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The Whole-of-Government Approach to Public Sector Reform

International Innovations

In this article, the authors discuss "whole-of-government" initiatives as a reaction to the negative effects of New Public Management reforms such as structural devolution, "single-purpose organizations," and performance management but also as a reaction to a more insecure world. The authors examine what is meant by a "whole-of-government" approach and explore how this concept might be interpreted in analytical terms. The structural approach is contrasted with a cultural perspective and a myth-based perspective. Finally, results, experiences, and lessons from the whole-of-government movement are discussed.

In the recent generation of modern public sector reforms—those following two decades of New Public Management (NPM) reforms—there has been a change in emphasis away from structural devolution, disaggregation, and single-purpose organizations and toward a whole-of-government (WG) approach (Christensen and Lægreid 2006; OECD 2005). This trend is most evident in the Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, once seen as the trailblazers of NPM, but it is also occurring in other countries, such as the United States, under the heading of collaborative public management (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; O'Leary, Gerard, and Bingham 2006). Countries that joined the NPM movement late, such as the Scandinavian countries, are also gradually acquiring WG features (Christensen and Lægreid 2007).

One pertinent issue is whether this development is really new, as it raises the old question of coordination, and indeed, elements of it have been observable in the United Kingdom and Canada for some time. Nevertheless, it probably would be correct to say that the approach has been revitalized and become more comprehensive (Halligan 2005, 29). Another issue is whether the WG approach should be seen as breaking with the past—that is, transforming the main features of NPM—or whether it should instead be construed as rebalancing the NPM system without

changing it in any fundamental way (Gregory 2006; Halligan 2006).

In this article, we will first discuss what the WG approach is. Second, we will outline some of the main arguments for WG initiatives. Third, we will discuss analytical interpretations of the WG concept and how this is manifested empirically. A structural approach will be contrasted with a cultural perspective and a myth-based perspective. We conclude the essay by indicating some results, experiences, and lessons from the WG movement.

The article is primarily a conceptual explorative one, but it also draws on a set of new empirical data gathered in Australia and New Zealand by way of example. The database consists of public documents, interviews with key political and managerial executives, and existing scholarly literature in the field. We also use studies and examples from other relevant countries, such as the United Kingdom and Canada, which have been frontrunners in addressing WG initiatives. We do not claim that the countries surveyed are representative across different state traditions, but they represent interesting examples of radical NPM reformers facing new challenges in the aftermath of NPM.

What Is the "Whole-of-Government" Approach?

In response to NPM reforms, a new generation of reforms, initially labeled "joined-up government" and later known as "whole-of-government," was launched. This approach sought to apply a more holistic strategy using insights from the other social sciences rather than just economics (Bogdanor 2005). These new reform efforts can be seen as a combination of path dependency and negative feedback in the most radical NPM countries, such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia (Perry 6 2005). As a response to the increased fragmentation caused by NPM reform programs, these countries adopted coordination

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and integration strategies. The slogans "joined-up-government" and "whole-of-government" provided new labels for the old doctrine of coordination in the study of public administration (Hood 2005). Adding to the issue of coordination, the problem of integration was a main concern behind these reform initiatives (Mulgan 2005).

The concept of joined-up government was first introduced by the Tony Blair government in 1997, and a main aim was to get a better grip on the "wicked" issues straddling the boundaries of public sector organizations, administrative levels, and policy areas (Richards and Smith 2006). JUG was presented as the opposite of "departmentalism," tunnel vision, and "vertical silos." It denotes the aspiration to achieve horizontal and vertical coordination in order to eliminate situations in which different policies undermine each other, so as to make better use of scarce resources, to create synergies by bringing together different stakeholders in a particular policy area, and to offer citizens seamless rather than fragmented access to services (Pollitt 2003b). The overlap with the WG concept is obvious. The Australian Management Advisory Committee's *Connecting Government* report (2004) defines WG in the Australian Public Service thus: "Whole-of-government denotes public services agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues. Approaches can be formal or informal. They can focus on policy development, program management, and service delivery."

The scope of WG is pretty broad. One can distinguish between WG policy making and WG implementation, between horizontal linkages and vertical linkages, and the target for WG initiatives can be a group, a locality, or a policy sector (see Pollitt 2003b). WG activities may span any or all levels of government and involve groups outside government. It is about joining up at the top, but also about joining up at the base, enhancing local level integration, and involving public–private partnerships. The WG concept does not represent a coherent set of ideas and tools, just like NPM, and can best be seen as an umbrella term describing a group of responses to the problem of increased fragmentation of the public sector and public services and a wish to increase integration, coordination, and capacity (see Ling 2002).

