

Abstract

Both academics and practitioners have disagreed among themselves about whether and to what extent the developed world is witnessing a convergence in the forms of public management. Some of this disagreement may be attributed to the formidable empirical problems facing those who wish to make global or near-global generalizations. To a considerable extent, however, the divergences of view may be attributed to a more subtle cause – an inadequate conceptualization of the notion of ‘convergence’ itself. This article sets out to remedy that deficiency by discussing ‘convergence’ and proposing a multi-layered definition of the concept. This approach carries with it the implication that different aspects of convergence require substantially different research strategies. It also holds out the probability that convergence and enduring difference can co-exist in one jurisdiction at one time – depending on the level at which the analysis is being conducted. The article concludes with a preliminary examination of the substantive question of actual convergence, comparing the adequacy of different theoretical approaches.

Key words

New public management, convergence, public sector reform, administrative reform

CLARIFYING CONVERGENCE

Striking similarities and durable differences in public management reform

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All around the world governments are recognising the opportunity to improve the quality and effectiveness of the public sector. Privatisation, market testing and private finance are being used in almost every developed country. It's not difficult to see why.

(Dorrell 1993 – Dorrell was then a junior minister in the UK Treasury)

If the rise of entrepreneurial government is an inevitable shift rather than a temporary fad . . . one would expect it to happen in other nations (than the USA) as well. And to a startling degree, it has. A similar process of transformation is underway throughout the developed world.

(Osborne and Gaebler 1992: 328)

Though the various terms – new public management, managerialism, entrepreneurial government – may vary, they point to the same phenomenon. This is the replacement of traditional bureaucracy by a new model based on markets. Improving public management, reducing budgets, privatisation of public enterprise seem universal . . .

(Hughes 1998: 4)

The movement has been striking because of the number of nations that have taken up the reform agenda in such a short time and because of how similar their basic strategies have been.

(Kettl 2000: 1)

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the period since 1980 has witnessed an apparently unending wave of public management reforms in the developed world (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000). There is disagreement, however, about the distribution and direction of this sometimes frenetic activity. Some say that the distribution is wide and the direction is converging – that public management reform is a global phenomenon and that everyone is travelling along roughly the same road. The widely sold Americans, Osborne and Gaebler, are probably the best-known exponents of this view, arguing that the advent of 'entrepreneurial government' is both worldwide and 'inevitable' (Osborne and Gaebler 1992: 325–8). While Osborne and Gaebler's text *Re-inventing Government* was not itself particularly scholarly, their basic belief in convergence seems to have been shared by some of the leading public administration academics in Europe, Australasia and North America (e.g. Hughes 1998; Kettl 2000; Lane 2000).

However, not all the experts agree with the interpretations expressed in our opening quotations. Some say that there is partial convergence, but that it is far from universal, with certain countries, such as Germany and Japan being noticeable absentees (Jones 1993; Flynn and Strehl 1996). Others argue that, even among the broadly similar states of North-West Europe, convergence has been exaggerated – that there are different starting points, capacities for reform and directions of travel (Olsen and Peters 1996; Christensen and Laegreid 1998; Premfors 1998; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000).

These differing views may be founded partly on the sheer difficulty of doing large-scale comparative research on administrative change. The amount of material is huge.

The linguistic barriers are formidable (particularly for the often language-poor Americans and British, who tend to dominate the Anglophone literature). Travel and access may be problematic. In short, the different views may to some extent derive from forgivable, but nonetheless culpable weaknesses in ‘sampling’ and in the interpretation of local administrative cultures.

Closer inspection suggests that there is more to it than that. Sometimes the selfsame reform is interpreted differently by different writers. It would appear that different standards of evidence and different concepts of ‘convergence’ are in play, some more sophisticated than others. Furthermore, ‘convergence’ itself is far from being a neutral, technical or scientific concept. It is frequently used in a normatively charged way – for example in the argument that a particular course of action should be adopted because many other countries are doing it (‘let’s not be left behind’) or because there is some particular example of ‘modernization’ (or even ‘success’) that should be copied (several countries have admired the UK Next Steps programme of creating semi-autonomous executive agencies, and have launched agency programmes of their own – see Pollitt *et al.* forthcoming). In the first of the opening quotations to this article a Conservative minister used the concept of convergence to suggest that the market-oriented reforms of which his government were so fond were both beneficial and more-or-less inevitable – everyone was doing them. At the same time he claimed credit for his government as a world-leader in this particular type of change. The rhetorical power of convergence as a claim to legitimacy can easily lead to overstatements of its extensiveness or depth.

This article unpacks the concept of *convergence*. It proposes a more differentiated and therefore discriminating concept of convergence, and suggests that different research strategies are necessary to probe the different aspects of the phenomenon. It shows how different conceptions of convergence can easily lead to different conclusions being drawn concerning its extent and significance. Finally, it deploys and combines certain theoretical approaches which have the potential to explain some of the apparent divergence of views concerning the extent of international convergence in public management reform.

