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When Reforms Become Permanent In Search of Evaluation Lost

JEAN-MICHEL EYMERI-DOUZANS

Ever since the beginning of the 1980s, nearly all national governments in OECD countries, regardless of their right/left orientations, adopted ambitious and voluntarist policies intended to "reform" and "modernise" their respective public administrations. It is already widely known that the major argument given to decision-makers and public opinions alike in favour of these "constitutive" policies¹ inspired by the methods of the private sector was then their capacity to generate significant savings in public budgets and allow for "better-value-for-money" public services.

Paradoxically enough, even if the evaluation of public policies is one of the key instruments of these administrative reforms initiated often at the very top of the executive power (President and/or Prime minister), serious assessments of their successes and failures, as well as a thorough scrutiny of their total costs are rare. On the contrary, decision-makers, leaders of opinion, the media, electors-tax-payers, they all seem to take for granted that these reforms have a very high return-on-investment and allow for saving a lot of public money. In many a country, this common belief rests more on a general feeling or intuition than on empirically demonstrated facts. The various "hidden" costs of such reform programmes, financial, material, organisational, human and other, usually remain unquestioned not only by the actors involved, but also by the academic research – the silence of the latter being more surprising than the discretion of the former.

This is especially true in the case of two types of costs these reforms generate: the "transaction costs", understood in a strict economic sense and equated to the costs of information and knowledge acquisition during the process of reform, when key elements are externalised to think-tanks, consultants, external evaluators, etc.; the overall socio-economic "costs of reform", understood in a general socio-political sense, including all the unanticipated costs (such as the pressure or resistance of unions of public servants, the increased ex-post difficulties of policy co-ordination, etc.).

After several decades of implementation of neo-managerial reform programmes whose objective was to put all public policies to scrutiny, while escaping themselves to any evaluation, the time is ripe for a scientific assessment of the effective and potential costs generated by these reform policies. By virtue of their political and economical significance in our world, the comparative examination of administrative reforms in OECD countries is a compulsory element of this scientific agenda.

Let us first recall the strength of the joint success of both neo-managerial reformism and evaluation across public administrations in the OECD countries during the latest decades (1). We will then uncover the difficulties of a cross-border analysis of the costs of reforms, knowing that, embedded in their respective national configurations, those

¹ According the famous typology of Theodore J. LOWI, "Four Systems of Policy, Politics, and Choice", *Public Administration Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1972, pp. 298-310.

policies became quickly highly differentiated (2). Finally, going beyond that empirical diversity, we will draw the outline of a critical assessment of the logics active behind these administrative reforms, all animated by a permanent and probably illusory quest for a new cohesion and a renewed legitimacy of our contemporary post-modern states (3).

Reformism and Evaluation: Rising together Across Public Administration

One doesn't have to endorse a cognitive approach in policy analysis in order to agree with Peter Hall upon the fact that public policies in all developed countries have undergone, since the end 70s-early 1980s, a global "paradigm shift"¹. Whether the main driver of this "paradigm shift" is to be found in "hard facts" – globalisation of the economy making impossible for national governments to maintain the Keynesian "policy-mix", major fiscal crisis of welfare states generating huge public deficits and increase of the public dept, etc. – or in major "framing" changes in the "belief systems"² of key policy-makers converted to neo-liberalism, is of minor importance for our present analysis. As a matter of fact, the 3 Is (Institutions-Interests-Ideas) have evolved jointly in the same direction, as interdependent variables: decision-makers in public institutions, well aware of the interest of the institutions as well as of their own interest (in terms of successful career, recognition by peers and/or electors, etc.), changed altogether their policy frames of reference and the concrete policy orientations they pursue effectively³.

Within the scope of this neo-liberal paradigm shift, perfectly illustrated by the programme of "rolling back the state" implemented by the US Reagan administration and by the UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, it is the whole conception of state-society relations that has been gradually redesigned. In the terms of a sociology of knowledge, contemporary nation-states entered simultaneously into an era of contested legitimacy, and into an age of administrative reformism and evaluation of public policies. It is well known and also well documented that both the New Public Management (NPM) doctrine and the policy evaluation precepts and tools have been coined in the United States during the 1970s by a network of opinion leaders – powerful think-tanks, business schools, social scientists, consultants, executives of public agencies and policy advisers to elected politicians. During the next two decades, these policy innovations have spread all over the OECD countries and beyond⁴.