Why Whole-of-Government Initiatives?

There are many different reasons or motivations for the emergence of WG. First, it can be seen as a reac-

tion to the "pillarization" of the public sector that was typical of NPM reforms (Gregory 2006; Pollitt 2003b). By focusing on performance management, single-purpose organizations, and structural devolution, NPM reforms tend to ignore the problems of horizontal coordination (Fimreite and Lægreid 2005). Performance management is mainly preoccupied with vertical coordination. The principle of "single-purpose organizations," with many specialized and non-overlapping roles and functions, may have produced too much fragmentation, self-centered authorities, and a lack of cooperation and coordination, hence hampering effectiveness and efficiency (Boston and Eichbaum 2005, 21; New Zealand 2002).

Structural devolution, which entailed transferring authority from the central political-administrative level to regulatory agencies, service-producing agencies, or state-owned companies, may have produced disadvantages of other kinds (Christensen and Lægreid 2001). The effect has deprived the political and administrative leadership of levers of control and of influence and information, raising questions of accountability and capacity. WG measures, particularly those involving a reassertion of the center, reflect the paradox that political executives are more frequently blamed when things go wrong, even though they actually sought to avoid blame through devolution (Hood 2002; Hood and Lodge 2006). Not surprisingly, they believe that being criticized and embarrassed politically while, at the same time, being deprived of influence and information is a bad combination.

Second, for a number of reasons, the world is perceived as increasingly insecure and dangerous. The concerns raised by terrorist attacks have had important repercussions for public sector reforms in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Halligan and Adams 2004, 85–86; Kettl 2003), while New Zealand is concerned about biosecurity (Gregory 2006). More and more countries are concerned about crises, disasters, and threats, including natural disasters, such as tsunamis, or pandemics, such as SARS or the bird flu. This has led to a tightening up of government, or what some Australians refer to as a "thinking up and out" strategy, which includes WG measures. The new threat of terrorism has underlined the importance of governments avoiding contradictory outcomes and ensuring that information is shared between agencies, as seen in the organization of military security and intelligence units in the United States (Hammond 2007).

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Analytical Interpretations and Empirical Manifestations

We will examine the WG approach from a structural, a cultural, and a myth-based perspective (Christensen and Lægreid 2001). From a structural perspective, the WG approach may generally be seen as conscious organizational design or reorganization (see Egeberg 2003). The perspective is based on the assumption that political and administrative leaders use WG as an instrument to get government organizations to work better together.

There are two major versions of the instrumental perspective (March and Olsen 1983). According to the hierarchical version, the political and administrative leadership is homogeneous and in agreement about the use of WG measures. One option is to adopt a rather aggressive top-down style in implementing WG initiatives, which was what the Blair government did in the United Kingdom (Stoker 2005). Another option is a strengthening or reassertion of the center. The United Kingdom has been a leader in strengthening the role of central government, establishing structures such as strategic units, reviews, and public service agreements. The Labour government's first move toward joined-up government was the creation of the Social Exclusion Unit in 1997 and the Strategic Communication Unit one year later (Kavanagh and Richards 2001). Both the United Kingdom and New Zealand have a clear hierarchical component in their style of "joining-up" (Perry 6 2005). One interesting paradox in the United Kingdom is that the Labour government has tried to improve service delivery by enhancing its central controlling mechanisms while, at the same time, continuing to argue for more autonomy for the officials charged with delivering services (Richards and Smith 2006). The best example of this shift in emphasis in the United States is the creation of the federal Department of Homeland Security (Kettl 2004).

The hierarchical strengthening of the center might also imply a stronger prime minister's office, in both a political and an administrative respect, as seen in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. It might also imply a tightening up of financial management and a strengthening of governance and accountability regimes, as in Canada (Aucoin 2006). Measures such as this are primarily concerned with strengthening central political capacity, potentially making subordinate agencies and companies less autonomous. Even though the prime minister's office in Australia has been strengthened (Halligan and Adams 2004, 86) and specialized agencies brought back under greater central control (Halligan 2006), there has not been much major restructuring going on.