DEFINING THE NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

One obvious source of divergent interpretation might lie in varying conceptions of ‘NPM’. To a limited extent this probably is the case. Many authors offer definitions and few are identical (e.g. Hood 1991; Ferlie *et al.* 1996; Lane 2000). Some draw interesting distinctions between US-style reinvention and Anglo-Australasian NPM (Kettl 2000). Nevertheless, one can make too much of these distinctions. They are certainly useful for more detailed exercises in comparing two or more countries, and for the forensic analysis of reform trajectories within individual jurisdictions. For the purposes of this article, however, the general elements of the ‘new model’ – those

which therefore form the ‘target’ for convergence – are accepted by most commentators. Principally, these are as follows:

- A shift in the focus of management systems and management effort from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes (OECD 1997; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000).
- A shift towards more measurement, manifesting itself in the appearance of batteries of performance indicators and standards (OECD 1997; Pollitt 2000b).
- A preference for more specialized, ‘lean’, ‘flat’ and autonomous organizational forms rather than large, multi-purpose, hierarchical bureaucracies (Boston *et al.* 1996; Hughes 1998; Pollitt *et al.* 2001).
- A widespread substitution of contract or contract-like relationships for hierarchical relationships (Harden 1992; Lane 2000).
- A much wider than hitherto use of market or market-like mechanisms for the delivery of public services (including privatization, contracting out, the development of internal markets, etc. – see especially OECD 1993; Walsh 1995; Lane 2000).
- A broadening and blurring of the ‘frontier’ between the public and private sectors (characterized by the growth of public/private partnerships of various kinds and the apparent proliferation of ‘hybrid’ organizations – see, for example, Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Lowndes and Skelcher 1998; Hupe and Meijs 2000).
- A shift in value priorities away from universalism, equity, security and resilience and towards efficiency and individualism (Hood 1991; Clarke and Newman 1997).

Taken together, these trends shape a general vision of the future public sector upon which, it is said, many countries are converging. It will be a smaller public sector, intensively focused on efficiency and continuous improvement. It will consist of small, core ministries (responsible for strategy) and a range of specialized, semi-autonomous agencies (responsible for operations). It will work within clear performance frameworks that specify budgets and expected results. It will make widespread use of market and market-type mechanisms, and will frequently work in partnership with for-profit and voluntary sector organizations.

WHAT MIGHT ‘CONVERGENCE’ MEAN?

The simplest image of convergence is that of a number of lines converging on a point. In administrative terms this could be thought of as many different jurisdictions adopting similar – or even identical – organizational forms and procedures. Then one could truly say that ‘everyone is doing it’, where ‘it’ might consist of specific structural forms such as semi-autonomous executive agencies or provider/producer splits and specific procedures such as performance budgeting, performance-related pay and total

quality management (TQM). In due course hearts and minds would probably follow authority, money and procedure, so that eventually some kind of *cultural* convergence would also take place.

One major problem with this simple image is that it is – as we shall see – too simple. Another is that most treatments of convergence focus on only one step in the middle of a long march. They tend to focus on the step of *adoption* – the point at which a jurisdiction proclaims that it now ‘has’ (or *is going to have*) agencies, or TQM, or whatever. The assumption – or implication – is that an official pronouncement in favour of a reform of type ‘X’ means that, if other countries have already similarly supportive statements about ‘X’, then the point of convergence is as good as reached. This is a principal limitation of some of the PUMA/OECD publications which show tables with asterisks denoting which countries have adopted reform X or Y (OECD 1997: 132–3 and erratum). It is hard to know exactly what they signify – whether one asterisk is equal to another, and whether the adoption is a brief flirtation or a deep meaningful relationship.

Similarly, a limitation of much of the (political science) ‘policy transfer’ and (business studies) ‘diffusion’ literatures is that they focus mainly on the phase in which an ‘importing’ jurisdiction adopts a given policy or programme from an ‘exporting’ jurisdiction. Researchers frequently concern themselves mainly with a search for the ‘conditions’ favourable to transfer, both at the exporting end and with the importer (Rose 1993). Again, therefore, attention tends to be focused on a defining moment or phase when a specified policy is ‘bought and sold’, and the story told builds to that particular climax. A typical question is: ‘Why was policy X adopted by country B but not by country C?’

Conceptualizations of this kind are seldom adequate characterizations of the process of public management reform. Most of what we know about such reform suggests that it is almost always a multi-step, and frequently a long drawn-out and erratic process. First, there is debate and the formulation of reform ideas. Then there is the attempt to assemble a sufficient coalition to enact reform. If this is successful, a decision to adopt may be announced. But, if lasting change is to be achieved, the decision to adopt has to be backed with resources and a sustained determination to implement the reform in question. It is not at all unusual for this pre-requisite to be lacking. Of Norwegian administrative reforms over the last fifteen to twenty years, Laegreid and Roness write that:

The overall impression is that there is a relatively loose connection between the reform measures and the changes which have actually occurred, especially if we look at the scope of the changes and the intensity of the implementation process, and not just at the direction of the changes.

(Laegreid and Roness 1999: 318)

Similarly, in Canada under the premiership of Brian Mulroney, a number of important reforms were announced but then allowed to decay (Savoie 1994). Even reforms

backed by the much-vaunted 'clout' of Mrs Thatcher could fizzle out. Of her Financial Management Initiative one scholar concluded that: 'Five years after its inception, the FMI had "run out of steam". Its successes, although present, were limited. Its failures, while understandable, were manifest' (Zifcak 1994: 69).

One of the most obvious reasons why attempts at implementation falter is that they rarely, if ever, take place on the 'level playing field' so much beloved of the metaphorically sporty Anglophone world. More commonly implementers find that they are obliged, to greater or lesser degree, to mould their innovations to the cultural, legal or organizational status quo.

