradition of Australian statutory authorities.
- Centrelink's large budget, large staff and the large number of localities in which it operated all ensured that it would attract much notice (Mulgan 2002; Rowlands 2003; Halligan 2004, 2007). And no one doubted that it had novel features, to be found especially in its extensive one-stop-shop character with service contracts to a number of commissioning departments. However, there had been earlier Australian experimentation with one-stop-shops going back at least as far as the middle-1970s inquiry exercise of the Coombs Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration.¹³
- Ministers and officials involved in building the new organisation, their speeches and papers carefully analysed in Smullen's thesis, all had a vested interest in portraying the great novelty of what they were doing. In the old Greek terms Smullen reminds us of, they were exploiting to the full *ethos* (character of speaker and the way she projects herself), *pathos* (employment of techniques of persuasion) and *logos* (logic of argument) in their efforts to communicate.
- There was a readiness in early accounts of Centrelink's establishment in 1997 to project it as an executive agency in the new tradition of Britain's *Next Steps* agencies. In any precise sense, however, there was no Australian capacity to create such agencies until the 1999 rewriting of the Commonwealth's Public Service Act (and use of that provision has been limited). That, whatever else it was, Centrelink was a statutory authority in accordance with long-standing Australian tradition did not get much notice.

The point here, of course, is that how you viewed Centrelink depended on where you had come from. Those involved in, and focusing particularly on, construction of the new arrangement were convinced that they were involved in something very new and very exciting. Others saw that it did have novel elements, but wanted also to point to the continuities with the past that they believed were being demonstrated. I was in this second camp, but on reflection now I can see that there was some degree of 'truth' on both sides of the argument. Perhaps that sort of late-stage recognition provides the best hope for reducing the confusions!

So what of the international debates? I need to say first that, in my own cultural cringing, I was much absorbed by relevant British developments when I began my own academic study of public administration in Tasmania. A lecturer recently arrived from the United Kingdom presented his Australian students with a great deal of interesting information on the UK's use of non-departmental agencies, including particularly the regulatory bodies of the earlier 20th century and the boards set up to manage the post-World War II nationalised industries. But he also challenged his students to research the comparable

Australian experience, and for this I have always been very grateful to him. This was my introduction to the field.¹⁴

So I began to understand the Australian history, but it was not long before my participation in international networks (especially the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration) connected me to the North American and developing country experience, and to Harold Seidman as a guru in the field (eg Seidman 1952, 1975). Anticipating another comment to come shortly, there was nothing in any of this to lead me to believe that the commercial functions of government were anything but central to this experience. The clear message was that non-departmental bodies were employed widely, in a great variety of countries, to discharge functions devolved from the centre ranging from managing public enterprises and public institutions like museums, art galleries, libraries, hospitals, universities and research establishments, through to regulatory activities and much more. Issues such as autonomy and control (I think the word 'steering' came later!), whether to staff within the public service or not, how to finance, how to ensure appropriate degrees of accountability, covered the whole field.¹⁵

With this background sketched, I now make five points on the international experience:

- The Ditchley Conference of 1969, which unleashed the word 'quango', led to a huge burst of Anglo-American interest in non-departmental bodies and associated accountability issues (Smith & Haigh 1971; Haigh *et al* 1975; Mackenzie 1981; Wettenhall 1981; Barker 1982).
- In Britain, around the time of the election of Thatcher, the Bowen and Pliatzky reports (1978 & 1979) documented a large number and wide range of existing non-departmental bodies. When the *Next Steps* report (Jenkins *et al* 1988) came out, it mostly (not entirely) ignored the sorts of bodies Bowen and Pliatzky had been concerned with. Pliatzky (1992: 557) thought it 'curious' that his own report was not even noted.
- For Britain the *Next Steps* report unleashed a huge movement towards the creation of executive agencies, one seen as creating a 'revolution in Whitehall' (James 2003). The large scale of this change attracted world attention, and the connection between it and the disaggregation component of NPM excited many scholars. Other countries considered copying it, OECD pushed it as something worthy of adoption almost everywhere (OECD 2002; Schick 2002), and it became a leading case in the 'policy transfer' literature. A new theory – 'agencification theory' – grew out of these associations, and it was soon proposed that the rush to follow suit constituted 'agency fever' (Pollitt *et al* 2001; see also eg Pollitt & Talbot 2004; Pollitt *et al* 2004; Christensen & Lægheid 2006).
- People with my sort of background had difficulty with this. While it was not claimed that there had been no 'disaggregated' bodies before, the essential message was that the massive increase in their number constituted a major and virtually new feature of late 20th century public management, and that the now-widespread use of such bodies raised important questions deserving of much serious study. Of course I supported that desire for serious study, but I believed that such study had been going on for generations and that it was unfortunate that much older work was being largely ignored.
- As I saw it (see Wettenhall 2005), the problem was that countries like Australia had had a large complement of such bodies since the 19th century, that Britain too had made much use of them over a long period, that the British-style executive