Another example of a hierarchical measure is the establishment in Australia and New Zealand of new organizational units, such as new cabinet committees, interministerial or interagency collaborative units, intergovernmental councils, lead agency approaches, circuit-breaker teams, supernetworks, task forces, cross-sectoral programs or projects, and tsars, with the main purpose of getting government units to work better together (Gregory 2006; Halligan and Adams 2004). In 2003, a new Cabinet Implementation Unit was established in Australia to support WG activities.

Of particular importance is the emphasis placed by WG on areas that cut across traditional boundaries. Under the label of horizontal management, the Canadian government launched such initiatives beginning in the mid-1990s in areas such as innovation, poverty, and climate change (Bakvis and Juillet 2004). Other examples of this were seen in Australia in 2002, when attempts were made to bring more coordination to such areas as national security, demographics, science, education, sustainable environment, energy, rural and regional development, transportation, and work and family life (Halligan and Adams 2004, 87–88). Creating coordinative structures inside existing central structures, increasing the strategic leadership role of the cabinet, and focusing more on following up central decisions are typical hierarchical efforts in Australia, intended to put pressure on the sectoral authorities in order to force them to collaborate and coordinate better (Halligan 2006).

Procedural efforts have also been made to enhance WG initiatives. In New Zealand, there is a stronger emphasis on effectiveness, broader long-term "ownership" interests, and greater outcome focus, in contrast to the more short-term and narrower "purchaser" efficiency and output focus that characterized the NPM reforms (Boston and Eichbaum 2005; New Zealand 2002).

The negotiation version of the instrumental perspective is based on the notion that the public apparatus is internally heterogeneous, with different units having different structures, roles, functions, and interests (March and Olsen 1983). There is also heterogeneity in relation to major stakeholders in the environment, including private actors. The WG approach will necessarily have negotiative features, whether inside the cabinet, between the ministries and departments involved in intersectoral task forces, programs, or projects, or specialized agencies involved in collaborative service delivery, as in WG reforms in New Zealand. In general, WG seems to be more about working pragmatically and smartly together than about formalized collaboration. This has especially been the case in Canada, where working horizontally has been an issue of ongoing importance since the mid-1990s (Bakvis and Juilett 2004).

Some collaborative efforts, as seen in Australia, are focused more on coordination from below, for

example, through one-stop shops aimed at delivering seamless service (Halligan 2006). This can be seen both as control from above but also as a real local collaborative effort requiring autonomy from central control. A comparative study of service delivery organizations in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and the Netherlands concludes that procedural bureaucratic models are being superseded by network governance to cater to the WG approach (Considine and Lewis 2003).

A cultural-institutional perspective sees the development of public organizations more as evolution than design, whereby every public organization eventually develops unique institutional or informal norms and values. The importance of path dependency and historical trajectories and traditions is evident in public institutions (Krasner 1988). Balancing fragmentation and integration, individualization and common identity, and market pressure and cultural cohesion is a big challenge in public sector reforms (Lægreid and Wise, 2007). When public organizations are exposed to reform processes, the reforms proposed must, according to a cultural perspective, go through a cultural compatibility test (Brunsson and Olsen 1993).

Several features of the WG approach can be understood using a cultural perspective. A central message is that structure is not enough to fulfill the goals of whole-of-government initiatives. Cultural change is also necessary, and processes and attitudes need to be addressed (Centre for Management and Policy Studies 2000). An overall feature is that the recent wave of reforms is relatively less preoccupied with structural changes and more characterized by evolutionary change resulting from conscious policy choices (Boston and Eichbaum 2005, 19–20).

Compared with the NPM movement, the post-NPM reforms focus more on building a strong and unified sense of values, trust, value-based management, and collaboration; team building; involving participating organizations; and improving the training and self-development of public servants (Ling 2002; New Zealand 2002). There is a need to reestablish a "common ethic" and a "cohesive culture" in the public sector because of reported corrosion of loyalty and increasing mistrust (Norman 1995). All agencies should be bound together by a single, distinctive ethos of public service (Shergold 2004). The report *Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges* (MAC 2004), underlined the need to build a supportive Australian public sector culture that encourages whole-of-government solutions by formulating value guidelines and codes of conduct under the slogan "working together."

