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BUREAUCRACIES REMEMBER, POST-BUREAUCRATIC ORGANIZATIONS FORGET?

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The paper examines the hypothesis that post-bureaucratic forms of organization perform less well than traditional bureaucracies with respect both to organizational memory and learning from experience. First, the paper 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 that 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 reflects on its own limitations. Finally, it sets out some broad conclusions concerning the state of organizational memories in the public sector. 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.

> 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, p. 26)

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 (see Heckscher and Donnellon 1994; Hughes 2003; Alvesson and Thompson 2004; Goodsell 2004; Du Gay 2005; Christensen and Lægreid 2007).

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. While there is a large and growing literature on organizational learning, it is not matched by any substantial work on organizational forgetting (see Pollitt 2000). Having identified the key processes which are likely to influence organizational memories, the paper proceeds to examine some associated consequences of post bureaucratic 'reforms' in the public sector. These seem likely to influence both the external, public accountability of organizations as well as 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 number of relevant cases.

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HYPOTHESIS, TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The hypothesis

> The hypothesis is that traditional 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 above hypothesis is intended to have only a limited domain. It does not posit a generic, and certainly not a uniformly globalized, phenomenon. It applies mainly to those organizations, sectors and states where intensive 'modernization' has taken place. Specifically, this means in the main organizations 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. However, such reforms are seldom uniformly present within a given jurisdiction (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004), so it is entirely possible that certain organizations within an intensively modernizing state may escape the effects posited here and, equally, that particular organizations within 'quieter' states will nevertheless experience these same effects, if they happen to be singled out for repetitive reform. It should also be acknowledged that in practice the global reach of 'post bureaucracy' may be rather less extensive than some of its pundits would have us believe (see, for example, Kickert 2008). Before going further, however, we need to at least define at least the following terms: 'bureaucracy', 'post-bureaucratic organization' and 'organizational memory'.

Bureaucracy

The Weberian ideal type can hardly be avoided. Thus, following mainstream scholarship, a 'pure' bureaucracy would possess the following features (Gerth and Mills 1946; 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.

Post-bureaucratic organizations

By this term we mean an organization that has been put in place as a conscious replacement for a traditional bureaucracy. Post-bureaucratic organizations are supposed to be faster, more efficient, more flexible, more committed and more outward-looking (Salaman 2005, pp. 141–5). Typically they aim to achieve these improvements by moving away from the bureaucratic characteristics listed above. This shift typically involves one or more of the following innovations:

1. Hierarchies are flattened. 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*.);
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 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 (see, for example, Chapman and Duncan 2007, p. 16);
5. Salaries also become less uniform and less predictable. Top executives may be paid spot salaries to 'reflect the market'. At all levels of the hierarchy performance-related pay (PRP) means that competitive elements are injected;
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 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 ways in which such recording takes place have become faster and more varied most notably through electronic systems;
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 (Saint Martin 2005; Craig 2006, pp. 155–68);
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' – codes of practice; guidelines, for example; 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 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, p. 10)]. The justification for this 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.

New Public Management (NPM)

Even in its English mother tongue, 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, p. 96; see also Hood and Peters 2004). To save space, I will instead simply refer to one of the best recent discussions – that of Dunleavy *et al.* (2006, pp. 96–105) and to one 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; 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 links rewards to measured performance (for example, 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, p. 97). This means that, at least for present purposes, NPM is *not* certain other things which are occasionally thrown into its portmanteau. Thus it is *not* partnerships, or networked governance, or joined-up government. All of these fall within the concept of a Public Service Network (PSN), which is discussed below. 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. If NPM means almost everything then it means almost nothing.

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, p. 3). 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, p. 3). 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, p. 61). It consists of a set of nodes, with inter-relationships, through 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 since the 1970s, they have become more numerous and more prominent.

