THE IMPACT OF MODERNISATION: THE AFTERMATH OF A CHANGE AGENDA ON PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES

Abstract
Modernisation was at the heart of New Labour’s approach to local government in the UK during the 1997-2010 administration. This Modernisation Agenda was New Labour’s interpretation of the principles of New Public Management (NPM) into a legislative and policy framework. Stoker (2002) contends that this agenda ‘showered’ local government with initiatives, grants, plans and strategies in order to provide a semi-chaotic state from which innovation and (self-managed) development could emerge. From a Foucauldian perspective, this article examines the language used to construct, disseminate and control the modernisation agenda and explores three questions:

• What did the modernisation signify?
• Did the rhetoric match the reality?
• How did discourses interact (or contradict)?

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with public managers across local government in England this article then explores the impact of this change rhetoric on public sector employee outcomes. Specifically, interviews centre on two core themes from the call for papers:

• The types and consequences of change in public sector organisations; and,
• The reactions and response of organisational stakeholders, including senior and middle management employees, to change management.

We seek to capture the resulting consequences of a ‘change legacy’ that came to typify the ‘core NPM group’ of countries that have pursued reforms aggressively for service improvement. Preliminary data analysis has uncovered emerging unintended consequences revolving around staffing reductions and the loss of a ‘competent middle core’ of experienced staff who have, and still, are being replaced with graduate trainees. Though a modernising government was described as one that freed public service so that it can build on its strengths to innovate and to rise to societal challenges, the net effect in stark contrast has been a loss of expertise and knowledge across public organisations; the very origin from which innovation should have materialized. The article explores further the lasting roles and behaviours of public managers involved in and affected by this ubiquitous change process, as called for by Kuipers et al. (2014).

References