¹ Peter HALL, "Policy Paradigm, Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1993, pp. 275-296.

² Paul A. SABATIER, Hank C. JENKINS-SMITH (eds.), *Policy Change and Learning. An Advocacy Coalition Framework*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1993.

³ For an in-depth analysis of one national case, see W.J.M. KICKERT, *Public Management Reforms in The Netherlands. A Social Reconstruction of Reform Ideas and Underlying Frames of Reference*, Eburon, Delft, 2000.

⁴ For an overview on this recent history, see Jan-Eric FURUBO, Ray C. RIST, Rolf SANDHAL (eds.), *International Atlas of Evaluation*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2000.

The governmental programmes called "reform of the state" or "administrative modernisation" adopted in the early 1980s in a few leading countries and since the 1990s almost everywhere else are all inspired by the NPM and confirm its worldwide diffusion. Contrary to what it is often stated on a single voice by policy-makers, administrative practitioners and consultants, NPM is not only a "common sense" toolkit of efficient recipes and techniques to better manage organisations at a reduced cost, but a real doctrine aiming to a major transformation in the governance of public institutions and public policies¹.

The NPM rests on the basic assumption that private enterprise is an optimal model for any human organisation and that the market is the ideal mechanism for the regulation of complex societies. If "private sector is best", then, consequently, the salvation of public administrations comes from importing the private sector *modus operandi* (in particular marketing and the client-oriented perspective) based on the famous trinity "Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness" or the *Three Es*. As already shown by Christopher Pollitt², NPM is a genuine doctrine with its own core beliefs: it denies any fundamental difference between the private and the public sector with this significant corollary of understanding of the citizen as a client; it claims that the current organisation of public institutions is outdated and, therefore, must be reformed; it ascertains a set of best practices validated in the private sector which are, consequently, to be transplanted into the public sector; it holds that these organisational reforms will necessarily lead to an increased efficiency of public administrations.

Fully in line with the neoliberal *Zeigeist* of the 1980s-1990s, the NPM has become the global paradigm for public administrations in all developed countries³, without any serious discussion upon its potential generated costs. Even in the third world, the World Bank has been eager to expand the NPM logic and ethos under the wider banner of "good governance". The international consecration of NPM has been made possible by the strong commitment of such institutions as the OECD Public Management Service (PUMA), which cleverly softened the most radical aspects of the doctrine so as to make it acceptable even by social-democrat governments. For instance, the very liberal objective of "marketization" of public services, which was put at the forefront by Margaret Thatcher or John Major has been replaced by the more qualitative, neutral and consensual "client-orientedness". The same can be said about the objective of "privatisation of the employment conditions" of public agents, which has been implemented only in a few countries (e.g. Italy under the Berlusconi Government) and replaced elsewhere by the softer notion of "flexibilisation of the management of Human Resources".

During the latest decade, several additional features have been included in list, among which a special mention must be made of eGovernment: using information and communication technologies (ICT) in order to improve the quality of public services delivered by governmental institutions to citizens (G2C) and businesses (G2B) and to develop new interoperability frameworks between public institutions (G2G) has become a major technology-driven incentive for the so-called "back-

¹ As it is clearly indicated by the title of the famous propaganda book by David OSBORNE and Ted GAEBLER, *Reinventing Government*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, 1992.

² Christopher POLLITT, *Managerialism and Public Services*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993.

³ Christopher HOOD, "Contemporary Public Management: A New Global Paradigm", *Public Policy and Administration*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1995, pp. 104-117.

office reengineering”, in other words for major organisational changes in the public apparatus and its agencies, with a view to the long-term prospect of a “paperless administration” and a “seamless government”, supposed to replace the red-tape and pipeline bureaucracies and to reduce substantially the personnel costs¹. If *eGovernment* programmes have been so popular among policy-makers all over the OECD, and if they are now a major dimension of neo-managerial reforms, this is probably due to two main reasons: first, modern devices such as computers and internet, intranet, extranet exchange of data and electronic documents are perfectly consonant with the aesthetics of the modernisation policies; second, technological innovations are often considered to be value-free or ideologically neutral (which they are certainly not), and, as such, are more suited to act as a consensual driver of institutional change than the “policy narratives”², which are more explicitly rooted in the traditional political cleavages.

