



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

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An administrative reform is a conscious, well-considered change that is carried out in a public sector organization or system for the purpose of improving its structure, operation or the quality of its workforce. According to Caiden (1968), "Reform is based on the simple idea that man should not wait for changes to take place naturally but should seek to speed, by artificial means, improvements in the world order."

Whatever the definition referred to, each of its components acquires special meaning in the public sector, where the dimensions targeted for improvement are more complex than those encountered in non-governmental sectors. While all organizations seek to do better at achieving their objectives (effectiveness) – and boosting their productivity (efficiency) – public sector organizations must also concern themselves with the political dimensions of administrative life. Thus, beyond economic dimensions, public administration reforms can target objectives concerning improvements to public life, such as eliminating patronage, nepotism and corruption, increasing representativeness, fostering the participation of citizens and groups, and enhancing accountability and transparency.

In addition, every administrative reform has a political dimension, since the notion of improvement implies a choice of values. As a result, any ensuing change will be viewed as a reform or a setback depending on the ideology of the observer or actor involved. Thus, for example, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, the introduction of user fees for public services, programs of employment equity or access to information will be seen as reforms by some and their opposite by others. Admittedly, a technical reform to streamline bureaucratic procedures will carry little political freight, but even so, it is likely to produce winners and losers. The emergence of typewriters in the 19th century created an opening in the employment market for women, who quickly familiarized themselves with this new technology; at the same time, one of the oldest professions of the world – that of scribe – underwent a transformation at the expense of those whose primary qualification had consisted in having fine handwriting. Ultimately, most reforms run up against resistance or inertia, thus forcing their proponents to engage in some measure of advocacy.

Quite a few reforms have grown out of periods of crisis or national trauma. Thus, in an atmosphere of recriminations over the poor performance of the country's armed forces during the Crimean War, in 1855 Great Britain enacted a set of reforms creating an upper tier of civil servants to be recruited on the basis of examinations. Likewise, the French government established the *École libre des sciences politiques* in the aftermath of its defeat during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

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Similar causes were also at work during the founding of France's *École Nationale d'Administration* in 1945. In 1883, in reaction to the assassination of President Garfield by a rejected office-seeker, the American government established the United States Civil Service Commission and introduced the system of civil service entrance examinations. In the last 30 years, apprehensions of a public finance crisis have prompted reforms aimed either at scaling back public services or at making them less expensive and more competitive.

An administrative reform may also be instigated by a research branch or one or more line units charged with delivering products or services. However, pressure for reform often originates outside of the administration and may come from: a new government or minister, a political party, a parliamentary committee, a commission of inquiry, a lobby, a users association, the media – in short, all political stakeholders. Over the last few decades, two new types of agents of reform have appeared on the scene. Internally, management and policy consulting firms have become omnipresent (Saint-Martin, 2000) and, supranationally, international organizations such as the UN, the OECD, the World Bank and the European Community, as well as NGOs such as Transparency International, have become powerful drivers of reform.

Administrative reform entails a transfer of knowledge that goes beyond that which is generated in the course of regular operations. Such knowledge can come from internal studies (whether occasional or systematic), but most often they originate externally. The most widespread phenomenon is emulation – that is, the adoption of an idea or practice that has been successfully implemented elsewhere. In this instance, prior success is reassuring to the administration that adopts a practice, for it can then forego having to perform an in-depth analysis of its own (Rogers, 2003).

Administrative reform is the work of specialists who draw on various bodies of knowledge to produce practical applications. The practitioners of this knowledge, both in the public service and in consulting firms, generally use analytical models or methods that are based on bodies of theoretical knowledge. However, they do not present this knowledge as being theoretical as such, nor do they advertise themselves as the bearers of specific theories. Their knowledge indeed belongs to the store of recipes of sound administration and reads like a list of administrative fashions developed over the last hundred years: scientific management, planning, programming and budgeting systems (PPBS), management by objectives (MBO), zero-base budgeting (ZBB), performance pay, managing for results, benchmarking, reengineering, reinvention, citizen-focused management, horizontal management, and so on (Cheung, 1997; Thomas, 1996).