Finally, it would be flying in the face of much of the history of reform to assume that even vigorous implementation was synonymous with the achievement of desired or predicted results. Some reforms just do not work, even when they are applied with exemplary energy. The UK Department of Social Security struggled for more than a decade with its grand 'Operational Strategy' for computerizing its hundreds of millions of transactions with citizens, but 'it did not achieve planned staff reductions or service quality improvements and was never fully completed' (National Audit Office 1999: 25). Famously, PPB fell well short of its objectives, despite the support of the then US President and his powerful Secretary for Defense (General Accounting Office 1997 gives a useful account of this and several other disappointing attempts at linking budgeting more closely to performance). Often reforms work in one context but not in another – the appropriate equation is $\text{CONTEXT} + \text{REFORM MECHANISM} = \text{OUTCOMES}$ (Pawson and Tilley 1997). This implies that, even if there is convergence at the stage of implementation, there may be continued divergence and variety at the stage of results. This is most clearly seen when a particular technique is applied at a number of sites, but results are diverse (for the case of the introduction of TQM in the UK NHS, see Joss and Kogan 1995; for a parallel study of quality improvement initiatives in US hospitals, see Shortell *et al.* 1995).

In sum, there are crucial temporal and contextual dimensions to management change. The consensus among both practitioners and academics is that the results of major administrative reforms usually cannot be clearly seen for three years or more after their adoption. And so on – at each step the reform project may fail, or undergo significant modification, or collide with some other set of priorities, or just quietly stall and fade (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000: 25–38).

As a reform moves through its various phases, the cast of characters also changes. For example, the opinions of ministers and senior civil servants may be crucial in achieving the decision to adopt, but the attitudes and capabilities of rank and file staff may be more important when it comes to 'rolling out' the reform into local offices. 'The bureaucracy', contrary to some popular stereotypes, is far from uniform. Research in a number of countries shows that both enthusiasm for and assessment of specific reforms varies considerably, according to the individual's position in the hierarchy. For example, in Australia, France and the USA middle- and lower-level staff

show less enthusiasm for enacted reforms than do the ‘mandarins’ at the top (Task Force on Management Improvement 1992; Rouban 1995; Thompson 2000).

In principle, therefore, we need a concept of convergence which reflects this sense of management reform possessing a *trajectory*, rather than it being a binary, have/have not type of phenomenon. To return to the image of lines coming together at a point, we need a concept which will also allow for the lines to come a little closer but then proceed in parallel, never meeting, lines that lurch towards each other and then wobble away again, lines that proceed in circles over time, sometimes coming closer and then diverging (as with the cycles of fashion sometimes visible between opposing administrative principles – Hood and Jackson 1991; Hood 1998). Furthermore, we need a notion of convergence which will permit us to distinguish between discursive strategies (ministers or officials deploying their rhetorical skills to ‘talk up’ convergence) and accomplished practices (new ways of managing actually taking root in local offices and outposts throughout a jurisdiction). Finally, it would be sensible to keep in mind the distinction between convergence at the level of broad policy, such as one in favour of increased use of market mechanisms in the public sector, and convergence at the level of specific instruments, such as the adoption of mandatory competitive tendering (see Halligan 1996, for a discussion of this distinction). In the remainder of this article we will develop a concept of convergence that will accommodate these various requirements. We will also suggest that some existing theoretical perspectives can be combined in order to animate a more dynamic analysis of convergence than has hitherto usually been attempted.

THE FOUR STAGES OF CONVERGENCE

In order to capture the sense of an uncertain trajectory through time, it is proposed that a concept of convergence be adopted that contains four stages. A finer subdivision of stages is, of course, possible, but it would pay the price of becoming progressively more complicated to understand and use.

The four stages of convergence are as follows:

- (1) *Discursive convergence* – more and more people are talking and writing about the same concepts (performance budgeting, TQM, etc.). The conceptual *agenda* is converging.
- (2) *Decisional convergence* – the authorities (governments, legislatures, boards, CEOs) publicly decide to adopt a particular organizational form or technique. For example, the UK adopted a national citizen’s charter in 1991, the French in 1992, the Belgians in 1993, the Italians in 1993, and so on.
- (3) *Practice convergence* – public sector organizations begin to work in more similar ways. For example, many jurisdictions use competitive tendering for a larger and larger proportion of their budgeted expenditure, or performance-related pay

arrangements are applied to a growing percentage of the public sector labour force.

- (4) *Results convergence* – this is when reforms produce their intended (and unintended effects) so that the outputs and outcomes of public sector activity begin to converge. For example the unit costs of issuing passports may fall in every country that re-engineers the issuing process in a certain way, or hospital waiting times may fall in each or every jurisdiction which practices TQM, or an international benchmarking exercise may result in the poorest performers (of some specified function) upgrading their practices through the study of the better performers, so that standards converge (see, for example, the UK benchmarking exercise reported in Next Steps Team, 1998).

Clearly, convergence at one stage does not necessarily imply convergence at the next. The process can dwindle or disappear during any of these stages. For example, the Italian citizen's charter (*La Carta dei Servizi*) was launched, with appropriate fanfare, in 1993, but the impact was so weak that it had to be re-launched 1995. Survey data in 1998 indicated that most Italians still could not remember hearing of it (Schiavo 2000). What is more, convergence at one of the later stages can be accompanied by growing divergence at the earlier stages – as when field agencies, after years of moving up the learning curve, are finally getting the hang of a new system, just as the political élite is deciding on a new reform.

RESEARCHING CONVERGENCE: HORSES FOR COURSES

If the four-stage concept is accepted, it has clear and significant consequences for research strategies and methods. In this section we will summarize the key implications.