All in all, NPM, in its various forms and adaptations through time, has become a dominant ideology-praxeology of public administration reform: it is both a system of beliefs about what public institutions should be (ideological dimension) and a transnational repertoire of managerial recipes and techniques (praxeological dimension), broadcasted as “best practices” in international and European forums where policy-makers from various countries pick them up and transplant them into their own public administrations, generating a sort of institutional import-export circuit between the national strategies and governmental programmes of administrative reform or modernisation. In this NPM-inspired reform toolkit, the key elements are the agencification, benchmarking, indicators, accreditation procedures, the management by objectives, accountability procedures, one-stop-shops, public-private partnerships, etc., and, last but not least, evaluation.

The art of evaluation, which has become over the past decades a growingly professionalized activity, is of course not a creation of recent neo-managerial reforms. It was born in the 1970s³ under the influence of the problem-solving orientation of US public policy analysis, focused on the concrete outcomes of policy implementation, reinforced by the utmost importance given to “feedback loops” by the cybernetic-systemic paradigm dominant at that time⁴. Moreover, it would be misleading to consider evaluation as a neoliberal approach by nature: it is obvious that evaluation techniques can be mobilised to improve the welfare’ and neo-Keynesian policies. The philosophy of evaluation is also perfectly consonant with the ideas of enhancing democratic control on governmental institutions and better involving those actors targeted by the various public policies into policy networks and communities: therefore, evaluation is omnipresent in multi-actors governance and participative democracy. Even though evaluation and neo-managerialism are analytically distinct, one can easily observe that they both share the same overall objective: improving the functioning of public institutions and their capacity to reach concrete and measurable outcomes in a context of budgetary austerity.

¹ Christine LEITNER, Jean-Michel EYMERI *et al.*, *eGovernment in Europe. The State of Affairs*, report to the Como eGovernment Ministerial Conference, 2003.

² Claudio M. RADAELLI, “Logiques de pouvoir et récits dans les politiques publiques de l’Union européenne”, *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2000, pp. 255-275.

³ Peter H. ROSSI, Mark W. LIPSEY, Howard E. FREEMAN, *Evaluating: A Systematic Approach*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1993.

⁴ David EASTON, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1965; Charles O. JONES, *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy*, Duxbury Press, Belmont, 1970.

One can also observe that several key features of neo-managerial reforms are intimately linked with the culture of evaluation in its various aspects: agencification has precisely been developed to allow a better measurement of the efficiency and effectiveness of public administrations in managing precise public services, and a better control of the real "production" costs of these services; benchmarking and indicators are evidently a form of evaluation *in itinere*; accreditation and accountability procedures are part of evaluation and quality control; management by objectives implies by its very nature that the achievement of the objectives endorsed is regularly assessed; new forms of human resources management, with their "individualised contracts of objectives", regular "assessment interviews" and "performance-related pay" are precisely an attempt to infuse the culture of evaluation into the sector, etc.

Even if evaluation has not necessarily a neo-managerial drive, there is strong empirical evidence that administrative modernisation policies inspired by NPM cannot be conceived and implemented without a wide use of evaluation. Thus, it is not surprising to observe that, during the recent decades, the implementation of public reform policies went hand in hand with the development and institutionalisation of evaluation¹. Thus, it could argue that the administrative systems, governing processes and public policies of OECD countries have been subject to a cross-border phenomenon of convergence. If the "convergence thesis" was strongly advocated by the PUMA-OECD in the 1990s and early 2000s, however, by mid-2000 already, the OECD analyses became more aware of the remaining diversity, complexity, unanticipated results in that sensitive domain and of the remaining "long way forward"². Indeed, the cross-examination of these reform policies provides empirical evidence of their strong differentiation among countries.

Neo-managerial Reforms Embedded into National Configuration

Two major couples of notions borrowed from the sociological tradition³ are well suited for the analysis of the specific dynamics of the current public reformism: Georg Simmel's notions of regularities and singularities⁴ and Talcott Parsons' dialectics of homogenisation and differentiation inspired by Max Weber⁵. On the one hand, we can observe a worldwide dissemination, through mimetic replications, of certain policy narratives, core beliefs, precepts, models and a significant toolkit of managerial and evaluation instruments and techniques: this is an homogenisation phenomenon. But on the other hand, case studies and comparative empirical research show clearly how these common features are embedded in specific ways in each and every country, administrative level, policy field or, using the notion coined by Norbert Elias, in each

¹ See Steve JACOB, *Institutionnaliser l'évaluation des politiques publiques*, P.I.E.-Peter Lang, Bruxelles, 2005.