Behind all the methods and recipes, there is the science of management. Administrative science has always been a normative science that combines, on the one hand, rigorous observation and analysis with, on the other hand, values to be promoted or maximized. Such was the case of the first encyclopaedias developed to prepare candidates for the civil service entrance examinations in Ancient China, of cameralism in the German states of the 18th century, and of the combined engineering/MBA degree path, which predominated throughout North America for much of the 20th century.

The theoretical basis of various administrative reforms is to be found in the fundamental disciplines of law, economics, political science, sociology and psychology. Management could be added to this list, except that it, like public administration, is less a discipline than a set of disciplines centring on a single object. Law has provided the foundations of the rules of the bureaucratic state, and it continues to inspire reforms (such as the establishment of the ombudsman's office) or the rules of administrative procedure. Political science knowledge is drawn

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on particularly in regards to the participation of groups and individuals in administrations, accountability, relationships between politicians and civil servants. Along with legal experts, political scientists have proposed improvements to representative bureaucracy, ethics or access to information. Economics has, for some time now, driven reforms focused on privatization, deregulation, fees for public service, pay for senior civil servants, and the introduction of competition in the outsourcing of public services. Sociology and the psychology of work have inspired MBO, theories of organizational development, workforce motivation and performance evaluation, and attitude/opinion surveys of various clienteles. All of the above disciplines have proposed solutions to the problem of corruption.

Over the last three decades, the debate has been dominated by economists' criteria and solutions, but recent years have seen a powerful swing backward in favour of political approaches, in particular through the notions of subsidiary government (Côté, 2006), the neo-Weberian State (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004) and path dependence (Bezes, 2009).

How might the impacts of administrative reforms best be described? There is an abundance of observations to the effect that such change rarely accomplishes all that it has promised. On the other hand, long-term studies have shown that administrative reforms produce significant cumulative impacts. In the United States, March and Olsen (1983) concluded that even failed presidential reform proposals had an educational impact that brought about changes in attitudes. In France, Bezes (2009, pp. 425) has, over a period of four decades, noted an accretion effect (*effet de sédimentation*), with “each reform sequence producing causal effects on subsequent sequences, ultimately creating threshold effects” [our translation]. The introduction of planning, programming and budgeting systems (PPBS) has changed the thinking of all those who study and practice public administration. Even if PPBS has never managed to achieve all its objectives, it nevertheless continues to frame analyses and to prompt observers to seek out the costs, outcomes and impacts of government programs.

Among other sources, the studies and publications produced by international organizations might well lead one to believe that there is a significant convergence in the way administrative reform is considered across the globe. However, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, pp. 200-202) have argued that reforms going by the same titles or names actually conceal both a considerable diversity of practices and much picking and choosing among the components of such reforms. Manning (2001) has also noted that few positive outcomes can be chalked up to New Public Management (NPM)-inspired reforms in the third world. The reason is thought to be cultural in origin, as NPM is the product of Anglo-Protestant countries and is based on a culture that is common to these nations. Working from a global survey, Hofstede (2001) has grouped countries together according to five main social attitudes toward work – namely authoritarianism vs. egalitarianism (“power distance”), tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and short or long-term orientation. Thus, anthropologists are relevant to the study of administrative reform, too.

Finally, considerable influence can be exerted by the attitudes of another group – politicians. According to Bezes (2009) and Light (1997), leaders in France and the United States eschew the experimental method, preferring instead to carry out broad, across-the-board reforms within a generally short timeframe. The outcome is rather paradoxical: seeking to make a big impact, these administrations often implement ambitious though little tested reforms that leave civil servants tired and discouraged.

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HOW TO CITE	Gow, J. I. (2012). "Administrative Reform," in L. Côté and J.-F. Savard (eds.), <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> , [online], www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
INFORMATION	For further information, please visit www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
LEGAL DEPOSIT	Library and Archives Canada, 2012 ISBN 978-2-923008-70-7 (Online)