Another cultural aspect is the increasing setting of ethical standards. In the Review of the Centre report

(2002) in New Zealand, this was formulated in the following way: "strengthening core public service capability, notably through a whole-of-government human resource framework based on good practice and policies, and broadening the State Service Commissioner's mandate to lead on values and standards."

A myth perspective sees reforms and their main concepts mainly in terms of myths, symbols, and fashions (Christensen and Lægreid 2003). These reform concepts often imitate practices in the private sector and are "sold" by private consulting firms and international reform entrepreneurs primarily to increase the legitimacy of the political-administrative system and its leaders rather than to solve particular instrumental problems (Sahlin-Andersson 2001). "Window dressing" is important, as is pretending to act in a successful way. In such a perspective, WG is primarily a buzzword and a countermyth to NPM.

It is not difficult to imagine that a WG approach would have mythical aspects. Very few actors would dispute the advantages of an integrated governmental apparatus or of taking anything other than a wide and collaborative view. A rather cynical view of the whole-of-government approach in Australia would be that it is a fashion and that it suits political and especially administrative leaders who wish to be seen as thinking about big ideas. An aspect of the reforms in Australia that could be understood from a myth perspective is the concept of "value-based government," which seems to have been imported and spread as a fad but has now become more formalized—in the sense of being written and codified—than earlier efforts. Another Australian reform initiative that is fundamentally rhetorical in its claims is the accrual output-based budgeting system (Carlin and Guthrie 2003).

Gregory (2006) sees the recent reforms in New Zealand and the WG approach to some extent as rhetoric. There is a gap between talk and action that may be attributed to a certain weariness with structural reforms, to the fact that the civil service has taken NPM on board and adapted to it, and to a general move to the right politically. As a result, he sees the new generation of reforms as "treating the effects rather than the cause."

Experiences and Challenges
Has WG resulted in more capacity to act for political and administrative leaders and more collaboration and integration among public organizations? There is no specific body of studies or hard evidence to make broad-based conclusion about these questions. What we will do is to suggest some bits and pieces of experiences with WG and discuss some of the challenges WG seems to face.

The whole-of-government approach has raised critical issues about public sector performance in the aftermath of NPM. One may ask to what extent integrative corrections are feasible given the character of certain forms of disaggregation, such as commercialization, privatization, and outsourcing. Unless cross-cutting targets receive equal status as organization-specific targets, WG initiatives will have difficulty becoming a major tool (Pollitt 2003a). This is a problem that is evident in the U.S. political-administrative system. After 9/11, major coordinative efforts in a fragmented system have been taken, such as the reorganization of homeland security and the comparable military organization (Kettl 2004). Nearly everyone agree that such coordinative efforts are necessary to fight terrorism, but such new administrative apparatuses are also said to be far too complex and ineffective, not to mention the difficulties of getting the participating subordinate administrative units to cooperate. One critical question is the extent to which such recent efforts on integration differ from earlier integrative phases, such as the emphasis in the 1970s on superministries.

WG approaches have a strong positive flavor and are generally seen as a good thing. But it is also important to stress that the "silo mentalities" these reform initiatives are supposed to attack exist for good reasons (Page 2005). Well-defined vertical and horizontal organizational boundaries should not only be seen as a symptom of obsolescent thinking (Pollitt 2003a). The division of labor and specialization are inevitable features of modern organizations, implying that WG initiatives will be difficult to implement. Working horizontally is a very time- and resource-consuming activity (Bakvis and Juillet 2004). The WG approach also raises other difficulties, such as unintended risks, ambitious agendas, and uncontrolled consequences (Perry 6 et al. 2002).

Accountability and risk management are central concerns, and a key question is how we can have WG joint action, common standards, and shared systems, on the one hand, and vertical accountability for individual agency performance, on the other (MAC 2004). WG tends not to clarify lines of accountability. The challenge is to balance better vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, and responsiveness downward (Ryan and Walsh 2004). WG initiatives are far from being only a question of neutral administrative techniques. Accountability, legitimacy, power relations, and trust in government organizations are fundamentally political issues (Perry 6 2005). Even if governments set budgets, programs, and objectives

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that cross organizational boundaries, WG activities might still be limited unless there are fundamental changes in accountability systems, dominant cultures, and structural arrangements.