An extremely large literature has swiftly arisen around networks (for overviews, see Klijn 2005; Agranoff 2007; for a collection of contrasting perspectives, see Salminen 2003; for a critique, see Pollitt 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 (see, for example, 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, while they may have originated in a spontaneous coming-together, require strenuous efforts to keep them functioning (Huxham and Vangen 2004).

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, for example, Levitt and March 1988; Walsh and Ungson 1991; Van den Broeck 1994; Van der Bent 1999; Stewart 2001; Agranoff 2007, pp. 125–9). 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 pose the threat of memory loss. However, with organizations as with individuals, possessing a memory is by no means the same as using it. The organization theory literature identifies countless reasons why information which is already in the possession of an organization may be ignored, or may be used in distorting and misleading ways: 'what is learned appears to be influenced less by history than by the frames applied to that history' (Levitt and March 1988, p. 324; March and Olsen 1988; Olsen and Peters 1996). Furthermore, 'some parts of organizational memory are more available for retrieval than others' (Levitt and March 1988, p. 328). Among the more common reasons why relevant records are not used effectively are:

- Policy-makers and their advisers may be unaware of the existence of previous evidence, even if it is archived somewhere within their own set of organizations (Pollitt 2008);
- If aware, they may discount such evidence as irrelevant, unreliable, too time-consuming to access or potentially awkward in a political sense and therefore best forgotten about (Pollitt 2008);
- Even if explicitly considered, the evidence may be misinterpreted in several ways – by being treated as too firm/too soft, by being considered in a de-contextualized way, by being given irrationally great or small weight (Levitt and March 1988, pp. 323–6; Olsen and Peters 1996, Chapter 1; Pollitt 2008).

The implications of this general point are considerable. Even if we find evidence that post-bureaucratic organizations tend to develop recording practices that are inferior to those of traditional bureaucracies, that does not necessarily mean that *decisions* by traditional bureaucracies will be better informed. Nevertheless, it remains true that organizations cannot draw on information which they do not have, and therefore deterioration in recording and/or archiving practices creates at least the presumption that there may be problems further down the line that leads to sound decision making.

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. This will not be an exhaustive list, but should 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.

> 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 probably brings changes in management

systems, and possibly also technical systems. Change in the organizational culture may be either an explicit aim of the reorganization or an unintended by-product. Such culture shifts may affect not only memory but the propensity to use memory. The new emphasis may lie on being forward-looking and innovative and against recourse to precedent and evidence from the past (see also discussion below).

Repeated restructurings are characteristic of the most intensive NPM regimes (Moran 2003; Greer and Jarman 2007; Pollitt 2007). In the UK, for example, there have been comments by senior insiders about the disruptive effect of rapid personnel changes in the Home Office, education and health care respectively (see Wolf 2004; BBC 2007; Ham 2007). For example:

> 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, p. 13)

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). In addition, 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, for example, 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 in The Netherlands 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. A major reason for the delays was that the project threatened something at the heart of the librarians' profession – cataloguing practices (Homburg 2008).

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, p. 41). 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 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 annual budgeting process 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, p. 19)

As early as 1994 a Parliamentary Select Committee was already anxious concerning the effects of NPM-engendered organizational fragmentation:

> The disappearance of many tangible common features of careers in different parts of the Civil Service reinforces the importance of less tangible shared values, and emphasizes the need to make those shared characteristics better known and understood throughout the service. (Treasury and Civil Service Committee 1994, para. 94)

At about the same time, the Head of the New Zealand State Services Commission suggested that the introduction of short term contracts had sometimes:

> undermined the broader framework of management development which emphasizes the nurturing of talent against a long-term view of career management. (Cabinet Office 1993, p. 134)

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 different network members frequently have sharply differing time perspectives, many of them not at all 'career-like'.

The specific network form that is a partnership is usually time limited. There is some form of contract or agreement that has a beginning and an end. So for employees the situation is very different from that in a department of state, where the presumption 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.

