Administration, vol. 65, no. 4 (2017), pp. 111–114
doi: 10.1515/admin-2017-0038

Theory and practice of public sector reform

Steven Van de Walle & Sandra Groeneveld (New York: Routledge; 2017; ISBN: 978-1-138887-41-1; 280 pp; £110)

Originally written as a *liber amicorum* for the retirement of Professor Walter Kickert, *Theory and Practice of Public Sector Reform* ascends beyond the characteristics of your typical tribute publication, seeking to provide not only a theoretical discourse on the study of public sector reform but additionally a broad introduction into the application of public sector reform in practice. For example, rather than focusing only on Professor Kickert's impressive contributions to the field of public sector reform, the authors – lead researchers in public management – have instead created a book that offers a comprehensive introductory guide that many students in the field will find highly beneficial and relevant.

For students of public sector reform, the book provides both a reflection on the theoretical approaches to reform as well as an understanding of how reform works in practice. Furthermore, it diverges from traditional books in the field as the authors present a broad overview of public sector reform by avoiding a focus on a particular country or region. To that extent, the researchers have filled a gap in current literature by utilising commonly held theories of public sector reform to explain observed changes in public sector organisations and provide an overview of major reform trends, without focusing on minute details of particular nations, thus serving as an excellent introductory reference.

However, as editors Steven Van de Walle and Sandra Groeneveld note, there remains one distinguishing characteristic of a traditional *liber amicorum*: each author is connected in some manner to Professor Kickert, and has dedicated to their colleague a book that provides a thought-provoking and rather expansive read on a selection of topics

that delve into the theoretical and practical aspects of public management and reform.

The book is divided into three core parts, beginning with the theoretical aspects wherein the authors detail the predominant theories of reform. The authors deviate from a traditional literature review by avoiding a singular theoretical perspective, and instead offer a variety of frameworks through which readers can reflect on public reform in practice. As such, each chapter defends its theoretical perspective and outlines how it applies to reform, beginning with Johan Olsen's defence of the institutional perspective, the leading and most widely accepted theory of public management.

Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid offer their understanding on the transformative approach, emphasising how environmental and cultural factors, combined with polity features, can influence, impact or direct reform processes and designs. Following this, Sandra Van Thiel delves into the principal agent perspective, which serves as the foundational core of New Public Management. In particular, as Van Thiel explains, the principal agent perspective is frequently utilised for its ability in allowing researchers to simultaneously explain not only why particular reform methods are used but, more importantly, their implementation and correlating success or failure.

The next two chapters discuss more recent perspectives on reform, firstly with Victor Bekkers and Lars Tummers, who address innovation theory. In particular, Bekkers and Tummers discuss 'social innovation', innovations that address important societal challenges such as ageing, pollution or declining election turnout. They further identify a range of factors likely to stimulate innovation. A second perspective that has become popular is presented through a collaborative effort with Joris van der Voet, Ben S. Kuipers and Groeneveld. The authors exhibit how change management theory, often called organisational change, can coincide with and supplement the institutional approach, currently the dominant theory, and thus allow us to better understand public sector reform. Finally, Christopher Hood reflects on the significance of organisation culture to public service reform and Rod Rhodes uses public service theory to reflect on public service reforms in the UK over the past two decades.

The second section discusses what is termed 'objects of reform'. Van de Walle begins the discussion with structural and organisational reform in the public sector, shown to be the most discernible aspect of reform. This leads to a discussion by B. Guy Peters regarding the influence of changes in political administrative relations, and the

impact these changes impart on reform efforts. In particular, he highlights the significance of the inconsistency in power relations between politicians and bureaucrats, and the changes to public reform each time the balance of power shifts. Following this, Erik-Hans Klijn and Joop Koppenjan discuss how ever-increasing societal complexities have resulted in a shift from government towards network governance. However, the authors conclude that the trend towards governance will not be the 'cure-all' solution it is perceived as by some commentators. They end by highlighting the need for additional research and practical evidence in the functioning of network governance.

Following this are Groeneveld and Bram Steijn, who underscore trends in human resources management, particularly the downsizing that resulted from the financial crisis. Mirko Noordegraaf discusses the rise of reform specialists and 'reform professionalism'. The section ends with Tiina Randma-Liiv and Geert Bouckaert as they discuss the modernisation of the financial cycle, participatory budgeting and the impact the financial crisis has had on financial public structures and policy methods.

Part Three further diverges from theory and addresses the practice of public sector reform. Kim Putters begins the discussion by addressing reform within its societal and administrative contexts. Next, Richard J. Stillman demonstrates the varying methods of reform between Europe and the US, emphasising that these differing approaches influence the literature, research, ideology and implementation of public sector reform on each continent. Lastly, in a joint effort, Frans-Bauke van der Meer, Christoph Reichard and Arthur Ringeling close the discussion by highlighting the significance of research and study in the field of public sector reform by addressing their target audience: students of reform.

Each section of the book offers an extensive understanding of the field of reform, beginning with the comprehensive theoretical sections, in which the contributors clearly exhibit the advantages and disadvantages of the commonly held theories of reform. With each chapter presenting a different perspective on reform, the authors clearly demonstrate the complexity of public sector reform and its continuation across the decades, as well as the need for additional research to continue to develop and strengthen our understanding.

Overall, given the extensive and thoroughness presented on the knowledge of the theoretical and practical aspects of public sector reform, the book remains much more than a simple homage to the groundbreaking contributions developed by Professor Kickert.

However, it is pertinent to note that while the book remains an exhaustive introductory source for students of reform, the reading can be quite complex for readers outside the authors' immediate target zone and, as such, remains inaccessible for the general public. This may be particularly troubling given the nature of the book revolves around public sector reform, a topic that ought to be accessible for politicians and policymakers. As such, if potential leaders who are able to *make* the necessary changes to public sector reform find the material inaccessible, then the book cannot truly accomplish its aims to ascend beyond theory and into reality. Nonetheless, as a source for students of reform, the book remains an excellent guide into the theoretical and practical approaches of public sector reform. To that extent, the authors have given perhaps the best *liber amicorum* that they could, by providing a book that exhibits extensive scientific research and literature which seeks not only to showcase the exceptional work to the field of reform that Professor Kickert has contributed throughout his remarkable career but, more importantly, to provide students of reform with a relevant and comprehensive piece of literature.

Sheema Lughmani