Discursive convergence is most obviously researched using the largely desk-based techniques of documentary analysis and textual deconstruction. One studies government documents, political speeches, conference agendas, keywords in academic and professional publications, and so on. One may note the appearance of a new term ('zero-based budgeting', 'total quality management', 're-engineering') and then, using modern bibliographic methods, trace its rise and spread and, perhaps, subsequent dwindling. One may focus on the official statements emanating from some particular jurisdiction (UK government White Papers, publications by a national audit office, the annual reports of executive agencies) and count the number of appearances made by a particular new topic or technique. One may conduct semiotic analyses of specific sets of statements (see, for example, Ahonen 1993). It is easy to do this kind of research in a slapdash way – by choosing a few quotations at random and then erecting upon them a grandiose superstructure of interpretation. It is more difficult and time-consuming to do it systematically – by defining a particular set of organizations or persons or documents which make sense in relation to the research questions being

asked and then going through all the relevant materials with a keen eye for shifting audiences, nuanced meanings and linkages to other concepts and themes.

In some ways *decisional convergence* is the easiest stage about which to conduct research. Governments usually publicize their decisions about management reform – indeed, they usually hope to gain some *kudos* from this, and therefore give the decisions some prominence. So it is a relatively straightforward matter to catalogue and collect reform announcements. Documentary searches of fairly well-structured sources ('White Papers' and their equivalents, records of government decisions, compendia of new statutes, transcripts of debates in the legislature) should yield reasonably complete records of decisions taken. One can sit at one's desk or computer terminal and assemble the record. Quite soon one has a list of reforms or, at least, of the names of reforms and summaries of their official rationales. Thus both discourses and decisions may be investigated through techniques of documentary analysis, but the focus in each case is different. Research into discursive convergence is concerned, so to speak, to map the tides of debate. How and when does a particular wave ('a customer focus', 'core competencies') begin to travel and grow? Research on decisional convergence is less concerned with the tides and waves than with the individual boats that are launched upon them (for example the decision to finance TQM pilots in the UK National Health Service or to downsize British, Finnish or New Zealand central departments).

To research *practice convergence* is a tougher challenge than identifying formal decisions. Only occasionally do official publications offer a sufficient account of what is going on 'on the ground'. Furthermore, even where official accounts do exist, there is an understandable tendency for them to emphasize the achievements of reform, and to move fairly swiftly over the less successful aspects or cases. The implication for the researcher who is seeking a systematic and scientific description of the extent of practice convergence is usually that extensive fieldwork will be necessary. This, in turn, implies a research project with adequate time, resources and access. When one is trying to compare developments in a number of countries the task is seldom straightforward. For example, a recent academic research project investigating the development of performance audit by national audit offices in five European states found it far easier to compare what these offices *said* they did (i.e. decisional convergence) than to count how often each institution actually *used* certain performance measurement techniques and criteria in practice (i.e. practice convergence – see Pollitt *et al.* 1999). A further complexity is the multi-layered nature of administrative action. It may look as though both the UK and Germany have set up independent agencies for telecommunications regulation. In terms of institutional facades, they have. However, the actual decision-making practices within these institutions are conducted very differently (Boellhoff 2000).

Finally, looking for a *convergence of results* is likely to be fraught with difficulties. For various reasons, the final *outcomes* of public management reform are frequently difficult to pin down, and few governments have even tried very hard (Pollitt 1995; Pollitt and

Bouckaert 2000: ch. 5). To *compare* results across jurisdictions and organizations is more difficult still. In those instances where it has been attempted there tends to be an unceasing argument over both the validity of the findings and the attribution of reasons for them (witness the debate over educational attainment in different national school systems, or the cost-effectiveness of alternative systems of health care). In short, any attempt to compare trends in the outcomes of public polices in different jurisdictions (for example falling unemployment and crime, rising educational achievements and innovation) will require the kind of full-scale evaluations which are expensive, time-consuming, difficult to design and – in the real world – noticeable by their rarity. Even the somewhat less demanding business of making international comparisons of *outputs* (unit cost of weather forecasts or driving licences issued; number of benefits claims processed per member of staff per year) tends to throw up a series of fierce methodological challenges.

Researching the *whole trajectory of convergence*, on an international scale, is therefore a formidable undertaking. It would require considerable time, plentiful resources, command of an extensive array of different research techniques, good access to many institutions in many countries and wide-ranging linguistic skills. Both academics and, indeed, governments themselves are usually obliged to content themselves with far more limited investigations – often of only one stage and/or of only a few countries. International organizations such as PUMA/OECD or the World Bank may find it easier to go wider (geographically) but not necessarily deeper (in terms both of research techniques and of the number of stages subject to direct enquiry). In one way this may seem an obvious point, but, once accepted, its consequences for the debate about convergence are considerable. It means that neither the believers in convergence nor the agnostics (nor the atheists) can be entirely sure of their ground.

Because the decisional stage is probably the easiest of the four to research, there is likely to have been a systematic bias towards that kind of evidence (with perhaps a subsidiary bias towards discursive convergence, which is relatively easy to pick up on an impressionistic basis, even if it is more difficult to research systematically). In the remainder of the article we will argue that, if there is indeed an over-concentration on decisional convergence (and a corresponding lack of systematic research into practice convergence and results convergence) then the most likely result will be considerably to overstate the extent of convergence.

EXPLAINING CONVERGENCE: SOME RELEVANT THEORIES

The argument now jumps to a different level. Until now we have been arguing for a particular concept of convergence (the four stages) on the grounds that this could encompass and reflect a more adequate picture of the complexities of administrative life than concentration on just one stage (or, indeed, any account that mixes more than

one stage without recognizing their differences). Now we turn to the substantive question of whether there has been international convergence or not.