² OECD, *Governance in Transition. Public Management Reforms in OECD Countries*, Paris, 1995; OECD, *Government of the Future*, OECD, Paris, 2000; OECD, *Modernising Government. The Way Forward*, Paris, 1995.

³ Robert NISBET, *The Sociological Tradition*, Basic Books, New York, 1966.

⁴ Georg SIMMEL, *Sociologie et épistémologie*, trad. fr. L. Gasparini, PUF, Paris, 1981.

⁵ Talcott PARSONS, *The Social System*, Routledge, London, 1991 [1951].

and every "configuration"¹. In short, there are noticeable cross-border common trends of administrative reforms. But, there is also a differentiated "digestion" of those reforms in the various national settings, and, consequently, a national differentiation of the final outcomes of these reform processes². At a closer look, the differentiation of the ways those common trends are embedded into national, sectoral or territorial configurations has nothing surprising. It results from a complex web of factors that are difficult to isolate. Among them, several are worth mentioning:

First, the political regime *per se*: ambitious administrative reforms are not similarly enforced by the nearly all-powerful Prime minister of a highly centralised state (e.g. UK under Thatcher) or by the chancellor heading the coalition government of a highly federalised state (e.g. German case).

Second, the administrative cultures³: the social acceptability of the so called flexibilization of the conditions of employment of public servants is very different in a Nordic country like Sweden or Finland, where there is a strict observation of the rules, and in some southern European states where political patronage, string-pulling, and even nepotism are widely practiced.

Third, the national policy styles⁴ and the correlate different configurations of "major players"⁵ involved in reform policy networks. Reforms are not tailored and implemented in the same way in a country like France, where top civil servants have managed so far to control the content of administrative reforms and the core institutions in charge with their enforcement, and in a country like Italy, where the chronic weakness of the *alta dirigenza* has pushed the public servants into a state of submission when the new political class recruited from the world of business which came into power with Berlusconi brutally imposed a "privatization of public employment" from the top and from the outside.

Fourth, the economic and financial circumstances, especially the scope of public deficits: while the economic and financial situation of the Netherlands became critical at the beginning of the 1980s, Germany, with its strong currency, managed to preserve its status of a dominant economy and a "virtuous" state (in terms of deficits) until the Reunification; such differences have inescapably affected, directly or indirectly, the rhythm and the calendar of the introduction and enforcement of managerial reforms in the public sectors of these two countries.

¹ Norbert ELIAS, *What is Sociology?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1978.

² Such a balanced conclusion which gives room to plurality and diversity can be found, for instance, in the results of the wide trans-European survey edited by Christopher POLLITT and Geert BOUCKAERT, *Public Management Reform. A Comparative Analysis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, or in the comparative researches undertaken at the European Institute of Public Administration by Jean-Michel EYMERI-DOUZANS, *Pouvoir politique et haute administration. Une comparaison européenne*, EIPA Press, Maastricht, 2001; Christoph DEMMKE, *European Civil Services between Tradition and Reform*, EIPA Press, Maastricht, 2004. Steve JACOB, *Institutionnaliser l'évaluation des politiques publiques*, cit., reaches exactly the same overall conclusion after having compared the different forms of institutionalisation of policy evaluation in Belgium, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

³ Michelle CINI, *The European Commission: Leadership, Culture and Administration in the EU Administration*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996.

⁴ Jeremy RICHARDSON (ed.), *Policy Styles in Western Europe*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1982; see also Jean-Michel EYMERI-DOUZANS, *Pouvoir politique et haute administration...cit.*

⁵ Graham T. ALLISON, Morton H. HALPERIN, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications", *World Politics*, vol. 24, (Supplement: *Theory and Policy in International Relations*), 1972, pp. 40-79.