Rapidly changing and diversifying means of information transfer and storage

The spread of mobile phones, voice mail, emailing and other ICTs has hugely multiplied both the speed and variety of communication. It has also created a series of interesting

questions about what is and is not an official, or legal, record, and how (and if) such records should be protected and archived (see, for example, Grose 2002; MacNeil 2002). These developments are not unique to NPM and PSN organizational forms, and to a considerable degree affect traditional bureaucracies as well. Where post-bureaucratic influences may be significant, however, is when modern ICTs are combined with the managerial styles and attitudes characteristic of NPM and PSNs. In particular, there may be problems when attitudes favour rapid, 'real time' decision making, flexibility, informality and a preference for decision making in small, *ad hoc* teams rather than within a well-ordered hierarchy.

There are already a number of examples of this combination of factors leading to failures of record keeping and a blurring of accountability. Among high NPM governments, there appears to have been a significant and consequential dilution of standard bureaucratic practices. In the UK, during the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, two major public Inquiries (Hutton and Butler) both found evidence that high-level decisions had been made in informal and un-minuted meetings:

> The increasingly informal methods of decision-making, highlighted in both the Hutton and Butler reports, and apparently quite normal in business contexts, are inimical to proper record keeping and therefore to bureaucratic lines of accountability in government. This is related to the downgrading of permanent officials in the decision-making processes and the rise of the special adviser . . .. (O'Toole 2006, p. 175)

Beyond this, it is the view of an official historian at the UK Cabinet Office that, when looking at the Prime Minister's files from the 1960s to the 1990s, 'there was a major decline in record keeping…in the mid 1980s, for example, of incidental meetings, "for the record" notes or even getting the right papers in the right file in the right sequence' (Lowe 2008).

At another hierarchical level, we may also consider the findings of the (English) Bichard Inquiry into the Soham murders. One of the issues here was of the adequacy of new recording systems for sexual offenders, in a situation where a person known to be unsuitable for a post dealing with children had been allowed to become a school caretaker. The Inquiry Report found that:

> there was not one single occasion…when the record creation system worked as it should have done
>
> and:
>
> Officers at various levels were alarmingly ignorant of how records were created or how the system worked. (Bichard Inquiry Report 2004)

Other lapses in record keeping have surfaced in Public and Parliamentary Inquiries into controversial decisions in another high-NPM country – Australia. In the infamous 'children overboard' case that coloured the 2001 general election campaign, the government created a 'task force' to deal with the situation. 'There were no terms of reference, a fluid agenda, and membership' (Weller 2002, p. 88). As for records afterwards: 'All that was available were the phone notes of participants, often shorthand scribbles intended as an *aide memoire* for the person taking the call' (Weller 2002, pp. 89; see also Select Committee on a Certain Maritime Incident 2002, Chapter 7). To a degree, this might have been understandable for a high-level task force working under pressure, but a number of Australian ombudsman reports revealed that poor record keeping (or none at all) had

characterized a whole series of immigration cases (see, for example, Commonwealth Ombudsman 2005, 2006a, b). By 2007, the head of the Australian civil service was responding to a new report aimed at improving record keeping throughout the federal government, tacitly acknowledging that standards had slipped (Malone 2007). The report noted that a sharper focus was needed because of 'the significant increase in the scale, breadth and complexity of records' (Management Advisory Committee 2007, p. III) and it went on to comment, *inter alia*, that 'There appears to be an ill-informed assumption that if employees can find their own emails/documents when *they* need them, then that is sufficient' (Management Advisory Committee 2007, p. 11, original italics). A year later the Australian Auditor General commented that his investigations 'highlighted the loss of corporate memory that can occur with a high turnover in staff, extensive use of external contractors and departmental restructures' (ACT Auditor-General 2008, p. 3).