For reasons already given, it is unlikely that anyone is in a position authoritatively to pronounce a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to this question. All we will do here, therefore, is first, indicate how the debate about convergence can be connected to certain bodies of theory, and, second, advance a hypothesis for further testing. The hypothesis is that the extent of convergence declines sharply as one moves through the discursive to the decisional to the practice and finally to the results categories. (The reader who is not persuaded by this hypothesis does not also have to reject the four-stage concept developed earlier. It is perfectly possible to accept the conceptualization advanced above, but to resist the particular way in which it will now be put to use.)

Contemporary organization theory provides some strong suggestions as to why convergence – at least of a sort – might prove to be popular. Several leading brands of social theory are essentially functionalist in structure. Theorists in institutional economics (both of the principal agent and the property rights variety) tend to explain organizational forms in terms of utility maximization. If one form is more efficient than another then, given space for competition, it will progressively replace the other (van Thiel 2000). Many of the elements of the NPM model noted earlier fit rather well with this kind of theory (indeed, in some cases such forms were chosen by political and bureaucratic actors under the clear influence of rational choice ideas – see Boston *et al.* 1996). In line with property rights theory, privatization, corporatization, contracting out and performance-related pay are all likely to increase the sense of 'ownership' staff have for the services and products their organizations generate. Contractualization of previously hierarchical relationships, if competently executed, may give principals a clearer view of the performance of their agents, thus ameliorating the monitoring problems with which agency theorists are so concerned (Boyne 1998). Separating policy and strategy from operations will serve the interests of senior bureaucrats (Dunleavy 1991). Note, however, that rational choice theories do not *necessarily* predict convergence. Rather they forecast that, *if* competition between forms exists and *if* the circumstances in different jurisdictions are similar, *then*, over time, the fittest forms will prevail.

A different – but nevertheless functional – logic of efficiency informs the work of most contingency theorists. They, too, believe that a more efficient organizational form will eventually win out, although efficiency is here defined in terms of adaptation to specific environments (Donaldson 1985). Therefore, if (and again it is a big 'if') the environments of public sector organizations have been changing in a particular direction, then one might expect a learning process in which governments gradually converge on those organizational forms which best handle the new circumstances.

The Osborne and Gaebler argument is also functional – convergence on a new way of organizing public tasks is happening because the old way ('traditional bureaucracy') does not work under contemporary conditions and therefore governments all over the

world are migrating towards a new way of running things ('entrepreneurial government') which does work. For functional theories, results are crucial. If entrepreneurial government/NPM does not work, then presumably the search will turn to something else. One may therefore expect reformers to be intensely focused on the *results* of the changes which they are putting in place.

However, there is also a rich non-functional theoretical tradition, which approaches the phenomenon of convergence in a very different way. One might dub this body of work as 'social constructivist' or 'interpretive/hermeneutic'. From this perspective change is not usually – and certainly not always – driven by functional imperatives of efficiency or good environmental 'fit'. Organizational reform is envisaged as being strongly shaped by a 'logic of appropriateness':

Action is often based more on identifying the normatively appropriate behavior than on calculating the return expected from alternative choices. Routines are independent of the individual actors who execute them and are capable of surviving considerable turnover in individuals . . . Rules, including those of various professions, are learned as catechisms of expectations. They are constructed and elaborated through an exploration of the nature of things, of self-conceptions, and of institutional and personal images.

(March and Olsen 1989: 22–3)

Constructivists of different hues have also argued for the importance of institutional path dependency (Pierson 2000) and of considerations of legitimacy, symbolism and fashion (see, for example, Christensen and Laegreid 1998; Premfors 1998; Guyomarch 1999). Thus constructivism is as internally various as functionalism, but stands on a common assumption that the evolution of organizations cannot be adequately explained solely by reference to 'objective' factors of performance, efficiency and measurable contingencies, or, indeed, by models of individual utility maximization.

Powell and DiMaggio, for example, have written influentially concerning the convergence of organizational forms. They identify three reasons for 'institutional isomorphism' (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). First, there is '*coercive isomorphism*', where an organization adopts a particular form because it is under pressure or instructions to do so from some other organization to which it is subordinate. Second, there is '*mimetic isomorphism*' where, uncertain as to how to deal with new pressures, an organization elects to copy innovations going on elsewhere (or *believed* to be going on elsewhere). If in doubt, copy what the perceived leaders of the field – the most modern, successful, fashionable or profitable organizations – are doing. Third, there is '*normative isomorphism*', where an organization is operating in a field that is heavily influenced by norms set by some body external to themselves. The classic professions of medicine and law are good examples – the organization of hospitals and firms of solicitors have, historically, been extensively influenced by the norms and standards (procedural, ethical, etc.) laid down by the respective professional institutions. Since the 1970s, management itself has acquired some of the trappings of a profession, and

it may be that current reform fashions draw upon the norms established during the boom in generic management teaching over the last two decades.

According to this view, therefore, convergence takes place because organizations are instructed to converge (coercive isomorphism) or because the least risky course seems to be to follow the leaders (mimetic) or because of the influence of professional norms and standards (normative). It may be hoped or believed that, because of reform, efficiency and/or effectiveness will improve, but, from this perspective, this is not a *necessary* condition for convergence. Isomorphism is more about organizational legitimacy and symbolism than about the 'hard cash' of measured productivity. It places more emphasis being seen to act appropriately than on maximizing efficiency or effectiveness.