Other factors are also influential and should be considered, but the overall observation would remain unchanged: a true differentiation of the ways the international neo-managerial set of reforms are embedded into, or "digested" by local configurations, whatever layer of government or policy field is considered. These differentiated embeddings create serious difficulties to any researcher eager to make general statements regarding the "transaction costs" and, more generally, the overall socio-economic costs of these reform policies. This is because these costs are not to be discovered theoretically: they are always related to the specificities of each configuration, and they often result from some unanticipated "side" effects of reform programmes manifest in some settings and not in others. For instance, it would seem sound to consider that unitary states, responding to the "command and control" of one single centre, were placed in a more favourable situation than federal states to generate public administration reforms at low political and organisational costs in terms of negotiation, co-ordination, inconsistencies in policy implementation, and feed-back adaptations, etc. However, both federal (the USA and Canada) and unitary states (the UK before Blair's reforms, New-Zealand) are to be found among the leading countries of the NPM reformism, while centralised, decentralised and federal states are to be counted among those countries resisting to or facing difficulties in enforcing NPM reforms.

A second remark can be made with respect to the differences in the "transaction costs" *stricto sensu* between countries where administrative reforms have been to a wide extent conceived by external partners of the politico-administrative decision-makers, such as right-wing think-tanks and consultancy companies in the USA and UK, and countries such as France, where the whole policy cycle of administrative reforms has been so far mostly internally driven and piloted by administrative elites of the core ministries. In which of these two typical cases the "transaction costs" of administrative reforms have been higher? The answer is probably contra-intuitive: a direct knowledge of the highly non-cooperative "power games"¹ within French central administrations², where rivalry and distrust between ministerial departments are constant, incline to think that transaction costs of finding information and sharing knowledge may have been much higher in the case of the French internalised production of administrative reforms than in the American or British externalised one.

A third remark concerns the costs in terms of accountability gap and conflict resolution generated by the agencification programmes implemented in so many OECD countries, following the "Next Steps" initiative undertaken in the UK in 1988³. This functional decentralization consisting in a distinction between policy-making, retained by the "core ministries", and implementation and service-delivery tasks entrusted to autonomous "executive agencies", was designed precisely in order to generate an increased accountability of public executive managers. However, as ministers remained accountable to the Premier, to the Parliament and to the public

¹ *Ibidem.*

² Jean-Michel EYMERI-DOUZANS, *La fabrique des énarques*, Economica, Paris, 2001; IDEM, "Définir 'la position de la France' dans l'Union européenne. La médiation interministérielle des généralistes du SGC", in Olivier NAY, Andy SMITH (eds.), *Le gouvernement du compromis. Courtiers et généralistes dans l'action politique*, Economica, Paris, 2002, pp. 149-175.

³ Ibbs Report, *Improving Management in Government: The Next Steps*, HMSO, London, 1988.

opinion of anything that happened within the scope of their portfolio, they manifested the tendency, in the UK and elsewhere, to interfere regularly into the activities of the agencies on the field. Moreover, the distinction between issues of "political" nature, which must be dealt with by ministers, and "purely technical" issues, which can be handled by chief executives of the agencies, proved to be, in Britain or Sweden, in France or Italy, a source of constant contention, generating important managerial and sometimes political costs. To a closer look this is hardly surprising, considering that a dossier is not "political" or "technical" by nature, but change its status according to the degree of salience and political sensitivity of the given topics for a given government¹. Even when open conflicts are avoided, one of the main results of the agencification reforms has been to increase noticeably the number of partners with a decision-making role involved into more fragmented public policy cycles. Therefore, politicians and top officials alike came to consider² that, within these "intra-state networks"³, the co-ordination costs, including the costs of information and knowledge sharing, consultations, policy-brokering, consensus-seeking, compromise-making, and also lesson-drawing after evaluation exercises are higher than in the past.

Last but not least, in some national contexts, proactive governmental initiatives of administrative reform can face major opposition from the stakeholders, especially unions of public servants, sometimes taking the form of important social movements and strikes, leading to the abandon of the programme or even to the resignation of the minister in charge, all this generating important costs for the public budget, and even for the economy at large. That is precisely what happened in France under the government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) when a vast project of reorganisation of the powerful Ministry of Finance, intended to fuse several directorates-general, was issued and then abandoned. The forms and the intensity of the social resistance to the policies of modernisation are highly dependent on cultural variables: France is well known for its "voicing-and-striking culture", while German civil servants are denied the right to go on strike... It goes without saying that circumstances also play a key role: the major reform which led to the privatisation of France Telecom and the agencification of the Post Office – a far more controversial programme than the abovementioned attempt to reform of the French Ministry of Finance – was achieved without major social turmoil during the 1990s.