Doctrines of radical change

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 of this *genre* is the relentlessly innovatory, visionary 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, and write reports and books testifying to the need for unceasing change, and for a focus on future opportunities rather than past traditions or achievements (for three different expressions of urgency/impatience, see Prime Minister and Minister for the Cabinet 1999; Abramson *et al.* 2006; Barber 2007). The general picture is that 'Public sector organizations are now under ever-increasing pressure for more profound changes…' (Abramson *et al.* 2006, p. 7). 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, p. 2)

It is very easy to drift from a perfectly justifiable focus on future possibilities to an unjustifiable enmity or contempt for the past. Such an attitude means that even if relevant records exist, they are less likely to be consulted. The past becomes no more than a source of constraint, 'old-fashioned' practices and organizations, conservative cultures and so on (Pollitt 2008, especially 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, p. 72)

> 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. (Barber 2007, pp. 124–5)

> Bold, sustained leadership is a pre-requisite for transformation; professions left to themselves rarely advocate more than incremental change . . .. (Barber 2007, p.144)

And so on. There is, from such a perspective, little respect for traditional bureaucratic attention to precedent, scrupulous record-keeping, caution or balance. Instead, one seeks lessons from American change management textbooks (enthusiastically cited by Barber) and from the previous month's performance indicator data – not from any sources further into the past, and not from the professionals who are actually delivering many of the public services because they are seen as being trapped in the traditional culture. 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, p. 44). They are more responsive to the constantly-shifting environment (Heckscher and Donnellon 1994, p. 51). 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 policies, programs and venues shift, so do the KM demands . . .. (Agranoff 2007, p. 129)

Meanwhile, Skelcher *et al.* (2005) conclude that partnership-type organizations privilege future delivery of goals over traditional due processes. '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, and it will also reduce the inclination to use 'the archives' at all. Most obviously, it re-shapes the organizational culture and repeatedly alters the management systems.

The wider cultural trend towards compression of time

In his book cited in the previous section (Barber 2007), the Head of Mr Blair's Delivery Unit proudly records 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 labelled 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, p. 91)

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, p. 97). 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, and changing demographics with their negative impacts on the welfare state.

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 demands continuous innovation, continuous consumption and continuous destruction/disposal of 'obsolescent' goods and services – and ideas (Nowotny 1994, pp. 11, 73). This is, in fact, the same world of ceaselessly transforming and innovative organizations envisioned 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 the increasingly popular notion of 'personal' or 'proper' or 'family' time, during which we can, as individuals, 'really be ourselves' (Nowotny 1994, pp. 36–7). 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. The tension between Sabelis' 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 that have their origins in the business sector:

> the security of a role anchored in an organization with a well-defined boundary and codified in a job description is being supplanted by stress-ridden, 'hyperflexible workplaces' where roles are defined by the task of the moment, and where rights become ephemeral as everything is driven by the demand to be adaptive and innovative. (Willmott 2003, p. 103; see also Sennett 2008, p. 35)

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 either easily or equally visible. The first (restructuring), and the second (fragmentation of careers), are both tolerably accessible to standard social science techniques

of discovery and measurement. The third tends to emerge mainly through detailed Public Inquiries, after something major appears to have gone wrong. It is hard for the lone academic to achieve the degree of access required to delve through the papers in the necessary detail, let alone question often reluctant officials. The fourth (the popularity of ideas of radical change), can be more readily charted: by literature surveys, documentary and rhetorical analysis. The fifth is quite elusive, although one can tap the presence of it through interviews or rhetorical analysis. In general it is easier to track the state of the formal memory storage locations than the informal, and it is most difficult to ascertain how and how far existing memories have actually been used to inform decision making. Even extremely detailed and expensive Public Inquiries into disasters frequently cannot entirely pin down what was consciously known and acted upon.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES OF POST-BUREAUCRATIC ORGANIZATIONS

The UK National Health Service (NHS)

This 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 in 1974. Further significant re-organizations followed in 1982 and 1984–86 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 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.

As early as 1998 the official NHS historian observed:

> 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 at ground level (Fulop *et al.* 2005). Currently this system is being 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 travelled through several rule changes and were then 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. 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 whereby any citizen with Internet access could check the performance indicator scores for all the hospitals in the NHS. The government introduced a 'star system', 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 National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI). 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 (in 2002) the National Clinical Assessment Authority, then (in 2003) the National Care Standards Commission and (in 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). This, therefore, is a tale of the almost wilful demolition of both 'in-the-head' experience and technical and managerial systems, all of which were subject to constant 're-disorganization'.