It is important not to exaggerate the gulf between functionalism and constructivism. Their deep epistemological differences do not mean that we have to believe that one is always correct and the other always without value. While each challenges the other, each also has the capacity to respond by absorbing many of the challenges within its own theoretical formulation (as, for example, when Dunleavy showed that bureaucratic motives far more complicated than crude budget maximization could still be explained within a rational choice framework – Dunleavy 1991). Most constructivists are quite prepared to accept that there are many occasions on which bureaucrats and politicians do indeed follow a calculating 'logic of consequentiality' rather than a logic of appropriateness – the argument is about the extent to which the one type of logic prevails over the other, or about which 'frames' which (see, for example, March and Olsen 1989: 25). Certainly, many constructivists recognize that the logic of consequentiality has become more and more dominant when it comes to *explaining and justifying* actions: 'Having determined what action to take by a logic of appropriateness, in our culture we justify the action by a logic of consequentiality' (March and Olsen 1989: 162).

EXPLAINING CONVERGENCE: SOME LIMITATIONS TO FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES

We now turn to the substantive issue of the extent and type of convergence. The hypothesis proposed is that the extent of convergence declines rapidly as one moves through the four stages (discursive, decisional, practice and results). In developing this hypothesis it will be suggested that functionalist theories, though furnishing useful concepts and yielding many valuable insights, are insufficient by themselves. Constructivist perspectives and methods offer 'added explanatory value'.

The argument runs as follows:

- Functionalism reasoning depends heavily on a kind of 'natural selection by performance improvement'. Governments will be obliged to converge on performance-improving changes because of the pressures which are upon them.

In the increasingly globalized world of government, good news travels fast, and soon everyone will be grasping for proven solutions to contemporary problems of public sector organization. One serious problem for this view is that, in a number of ways, the evidence does not support it. To begin with, there seems little correlation between the countries which have reformed furthest and fastest, and those which could be said to need such reforms most (Wright 1997). 'Globalization' (in its myriad forms and meanings) certainly poses problems which governments are obliged to address, but it does not dictate single organizational solutions. Even if it did, different states occupy markedly different niches in the global economy and this, apart from anything else, would be likely to encourage differences of response (Hirst and Thompson 1996).

- Furthermore, evidence of reform leading directly to large improvements in outputs, outcomes and legitimacy is very patchy indeed. In many cases no evaluation was done, or the evaluations conducted were seriously limited or flawed (Pollitt 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000: ch. 5). The seeming lack of strong interest in stringent evaluation of one's own reforms is hard to explain for functionalists, but much easier to understand if one assumes that much reform is either ordered from 'on top' (coercive isomorphism, as with compulsory competitive tendering or the institution of the National Health Service 'internal market' in the UK) or copied from jurisdictions which are advertising themselves as being in the vanguard of fashion (mimetic isomorphism, as when departments or agencies or local authorities or health authorities copy what they perceive to be well-received innovations made by other organizations in their peer group). Sometimes mimetic isomorphism may be helped along by earmarked financial support. Thus, within the UK National Health Service in the early 1990s, individual health agencies were encouraged to experiment with TQM via a system of pump-priming finance from the relevant ministry. This creates an interesting hybrid category for the Powell and DiMaggio classification of isomorphism – a situation in which organizations are not actually coerced to adopt a particular form, but are differentially rewarded for choosing to do so.
- Nor does there seem to have been any systematic 'results-testing' by those countries which most obviously imitated or borrowed reforms from the 'leaders'. Imitation was more often a question of 'what should we do and how should we do it?' than of 'what evidence of improved results is there to warrant our following this course of action?'. Again, this behaviour is hard to explain from a functionalist perspective, but relatively easy using the model of mimetic or normative isomorphism. The endless foreign delegations travelling all the way to New Zealand to inspect their reforms, and the spreading of US/UK/Australian/New Zealand models through PUMA/OECD were more examples of bandwagons and fashions rolling forward in a climate of uncertainty rather than of any sober appraisal of measured results (Halligan 1996; Premfors 1998). There were results, of course, but generally couched in much 'softer' currency

than large-scale improvements in measured productivity. The evidence tended to be both more case-specific and more subjective: staff savings in this particular unit or an expressed belief among senior officials that relationships were now more output-oriented or that management was more dynamic. In some instances it is likely that expenditure savings, far from being the main result of management reforms, were actually their main cause (Murray 1998).

- Nor is everyone travelling in the same direction anyway. Deep differences of approach continue to manifest themselves between different countries and groups of countries. The Finns do not aspire to the 'New Zealand model' and the French do not want to copy the American 'National Performance Review' (Guyomarch 1999; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000). The Canadians claim to have a Canadian model (Bourgon 1998) and a number of leading German authorities believe that they have little to learn from the Anglo-Australo-American paradigm of NPM/reinvention (Wollmann 1997; Derlien 1998). Even strong believers in convergence see important differences between, on the one hand, the UK and New Zealand and, on the other, the later American attempt at 'reinvention' (Kettl 2000). Such multiple and durable differences are hard to explain within a model that assumes irresistible and uniform global pressures.
- Constructivist theories are in general more sympathetic to the possibility of continuing differences. Even Powell and DiMaggio – who are trying to explain convergence – do not claim that convergence is present in all fields. Their point is simply that, under certain conditions it is likely to occur. If those conditions are not present, then isomorphism will not take place. If, therefore, the Germans or the French see themselves as having their own, strong and relatively successful models of public sector organization, they will be that much less likely to copy models from administrative systems which, in general terms, they do not much admire (UK, USA). The fashion conscious buy clothes with labels such as Armani or Versace, not Walmart or British Home Stores. Other brands of constructivism (especially 'historical institutionalism' – Premfors 1998) treat more directly with the issue of diversity. One strong argument is that pattern of existing institutions shapes the distribution of costs and benefits likely to be obtained by moving to any particular new form. Thus an inheritance of this or that system of politico-administrative institutions will influence the payoffs from any given new reform proposal. This 'path dependency' is a general characteristic of political systems (Pierson 2000) and is clearly visible in the detailed trajectories of public management reform (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000: chs 2–4).