All in all, the real costs of the neo-managerial reforms of public administrations remain very difficult to analyse and assess, both because of a chronic lack of transparent information and figures and of the embedding of these reforms into national configurations making hard to identify trans-border key variables. Despite all these reserves, it is still possible to propose a more qualitative and overall assessment of the core logic at work behind all administrative reform programmes in the OECD countries (and beyond).

¹ Jean-Michel EYMERI-DOUZANS, "Frontière ou marches? De la contribution de la haute administration à la production du politique", in Jacques LAGROYE (ed.), *La politisation*, Belin, Paris, 2003, pp. 47-77.

² W.J.M. KICKERT, *Public Management Reforms in The Netherlands...cit.*; Rod A.W. RHODES, Patrick WELLER (eds.), *The Changing World of Top Officials. Mandarins or Valets?*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2001.

³ David MARSH, Martin SMITH, "The Role of Networks in an Understanding of Whitehall: Towards a Dialectical Approach", *Political Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2000, pp. 4-21.

Behind the Administrative Reforms: The Illusionary Quest for A New Cohesion and A Renewed Legitimacy of the State

There is a strong consensus among the European scholars of Public administration reform programmes, including the development and institutionalisation of evaluation, on the fact that such "constitutive policies" which target public institutions themselves are fed by two underlying major logics, active behind their specific explicit objectives: (1) to contribute to a renewed integration of a segmented public administrations under the lead of the "core executive"; (2) to enhance the legitimacy of public institutions, constantly eroded in so many developed countries since the 1970s. We can try to assess the effects of these two main logics of administrative reforms.

In the first case, Christopher Hood¹ already demonstrates that neo-managerial reform programmes are "transversal" policies, which mobilise "generic" knowledge and repertoires of solutions and tools hold for valid for all public administrations in any policy field. They feed an interdepartmental diffusion of new common norms, values and practices. As such, these reforms have a strongly impact on the compartmentalisation and the segmentation of a public sector "cut into pieces"² in which each and every line ministry and specialised public agency tends to become an "autopoietic" and auto-centred universe³, with its own habits, its own common knowledge, its own routines, and also its own policy communities or networks linking the politico-administrative decision-makers and the main partners of the field. Such a fragmentation of the public apparatus that can be currently observed in so many countries creates serious risks of inconsistency in public policies implementation and generates severe co-ordination problems. Therefore, because of their transversal nature, these administrative reforms can be seen as an attempt to remedy the fragmentation.

As a consequence, administrative reforms stir intra-bureaucratic conflicts, as civil servants are perfectly aware, even if it is in practical or intuitive terms, of this integrative ambition. To be more precise, in almost all EU countries, a clear-cut distinction separates the institutions leading the reform policies, and all the others which act like more or less reluctant objects of the reforms. Unsurprisingly, the leading institutions are part of the *core executive*⁴: the *Cabinet Office* and the *Treasury* in the UK; the entourage of the Prime minister, the ministry for Public Service, the ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Budget in France⁵; the services of the Prime minister, the *Statskontoret* and the Department of Finance in Sweden⁶ etc. These core institutions also compete with each other for the leadership of the administrative reform process as a whole, each of them trying to increase their institutional power over the State

¹ Christopher HOOD, "A Public Management for all Seasons?", *Public Administration*, vol. 69, spring 1991, pp. 3-19.

² François DUPUIS, Jean-Claude THOENIG, *L'administration en miettes*, Fayard, Paris, 1985.

³ See Nicklas LUHMANN, *Politique et complexité*, trad. fr. J. Schmutz, Cerf, Paris, 1999.

⁴ Rod A.W. RHODES, "Introducing the Core Executive", in Rod A.W. RHODES, Patrick DUNLEAVY (eds.), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, Macmillan, London, 1995.

⁵ For details, see Philippe BEZES, *Réinventer l'État. Les réformes de l'administration française (1962-2008)*, PUF, Paris, 2009.