One lesson is that if we want to encourage more collaborative working practices, one size does not fit all (Page 2005). WG is not a panacea that will solve all problems everywhere and at all times. WG may be seen as a selective project that is not appropriate in all circumstances or suitable for all public sector activities (Pollitt 2003b). A critical Canadian study of horizontal management recommended that horizontal arrangements should be entered into only after careful thought and an estimate of the costs involved. Departments working horizontally in the same policy area may well engage in competition and rivalry rather than cooperation (Bakvis and Juillet 2004).

We have also revealed that countries have different approaches to WG. There are contradictory forces pulling in different directions when it comes to adopting a WG approach (MAC 2004; Peters 1998). On one hand, NPM reforms have pushed central governments to decentralize decision making. On the other hand, the center has been encouraged to strengthen its capacity to coordinate policy development and implementation. Several competing strategies have been advocated and implemented to enhance WG systems, implying that the reform content is somewhat fluid and contested (Ling 2002).

Another lesson is that high-level politics and changes in central government organizations are not necessarily the most important reform tool for promoting "whole-of-government" initiatives. WG is, to a great extent, about lower-level politics and getting people on the ground in municipalities, regions, local government organizations, civil society organizations, and market-based organizations to work together. WG needs cooperative effort and cannot easily be imposed from the top down (Pollitt 2003a).

A third lesson is that building a WG system is a long-term project that takes time to implement. New skills, changes in organizational culture, and the building of mutual trust relations need patience. The role of a successful reform agent is to operate more as a gardener than as an engineer or an architect (see March and Olsen 1983).

The question is whether WG will continue to be a strong reform movement or whether it will gradually

fade away and be supplemented or replaced by new reform initiatives (Page 2005, Stoker 2005). Seen from a myth perspective, this might easily be the case. In the period 1997–2006, we have seen a shift from joined-up-government to the whole of-government concept. In the United Kingdom, joined-up government is no longer so much in vogue, and since the 2001 election, it has been overshadowed by other reform concepts such as modernization, quality services, delivery, and multilevel government.

In the United States, we see an emerging interest in collaborative public management that is focused on how to manage boundaries and networks in American administration, on the collaboration process, and on the design and implementation of cross-sector collaboration (Agranoff 2006; Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2006; Kettl 2006; McGuire 2006; Thompson and Perry 2006). An interesting observation is that this renewed focus on collaborate public management in the United States seems to be loosely coupled to a similar development in other Anglo-American countries launched under a different label.

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Note

1. These data are reported and analyzed in Christensen and Lægreid (2007), where the reform experiences in Australia and New Zealand are compared with Scandinavian reform efforts.

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Theme: "Whole-of-Government Financial Reporting: International Trends"

Guest Editors: Giuseppe Grossi, University of Siena, Italy, and Sue Newberry, University of Sydney, Australia

Papers are invited for consideration for inclusion in a special themed issue of *Public Money & Management* on whole-of-government financial reporting. Internationally, public sector reforms have given rise to perceived need to define clearly and produce financial reports for the whole of government. While individual countries are molding their own unique approaches, it is possible to identify global trends. These include the fragmentation of government activities as if they were separate businesses and the resulting need to consolidate their financial reports for whole-of-government purposes; the use of nongovernmental entities to organize and provide service through, for example, the marketization of service delivery; and efforts to reduce and change the layers of government, especially at the regional and local levels.

Topics. This special themed issue of Public Money & Management will analyze similarities and differences in the approaches to producing whole-of-government financial statements. The guest editors invite historical, empirical, practical, and review papers, whether quantitative or qualitative, from academics and practitioners. Topics suitable for this special issue include but are not limited to the following:

• The international standardization/harmonization movement
• Setting whole-of-government financial reporting standards
• Comparative international studies relating to whole-of-government accounting
• Accounting for governmental organizations
• Review of whole-of-government financial reports
• The role of whole-of-government accounting in the accountability agenda
• The transfer of private sector financial reporting practices to the public sector

Deadline. The deadline for submissions is **April 30, 2008**. Accepted papers will be presented at a workshop in Siena, Italy from August 30 through September 2, 2008 (visit www.consolidation.unisi.it for details). Selected papers of up to 5,000 words and debate articles of about 1,000 words, including references, will be published in Public Money & and Management in June of 2009 (Vol. 29, No. 3).

Submission. Papers should be sent in the form of a Microsoft Word e-mail attachment to Sue Newberry at s.newberry@usyd.edu.au. For Public Money & Management submission guidelines, visit http://www.cipfa.org.uk/pt/pmm/submissions.cfm