

A predictable readjustment; politics and public management

Eric Caines predicts adjustments in policy on the new management approach.

The deadline for this piece required it to be submitted before the delivery of what promised to be two significant speeches on law and order to be given to the Police Federation Conference by Jack Straw and William Hague. Nothing surprising in that, you may say, given the way in which the subject has, for the time being at least, displaced the National Health Service as the principal concern of voters up and down the country. But what they are likely to be saying, though obscured somewhat by the usual political rhetoric, may well signify an acceptance that the manner in which the effectiveness of policing is judged may be overdue for a change. They won't couch their messages in public management-speak. They will, as always, be directing what they have to say, not at their particular audience, but at the electorate. But for those who take an interest in the development of management thinking, there will, if I am not mistaken, be much to mull over.

Looked at narrowly, they will be addressing the lessons to be learned from the Tony Martin affair and the anti-capitalist May Day riots, both of which have raised a public and political furore (and which serve marvellously to illustrate the fact, long accepted with resignation by Whitehall watchers and those inside the system, that policy developments are more likely to result from isolated incidents such as these rather than from ordered and rational processes of deliberation).

Acceptability and the public

What is likely to emerge as the principal consequence of these events - though it is in effect only

giving an extra push to a process which has been running for some time - will probably be a requirement for policy-makers to be much more conscious of the extent to which the policies they devise are acceptable to the public, not in terms of specific, precisely-defined outcomes, which are relatively meaningless to most people, but in terms of general expectations. Let me try to explain. The announcement, for example, that there have been more convictions for burglary this year than there were last year is simply not newsworthy when set against the reported conviction of a householder for killing a burglar (an issue about which I make no judgements). That single incident serves to reinforce the belief that the police are ignoring their prime function of keeping us safe in our beds and doing whatever they ought to be doing to prevent crime rather than pursuing those who have committed it. In other words, they should be most active before the event rather than after it.

Which is not to say that the deterrence argument is not accepted, in principle at least, by the police, in exactly the same way as it is accepted, for example, by Health Service policymakers in relation to keeping us healthy and by those formulating welfare policy in relation to keeping us out of destitution. Despite which, what we have, in effect, are a Crime Detection Service, a National Sickness Service and an Income Rescue Service. All three services spend their time shutting their stable doors after their respective horses have bolted.

New Public Management

So how does this resonate with our understanding of what new public management is all about? As Professor Christopher Hood says in *The Art of the State*, the conventional story is that a fairly uniform old-fashioned style - typically characterised as rule-bound and process-driven - has been replaced by results-driven, managerially orientated approaches, with a particular stress on efficient least-cost production. Thus the emphasis has been essentially on efficiency at the expense of effectiveness. Or, if this is putting it too bluntly for some, at the expense of effectiveness defined by reference to broader social rather than narrower professional objectives.

My strong feeling is that the rush to adopt output measures, targets, measures of performance, or

whatever you like to call them, with a view to being able to demonstrate that money has been well spent, has deflected attention from those aspects of policy which are not susceptible to or do not easily lend themselves to measurement and quantification. It cuts no political mustard for a Government to say that there would have been more crime, more people requiring hospitalisation, more people making fraudulent claims if particular policies had not been pursued if all that has happened is that there has been a slowing down in the growth rate of burglaries, cancers, and benefit fraud.

Trade offs

All policies contain trade-offs. The usual one is between efficiency and equity e.g. if you give everybody in a particular category of claimant the same flat-rate of benefit, some will do better than others in that individual circumstances will vary widely. Your administration costs, however, are likely to be much lower than if you were to attempt to derive individually-tailored benefit levels from a consideration of individual circumstances. Nothing new in that, except that in practice, Governments usually want the best of both worlds and end up getting the worst of all worlds.

What I think we may now be looking at, however, is the emergence of a new form of trade-off between efficiency and a broader approach to effectiveness, based not on policies which allow for easy quantification of results but policies designed to foster public confidence and meet public expectations. It could mean more policemen walking the streets, more early and comprehensive screening for cancers, different forms of job creation and so on. If it happens, it will be relatively easy to portray it, in narrow economic terms, as money wasted; in political terms, it will serve to quell public disquiet that the public services are engaged in a perpetual and losing game of catch-up. But however one chooses to view it, it will certainly require some redefinition of public sector management and an adjustment in the way public sector managers justify what they do.

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Reference

Hood, C. (1998) *The Art of the State* Oxford, Clarendon Press.