⁶ Torbjörn LARSSON, *The Government of Sweden*, Statskontoret, Stockholm, 1995.

apparatus. Eventually, this competition is the very driving force of the whole reform process. In all national cases documented, the fight oppose the Finance and Budget Department – always eager to support reforms that allegedly reduce public expenditures, cut public employment by enhancing productivity, and, more generally, introduce quantitative tools and measurements – and the services of Prime ministers and the ministry for public service, if any, which, without completely disavowing these objectives, prefer to insist on new recruitment policies, on improvements in the initial and vocational training of public employees, on the development of a real human resource management within public administration allowing for effective profile-post allocation, on the qualitative evaluation of the socio-economic outcomes of public policies etc. Finally, the entourage of the Prime minister tends to promote a “global approach to administrative reform” that brings together all initiatives under the umbrella of a “general doctrine”.

For these central institutions of the core executive, the major strategic objective of public administration reform is to enhance their capacity to “control” a increasingly differentiated public sphere whose administrations are more and more institutionally segmented, functionally specialised and territorially dispersed. During the past twenty years, in all developed countries, be they unitary or federal ones, the public sector has become an inconsistent conglomerate torn apart by strong centrifugal tendencies. Confronted to a serious risk of disaggregation, core executives, both the politicians and the top civil servants, have quickly identified in the transversal and interdepartmental nature of New Public Management reforms a real opportunity for setting this conglomerate straight by imposing a new principle of order. Considered from this perspective, the appeal of one of the key dimensions of neo-managerialism, that is the ambition to separate clearly between the operational management of public services and the strategic policy-making defined as the exclusive privilege of core politico-administrative institutions, became obvious. Administrative reforms tend to reinforce core executives reorganised for dealing only with strategic activities, or governing activities in the noble sense. In Britain as in France, as well as in and other countries, these reform programmes are an attempt to “re-regulate” the public sphere¹. Such a willingness can be observed both at the national level and at territorial layers of government, where regional and local politico-administrative elites exhibit the same tendency to refocus their activity on strategy, piloting, monitoring and evaluation, delegating the management of public services to agencies or even third-sector or private institutions (by means of PPPs, out-contracting etc.).

Hence, considered in broad terms, neo-managerial reforms appear to be rather paradoxical: on the one hand, they advocate their intention to abandon the old “command-and-control” hierarchical bureaucratic system, for a “let managers manage” position, to give more autonomy and room for manoeuvre to each service or agency and to each public servant in order to make them more responsive and accountable. But on the other hand, the underlying logic of these programmes is to

¹ Christopher HOOD, Colin SCOTT C., Oliver JAMES, George JONES, Tony TRAVERS, *Regulation inside Government. Waste-Watchers, Quality Police and Sleaze-Busters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999; Philippe BEZES, “Concurrences ministérielles et différenciation: la fabrique de la ‘réforme de l’État’ en France dans les années 1990”, in Françoise DREYFUS, Jean-Michel EYMERI-DOUZANS (eds.), *Science politique de l’administration. Une approche comparative*, Economica, Paris, 2006, pp. 236-252.

restore the overall consistency of the state apparatus, to re-regulate and to reinforce in some way the control of the core executive over the public sector. Such a structural ambiguity may cause the failure of the attempt to restore the cohesion of public sectors strongly driven by centrifuge forces.

Another apparent paradox is that these managerial reforms led to the unanticipated increase of the professional prestige of the top civil servants who are close to ministers (or territorial governments) in the "core executive" and, more importantly, of their politicisation. Contrary to the common sense and against the official discourse, new public management is not neutral. Increased politicisation as a major and durable outcome of recent administrative reforms has to be clearly assessed. Of course, here, politicisation is not taken in its ordinary sense, referring to the political patronage manifest in the recruitment and career advancement of civil servants. Politicisation designates a subtler phenomenon, defined as "functional politicisation" of top administrators¹. Indeed, NPM reforms reject the traditional model of a civil servant at the service of the *Rechtstaat*, concentrated first and foremost on the respect of legal obligations, and replace it with a new model in which public managers focusing on efficiency and effectiveness are accountable to the political power and are evaluated in the light of their duty to get results. This substitution induces a new definition of the loyalty of top civil servants. In the traditional model, the loyalty of a Weberian type was to be expressed as a neutral expertise, *sine ira et studio*, mixed with a rather passive obedience to ministers. The administrative reforms have installed a post-Weberian definition for the loyalty of public managers who now have a duty of personal involvement in policy-making, as they are asked to set the goals of public policies – which are inescapably political goals, thus of utmost importance for those in power – and to account for the success of the public policies they have designed. That is "functional politicisation" in the sense that top civil servants are no more neutral servants of the state and the law but close partners of governing politicians highly committed to the success of their common undertakings. Administrative reform policies contribute to an increased "functional binding together" of governing politicians and governing public officials. It is maybe one of their most important durable outcomes.