This line of interpretation leads directly to a crucial issue. Can the existence of durable differences be reconciled with the world portrayed in the opening quotations – a world where many countries are homing in on a similar set of reform ideas and techniques? Our answer to this will be that *some* reconciliation of durable differences

and striking similarities *is* possible. To do this, however, we need to combine the four-stage conceptualization of convergence with further constructivist insights. In particular, we need to recognize that path dependency is not only a matter of concrete payoffs and penalties (important though these are) – it also influences the way reform proposals are discursively (re)constructed in each new context to which they are brought.

EXPLAINING CONVERGENCE: TALK, DECISIONS, ACTIONS AND RESULTS

The Swedish scholar Niels Brunsson distinguishes between organizational talk, decisions and actions (Brunsson 1989). At the core of his provocative account is the observation that organizational talk, organizational decisions and organizational actions are frequently divergent, and that, far from being some kind of mistake, this divergence serves a series of useful purposes. In particular, it enables political organizations to cope with conflicting and ambiguous demands. In Brunsson's world organizations routinely say one thing, decide another and do a third. His insights have influenced the conceptualization of convergence presented in this article. Thus his tripartite schema matches our first three distinctions (between discursive convergence, decisional convergence and practice convergence). However, we added a fourth stage, because we wanted explicitly to allow for the fact that results do not always correspond with what the practitioners/takers of action hope or intend.

One of the points established by Brunsson is that talk, decisions and actions each have their own payoffs. One certainly does not have to wait for final results to get a reward. This observation corresponds with many commonplace occurrences in organizational life – certainly in the public sector. The minister gets headlines and political kudos from launching a new reform today. The minister's speech says that the government is moving with the times and introducing the latest management techniques (public – private partnerships; re-engineering; one-stop shopping) in order to provide citizens with the highest quality service at the lowest feasible cost. However, *s/he* is probably not around when, four or five years later, a national audit office study reveals that the reform has not worked at all well. This is decisional convergence, but not necessarily convergence of practice or results. Or again, managers get favourable recognition from their seniors for 'talking the talk' – deploying the vocabulary upon which managerial fashion has currently converged (recently, in the UK, 'leverage', 'partnership', 'networked solutions', 'empowerment', 'virtual organizations'; half a generation ago 'synergy', 'cultural shift', 'right-sizing', 'close to the customer', 'a passion for excellence'). This is discursive convergence – it sounds up-to-the-minute but does not necessarily mean that any real decisions have been taken, still less that practice is about to change (the talkers do not necessarily 'walk the walk').

Many studies have confirmed that substantial gaps between rhetoric and decisions, and between decisions and practice, have characterized the process of public manage-

ment reform (e.g. for Canada, Savoie 1994; for Norway, Christensen and Laegreid 1998; for the USA, General Accounting Office 1997; more generally, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000). The significance of this for our analysis is that it supports our earlier suggestion that convergence could be taking place at one or more stages without necessarily doing so at all four. In other words *there may be a considerable convergence of discourse and/or of decisions, without anything like the same degree of convergence of practice (and still less of results)*.

If this is accepted, then a sympathetic reinterpretation of the best-selling *Reinventing Government* might run as follows. First, Osborne and Gaebler accurately identified a considerable (though by no means total) convergence of *talk* (though they largely ignored some substantial, non-Anglophone islands of resistance and criticism). The convergence of *decisions* is less pronounced, but our own work indicates that there has definitely been some, at least among the ten OECD countries we surveyed (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000: appendices). Osborne and Gaebler were therefore correct here too – up to a point. There *has* been a series of decisions in which governments have adopted measures which they frequently first heard about from other governments (sometimes bilaterally, sometimes through international organizations). Performance budgeting, accruals accounting, performance-related pay, agencification of executive tasks and public – private partnerships are only some of the reforms which have been copied internationally. Beyond this, however, it is easy to overstate convergence. To begin with, one needs to look at reform packages as a whole, within each national context, taking account of what does *not* change as well as what does. Otherwise one is only looking at the evidence of change, not at the evidence of continuity. Finding a few positive cases and anecdotes hardly proves the transformation of a large, complex and diverse public sector. Therefore, the *extent* of innovation is important. Many countries may be using competitive tendering, but there is a big difference between a country which uses it in a few instances, on a pilot basis, and another country which makes such tendering mandatory for most public authorities across a wide range of goods and services. This leads to the point that, as Brunsson insists, decisions to adopt often fail to lead to very deep or widespread adoption in *practice*. In 1995 both Italy and the UK had a ‘citizen’s charter’, but the effect on practice seems to have been far greater in the colder of the two countries (Schiavo 2000).