The Dutch telecommunications regulations agency

In the early years of the 21st century this agency was attempting to regulate the telecommunications sector, especially the recently privatized 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 contract in 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. 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 realized 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 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 organization which had fragmented and externalized its own memory. It was learning fast and forgetting almost as quickly (Zonnevijlle and Pollitt 2003). Nor was this an isolated example. Researching the UK telecommunications regulator, OFTEL, Hall *et al.* (1999) discovered something very similar – a hectic 'meetings culture' in which no-one gathered, classified and stored episodic data. While 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, p. 53). These cases therefore concerned weaknesses in the first two storage locations – the heads of existing staff and the formal, technical systems for recording experience.

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, p. 13)

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. This case was therefore partly to do with the first storage location – people – but also with the third, the management system.

Rapid 'churn' in public service performance

My fourth example concerns what is known as rapid 'churn' in public service performance. 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 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 performance indicators (PIs) used by Next Steps agencies in the UK, and found that only 36 per cent 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, p. 470)

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, p. 46)

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. Technical systems and management systems are constantly on the move. Even if people want to compare the present with the past they cannot reliably do so. This is very different from the past, when the focus was on inputs, not performance measures, and where budget categories tended to change very slowly.

Organizational memories in networks

The burgeoning literature on public sector networks says remarkably little that is directly focused on their proclivities to: (1) forget or misplace information; (2) fail to record relevant information in the first place; or (3) 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 (see, for example, Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; Choi and Heinrich 2006, Chapter 8; Agranoff 2007, Chapter 7) 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. For the moment, 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.

In a series of field studies, Provan *et al.* have emphasized the value of stability to health and human service networks; 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, p. 185).

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, p. 800). Their data include 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' (Huxham and Vangen 2000, p. 800). 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, p. 140). 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. (Agranoff 2007, pp. 140–1)

More generally, Agranoff acknowledges that many aspects of knowledge management in networks were not captured by his research methods. While 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. In these cases all four storage locations are compromised. People, technical systems, management systems and norms and values all have shallow roots. In such environments it seems highly likely that not only record systems but the propensity to consult record systems will be weak.

Cases and mechanisms

It may be useful very briefly to summarize how the four mechanisms identified earlier are exemplified in the cases. The NHS story is one of incessant restructuring at every level – government 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 concerned. 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 attached' are likely to develop strong collective memories.

CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

This paper has a number of important limitations. The first is that we still have to thoroughly test the assumption that traditional bureaucracies actually did succeed in maintaining strong and reasonably accurate central record systems and/or that they regularly used them for key decisions. The paper contains some indicative evidence of deterioration compared with former periods, but direct evidence on the high standards of conventional bureaucratic record-keeping in, say, the 1950s and 1960s, has not yet been found. Second, the empirical evidence offered concerning post bureaucratic forms – though extensive and occasionally vivid – is not yet systematic. Governments themselves seldom measure the kinds of processes identified here as memory-damaging, and researchers have not paid frequent attention to them either. This exercise, therefore, has been a preliminary one, setting up concepts, identifying mechanisms and looking for evidence to support the hypothesis. One next step would be to look equally hard for evidence that might *disconfirm* the hypothesis – and to look for good rival hypotheses that would counter our central proposition. 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 also focus on actual practice rather than just technological potential. Even a wonderful historical database will not function as such if: (1) there are no incentives for staff to use it; and/or (2) access is fragmented, or even forgotten about, due to repeated restructurings of the parent organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

A *prima facie* case has been made for the proposition that the arrival of post-bureaucratic organizational forms has tended to reduce both the completeness 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 policy-making 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 policy-making.

The consequences of this trend are, admittedly, hard to measure and discern. 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 of greater attention than it has hitherto attracted.

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