agency (as many of them as there were) was simply a late addition to the types of devolved body so often encountered in the world's public sectors, that the copying of it was not as widespread as was claimed, and that agencification theorists were sometimes reaching their conclusions by excluding bodies with commercial functions – whereas those bodies reflected many of the same problems and issues as the others. While Sandra van Thiel included the commercial bodies in her sensibly broad classification of quango types, she then made the very surprising assertion that quangos thus broadly defined had not received much serious research attention until the mid-1990s (van Thiel 2001: 6, 12).¹⁶

Agencificationists now have to contend with a substantial reversal of the *Next Steps* program, noted above as an example of cyclical fashions at work, and the weakening of the 'agency' population generally as part of the new 'whole of government' environment. But the point here relates rather to the going forward of that program and interpretations about it. What is significant is that serious scholars working in the same area could draw very different interpretations from the 'facts' they observed. Both groups were seeking to understand those 'facts' -- ie both were seeking 'truth', but obviously their truths were very different. I believe I have seen what the other group missed; what have I missed that they have discerned?

I suggest that it would be useful to explore these divergences further, in the hope that some sort of common ground can be reached. There is no evidence of deliberate distortion here. But somewhere there is memory loss, or failure to recognise important matters that affect the several interpretations. Can any of this be explained by the 'rules of speaking' -- *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* -- that Smullen reminds us of? At the very least, we need to acknowledge that, without resolving such issues, we are imparting very different, even conflicting messages in what we write and teach.

The problem is not unique to this particular area of public management scholarship. I have experienced similar disagreements in the study of public-private mixes and partnerships. Mixes are as old as organised government, and the 'PPP' term itself seems to have emerged in the 1970s in the context of urban regeneration schemes, particularly in the US. From the early 1990s there was a dedicated PPP network, but it was happy to range over a wide variety of mixing situations. Then in 1993 the Conservative Government in Britain introduced the so-called Public Finance Initiative, aimed at enlisting private finance to maintain old and develop new infrastructure facilities. When the Blair New Labour Government came to office in 1997, it quite deliberately renamed the PFIs as PPPs, and since then there has been confusion about the term, and argument between those who see PFIs as the only true PPPs, and those who want to apply the term much more widely and, indeed, see PFIs as less partner-like than many of the other forms. Again a British usage spread widely, but the semantics involved confused rather than clarified. Thus PPP came to be seen as a 'nebulous' and 'contested' concept that lends itself flights of rhetoric but contributes little to understanding what is actually going on (Wettenhall 2003b; Hodge & Greve 2005; Weihe 2006).¹⁷

Afterword

In the main sections of this paper I have looked at:

- how shifts in the meaning of terms we use can affect understandings about administrative organisation;
- how fads, fashions and cycles can also affect those understandings;
- efforts to create archival and record-keeping services as aids to good memory, and how other factors disrupt those efforts so contributing to serious memory loss; and
- how well-intentioned scholars can come to very different interpretations of developments in administrative organisation and sometimes clash over those interpretations, so confounding good understanding.

I suspect that these four sections and the related issues do not fit well together, in part because they focus on different aspects of the memory/amnesia problem:

- how to ensure that actors within government systems have adequate access to information about things they need to know, and so guide good policy-making and good management; and
- how to ensure that interpretations of real-life developments within these systems come close to reality and so improve general understandings, leading to good frameworks for teaching and research.

Improvements on both these fronts may also make us better able to discern when political rhetoric deliberately seeks to disguise intentions, or acts more innocently to obscure good understanding. So I suggest that there is great value in opening such issues up for closer examination, and welcome the opportunity provided by this panel to participate in a movement in that direction. I will appreciate comments that help me bring the several issues in this paper into greater harmony, and other suggestions for its improvement.