Functionalists, on the one hand and constructivists on the other, have very different explanations of the frequent failure vigorously to implement reform decisions. For the functionalists it is indeed a failure – progress is being held back, probably by the self-interested manoeuvres of ‘traditional bureaucrats’. However, for constructivists the main payoff may be in the decision to do something rather than the actual doing of it – the announcement of reform wins praise and attracts legitimacy among significant audiences, but actual implementation may be highly risky and possibly counter-productive. This is not necessarily Machiavellian – those who announced the original decision may well not have foreseen all the difficulties of implementation. Public

management reform is far from an exact science: unforeseen or downplayed implementation problems may be factors in weakening 'follow-through' and 'roll out', so that practice convergence turns out to be smaller than decisional convergence.

As for convergence of *results*, this usually remains elusive. Of course, performance indicator systems have sprouted up in most countries, and, for the optimistic, these may appear to hold out the prospect of pinning down performance improvements so that, eventually, international comparisons will be routine. At that stage, the diligent observer may be able to detect a convergence of results, as legislatures and publics in the under-performing countries put pressure on their administrations to 'catch up'.

However, alongside the spread of performance indicator systems for measuring 'results', there has been a parallel development of a critical literature that identifies countless fallibilities, limitations and paradoxes in public sector performance measurement (Meyer and Gupta 1994; Smith 1996; Talbot 1996; Pollitt 2000b). There has also been a steady trickle of studies by national audit offices calling attention to sometimes serious problems with the measurement systems used by departments and agencies (e.g. National Audit Office 1995, 1998; the Swedish RRV has made the validation of performance data a regular part of its work). Finally, there is persuasive evidence from the world of evaluation that the results of reforms frequently depend as much on the local context as on the characteristics of the reform mechanism (Pawson and Tilley 1997). Anyone who reads this literature will find it difficult to believe that we are close to being able confidently to judge to what extent, if at all, the *results* of reformed public services in different countries are converging.

CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF WORDS AND THE WORDS OF POWER

We have argued that 'convergence' is quite a complex phenomenon, and that a useful conceptualization of it needs to distinguish between at least four stages – discourse, decisions, practice and results. Each of these four typically requires a somewhat different research strategy. Research into decisions is the most straightforward. Research into results is the most difficult. Unsurprisingly, both the academic and the practitioner literature, when read carefully, seem to be more about the first two stages of convergence than the third and fourth. Little if any work examines convergence right through all four stages – and, indeed, such research, though feasible in principle, would be very difficult to organize.

This (understandable) bias in the study of convergence means that the substantive question of the international extent of convergence does not yet have a certain answer. Such partial evidence as is available casts doubt on the cruder version of the functional hypothesis, namely that governments all over the world are being forced (by 'modern conditions') to adopt increasingly similar organizational forms and practices. To begin with, environmental pressures differ enormously in different countries, sectors and activities. One size is most unlikely to fit all. At the least, therefore, there is a need

for functionalists to model different environments in some detail, and not to assume that 'globalization' is everywhere demanding similarity. Of course, sophisticated contingency theorists like Donaldson and rational choice theorists like Dunleavy, do indeed model in this way, and that gives them the possibility of producing far more discriminating accounts than those of, say, Osborne and Gaebler.

However, even more sophisticated and nuanced functionalist accounts seem to fail to explain some of the available evidence. NPM-type reforms have frequently been pursued in the absence of any real evidence for or analysis of efficiency gains. Sometimes they have generated significant perverse consequences or have been swiftly diluted or abandoned (especially in 'soft', highly professionalized human services sectors). Constructivist approaches seem to offer a better understanding of some of these events. Unlike functional accounts, these theories show how important institutional actors obtain positive payoffs from talk and decisions, even if they do not lead to action, or lead to only modest, incremental change. They also show how, through coercive forms of isomorphism, fashionable organizational forms may be propagated even if the institutions 'on the receiving end' are lukewarm or sceptical about the benefits. (Interestingly, one of the most trenchant functionalist critics of constructivism conceded that there was empirical evidence for state-coercive isomorphism – see Donaldson 1995.)

Thus, allowing for the patchy state of knowledge about (especially) practice convergence and results convergence, and taking into account the evidence of durable national and sectoral differences, the following interpretation is proposed for further investigation and testing:

- Within the OECD world there is considerable evidence of discursive convergence towards NPM/entrepreneurial concepts and vocabulary. This is where the case for 'striking similarities' is at its strongest. However, even this proposition has to be qualified by the observation that most commentaries on the situation have been based on impressionistic rather than systematic methods of analysis. A second important qualification is that some countries appear to have been less enthusiastic participants in this discourse than others. The most active participants have been the Anglophone countries, the Netherlands and the Nordic group. The others (e.g. Germany, France, the Mediterranean states) have been much more cautious, even at the talk stage.
- There is also evidence of decisional convergence, though with roughly the same geographical inequalities as are mentioned above for discursive convergence. Even within the Anglophone group there have been differences, with reform decisions in Australia, New Zealand and the UK having been noticeably more radical and far-reaching than in Canada or the USA (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000).
- Information on practice convergence is limited. There is, however, a good deal of information to indicate that there continue to be durable differences between public administrations in different Australasian, North American and Western

European states. This suggests that practice convergence is significantly less extensive than attention to discourse alone (or even to decisions) might lead one to suppose. There is also evidence from several countries that ‘soft’ services such as education and some forms of health care fit the NPM model much less well than activities with relatively uniform production processes and more easily observable and measurable outputs and outcomes (Lane 2000).

- Information on convergence of results is sparse indeed. International benchmarking is both novel and fraught with complexity. There is no firm basis for claiming that there is as yet any large-scale convergence of results.

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