The second major underlying logic of NPM administrative reforms concerns the attempts to restore the eroded legitimacy of contemporary states, and public institutions in general. The literature addressing the issue of the deficit or crisis of legitimacy of public institutions in post-modern societies is immense. Without entering into an in-depth discussion of the topic, it is obvious that since the quasi-bankruptcy of welfare Keynesian states in the 1970s and the subsequent neo-liberal ideological shift of the developed countries in the 1980s, public institutions are facing constant criticism for their real or supposed inefficiency and irresponsibility and they are bitterly asked to produce evidence of the real outcomes and benefits of the public policies they implement. Administrative reforms and the widespread use of evaluation are obviously the main answer given by those in power to the social criticism and lack of social confidence. However, since criticising the state has become a recurrent topic, regularly on top of the media agenda and also very present in the everyday

¹ Renate MAYNTZ, Hans-Ulrich DERLIEN, "Party Patronage and Politicization of the West German Administrative Elite 1970-1987. Towards Hybridization?", *Governance*, vol. 2, 1989, pp. 384-404.

talks among citizens, politicians in power, at least in the EU countries, have adopted a common advocacy strategy which consists in pleading guilty – “Yes, that’s right, public bureaucracies are heavy and inefficient” – and in trying to make amends by showing their good will to improve the situation by means of administrative reforms – “Public institutions are in bad shape, but they are under reform”, claim the chorus of our governments.

What is remarkable in this typical strategy of blame-avoidance¹ is that, as a result, reform has now become permanent. By the mid-2000, the French minister for State reform publicly acknowledged that “The reform of the State will obviously never been fully achieved. It is something permanent”. For centuries, the notion of “reform” used to mean an extraordinary and temporary period of reshaping or reorganisation. Or, now, “reform” has become a constant feature of post-modern states, generating an endless enfilade of “reform programmes”. Administrative reform and modernisation, including the use of evaluation, are topics widely used in political communication as a major instrument for legitimising governing institutions. Consequently, no government (either at national or territorial level) would willingly claim that the reforms are accomplished and their objectives fulfilled. It would mean to (implicitly or explicitly) call for a critical evaluation of their general results, their successes and failures, fatally opening highly publicised and risky political debates. Consequently, for a quarter of a century now, public administrations in the OECD countries were doomed to permanent reform. There is clear evidence that the trend will not be disavowed soon.

This strange endless phenomenon calls for two final critical remarks. First, in spite of this constant reformism, it does not seem that the legitimacy of the state has significantly improved in the OECD countries over the past two decades, regardless of the measurement used (opinion surveys, level of electoral successes of populist anti-system political parties, number and intensity of social movements, etc.).

Moreover, if we are to recall both the lessons of Max Weber’s sociology of “routinisation”² and Robert Merton’s sociology of bureaucratic “ritualism”³, it becomes apparent that such a transformation of administrative reforms into an endless spiral generates a routinisation–ritualisation process that transforms reform ideas and tools into bureaucratic routine and erodes, in the eyes of the public, the potential of re-legitimation of these reform programmes. Therefore, the chances are high that routinised administrative reforms will soon be nothing but a part of the ordinary scenery of the state, unable to contribute to a renewal of the legitimacy of public institutions. Eventually, this would equate with the complete failure of public administration reformism. Even though they are difficult to anticipate and measure accurately, the subsequent “costs” in terms of loss of credibility of governments and public institutions in the eyes of the public opinion would be certainly high.

¹ Giandomenico MAJONE, *Evidence, Argument and Persuasion in the Policy Process*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989.

² Max WEBER, *Economy and Society*, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley, University of California Press, London, Los Angeles, 1978.

³ Robert K. MERTON *et al.*, *Reader in Bureaucracy*, The Free Press Glencoe, 1952.