NOTES:

1. Consistently with the areas I have been researching over many years, the term 'administrative organisation' here relates only to public sector concepts and structures.
2. Though Orwell wrote many novels, the other one that was similarly motivated and attracted so much attention in those years when I was receiving my introduction to public administration theories and practices was *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1945).
3. 'Public administrationist' was the term coined by Dwight Waldo, one of the eminences of our field as I understood it, for those who taught and researched within the profession of public administration (eg Waldo 1975: 199-200; 1985: 53). I wonder how many 'moderns' remember it or its author now? I guess that was a bit of Newspeak too, but it was simply a useful aid to understanding within the old paradigm; it did not challenge it in any way.
4. This section draws in part on a paper my University of Canberra colleague Chris Aulich and I presented a few months ago at the annual conference of the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA) in Madrid: Aulich & Wettenhall 2007.
5. Jordan, Hood and Flinders have all attributed this metaphor to Henry Parris, whose book *Constitutional Bureaucracy* (1969) provided massive evidence that these swings did take place. But we could not find the actual metaphor in the Parris book! As part of his "pendulum" explanation, Flinders (2004: 885-886) notes that opposition parties frequently attack governments for creating non-departmental public bodies and commit themselves to abolishing them, only to maintain them and create new ones when they come to office themselves. On the same phenomenon in Australia, see Wettenhall 1988: 195-196, 2005a: 91.

6. See Aulich & Wettenhall 2007: 2-3 for a development of this argument.
7. Schellenberg's much reprinted and translated book based on this series of lectures was dedicated to 'the Australian archivists' he had met on his tour (Schellenberg 1956; SAA 2003). This account comes from my personal recollection of attending some of his lectures as a young public servant and part-time university student.
8. The view expressed in a 2004 ANZSOG symposium that administrative history is a neglected field in Australia fails to take sufficient note of work done in association with archivists or by archivists themselves (Scott & Wanna 2005). On Australian administrative history generally, see eg Caiden 1963; Wettenhall 1968, 1977; Hume 1981; Eddy & Nethercote 1987, 1994.
9. See eg Abjorenson 1998; Metherell 2002; Burgess 2002a, 2002b; Grose 2002, 2006; Malone 2007.
10. I had earlier experienced this sort of problem when researching for an article on changing ownership patterns in Australian airports in the mid-1990s (see Wettenhall 1996a). Officers in the library of the department then housing the air transport function were as helpful as they could be, but that help was restricted by the requirement that relevant files and documents should be held for only a relatively short period of time.
11. 'Agencies' in the catholic sense, in which that descriptor is applied to all public organisations including departments. The obvious decline in recognition of the importance of good recordkeeping has struck me as one of the sad consequences of modern administrative reform. I commenced my working life as a registry clerk in the GPO in Hobart, well before corporatisation and digitisation hit us. The PMG's Department was then part of the regular public service, and it was always impressed on me that the recordkeeping function was one of the pillars of accountable government and ministerial responsibility, and therefore of utmost importance. My minister was always at risk of being questioned on matters that could quickly become politically embarrassing, and my role was to help keep the records in good order so that, when questions were asked, checks could be made and answers supplied at short notice.
12. Though there is some reason to believe that it had earlier Hong Kong usage.
13. The new Centrelink principals were certainly supplied with a copy of a relevant research report prepared at the University of Canberra (Wettenhall & Kimber 1996), but I have been able to find no evidence that it was ever seriously noted.
14. It is likely that, in the 1950s, the only Australian students of public administration to get a home-grown introduction to the subject were those in the University of Sydney, where Prof. FA Bland had already established a strong tradition of Australian national teaching and research (eg Bland 1937). Even there, however, Dick Spann was soon to come from Britain to head the relevant department; later Christopher Hood followed him! In Adelaide, students were taught by Tony Blair's father!!
15. For me, one of the best guides to this range of issues came in AH Hanson's book *Public Enterprise and Economic Development* (1959), intended primarily for the guidance of developing countries.
16. The COBRA international survey exercise centred on the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium has similarly developed mostly by excluding the commercial bodies, and the related Irish study follows suit (McGauran et al 2005). But I am now informed that the Irish study is being extended, at government request, to related commercial bodies (McCarthaigh 2007). Of course many new regulatory bodies replaced retired (privatised) commercial ones, but the claims about the huge increase in numbers do not make that calculation.
17. This debate received a thorough airing at an International Workshop on PPPs: Promises, Politics and Pitfalls at the City University of Hong Kong in October 2007.

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16. At this late stage of my presentation, I want to declare that it is a matter of some surprise to me that (a) I am so appreciative and respectful of the careful reflective consideration Christopher Pollitt has given to many public management issues, including issues of convergence and divergence and the relationship between ideas and talk on the one hand and actual decisions and actions on the other (as eg in Pollitt 2002), and yet (b) so ready to argue with him on the agencification issue!