The Political-Administrative Design of NPM

Peter Aucoin

Introduction

This chapter examines the political-administrative design of the movement in the Westminster systems that came to be called New Public Management (NPM) (Hood 1991). A major driving force behind NPM, if not the major force, was the effort to establish a new structure to the relationship between ministers of the government of the day and the permanent professional public service, especially the senior public service executive cadre (Aucoin 1990). This chapter is focused on the Westminster systems as the locale where NPM first came to the fore.

The chapter first considers the three basic reasons why ministers wanted to change the relationship. First, they did not sufficiently trust the public service to implement their agenda, including the provision of advice that would best advance their agenda. Second, they did not have sufficient confidence in the management capability of the public service, at a time when the fiscal circumstances of all Westminster systems demanded enhanced attention to the economical and efficient management of resources. Third, ministers wanted to ensure that they, and not public servants, were in charge of the government’s agenda and its implementation. All this meant that there was a paradox deeply embedded in NPM at its inception. The demand for improved management on the part of the public service required greater authority for managers at the same time that ministers sought to reassert their authority over the direction and control of the state apparatus (Aucoin 1990). The paradox is ignored in much of the literature on NPM, perhaps because the second feature of NPM was not present in other than the Westminster systems, or at least not as prominent as in them, especially Britain and Australia. For this reason it is important to stress that NPM in the Westminster systems was largely imposed on the bureaucracy by the political leadership.

The chapter next considers what this meant in terms of the restructuring of the relationship at the outset of the NPM movement. It examines the ways by which
prime ministers and their governments in the Westminster systems sought both to reassert political leadership and control over the public service and to improve public management. These ways included:

1. strengthening the corporate centre of government;
2. strengthening the political arm of government in the form of political staff;
3. controlling the staffing of the senior public service;
4. establishing a more explicit set of mechanisms for distinguishing between policy and administration to put ministers in better control; and
5. requiring public service managers to focus on the management of their resources and operations as well as to accept personal accountability for their performance in delivering to expectations.

Again it is important to note that the first three developments preceded the last two, contrary to much later rhetoric or revisionist history.

By way of conclusion, the chapter briefly considers what has happened in the Westminster systems in terms of the relationship between ministers and the public service over the past three decades. The experience suggests that the relationship has been changed, as originally intended, with ministers securing the upper hand. With some exceptions and variations, centralization of power under the prime minister has been accompanied by more influence for political staff at the centre and in portfolios. The influence and role of the public service has thus been diminished, even though greater authority for the management of resources and operations has been part and parcel of NPM reforms. To the degree that NPM was intended to improve public management, it has done so on a number of fronts. NPM has not necessarily led to improved public governance, however. Rather, the partisan-political dimensions of government have gained an ascendency in ways that have led governments, of various partisan persuasions, to abuse and misuse the public service and public resources well beyond the degree necessary to assert political direction and control for improved public management. A pattern that I call New Political Governance has thus diminished many of the gains that NPM brought about in public management improvement, including even its greater political direction and control (Aucoin 2008).

The Determinants of the New Public Management Design

Distrust in the Public Service

By the 1980s, trust in the career public service by the political class in the Westminster systems had diminished (Boston et al. 1991, 1996, Campbell and Halligan 1992, Savoie 1994, Campbell and Wilson 1995, Aucoin 1995). In Britain, Labour viewed the Whitehall leadership of the public service as conservative and elitist, a not
surprising view given the dominance of the Oxbridge educated leadership of the public service. In Australia, Labor was not enamoured of the Canberra mandarins, regarding them as an extension of successive conservative governments. In New Zealand, the responsiveness of the public service to the direction of ministers from either governing party was in doubt. In Canada, both Liberals and Conservatives were wary, even though the Conservatives had much greater reason to be distrustful, given the long tenure in government of the Liberals.

By the end of the 1970s in the Westminster systems (and in the United States), the bloom was also off the rose of the political consensus of the post-war period concerning the virtues of the social welfare state that was accompanied by activist government across a wide range of socio-economic affairs and, with that expansion, an expanding bureaucracy. The ideal of rationality in government policy-making and administration, so pronounced in the ascendancy of the ‘policy sciences’ paradigm, applied to governance that emerged in the 1960s and gave way to traditional ideological divisions between the left and the right.

The left and the right had different reasons for distrusting the permanent bureaucracy. The left thought the mandarins too conservative in respecting the status quo, a status quo that even in its expansion was in a great many respects a design of their own creation. They were thus perceived as an obstacle to progressive reform. The right thought them too committed to an activist rather than the minimalist state. But both the left and the right were increasingly pressured to roll back the state in terms of taxing, spending and economic regulation. In Britain, this agenda was labelled as neo-conservative; in Australia and New Zealand, the Labor governments that brought forward fiscal and regulatory reforms viewed it as neo-liberal. To the degree that the short-lived post-war consensus on the social welfare state had collapsed and partisan ideologies returned to the fore, the influence of the bureaucracy that emanated from assumptions about its capacity to provide impartial and objective (what we now call evidence-based) policy advice was downgraded accordingly.

Trust was also adversely affected by the negative view that the professional public service was merely another collection of self-serving interests that used their power and influence to advance these interests rather than the public interest, as defined by their political masters, let alone the interests of their political masters. The British Broadcasting Corporation’s Yes, Minister television sitcom series, first shown in 1980, not only brilliantly captured the spirit of this view, but, given the sitcom’s enormous popularity in all four Westminster systems, it served to propagate it as a novel kind of public affairs documentary (Borins 1988).

The idea that the self-interests of the bureaucrats individually and collectively took precedence over the interests of ministers as the political executive became a part of conventional wisdom on the part of the political class, notwithstanding the fact that the scripts of Yes, Minister, and the propositions of public choice theory about this self-serving behaviour from which Yes, Minister drew its thematic inspiration, took direct aim at politicians as well as at bureaucrats. Politicians are depicted in both the series and the theory as self-serving vis-à-vis their political masters, namely, the citizens whose interests they are meant to represent. Public
choice theory seeks to undermine the moral legitimacy of politicians and public servants, treating both as agents who need to be constrained as much as possible because they cannot be trusted by their principals: citizens for politicians and ministers for public servants (Boston 1996b).

As it turned out, the public service suffered the most from this assault, at least in terms of the relationship between ministers and public servants. The reason was simple, given the constitutional design of the relationship, with ministers the superiors of public servants. Bureaucracy-bashing by politicians, both during election campaigns and in government (increasingly the permanent election campaign) could not be countered publicly by public servants, given the prevailing public service norms of anonymity and neutrality. For public servants to speak against politicians, elected or campaigning, would be to risk being seen to be acting contrary to these norms.

For their part, ministers were not wont to defend their public service, if for no other reason than that bureaucracy-bashing was deemed an effective political tactic. It allowed politicians, even when in government, to divert public criticism of themselves and of government more generally to unnamed bureaucrats. It took little in the way of serious thinking to scapegoat the bureaucracy for the high levels of public angst then experienced virtually everywhere in the Anglo-American systems over the deadly combination of debt and deficits in public finances and public services of dubious quality. Although ministers, along with other politicians, were themselves singled out by critics of big government for living off their access to the public purse, the public service bureaucracy was an equally easy, perhaps even easier, target, especially as the public perception of bloated bureaucracies and overly privileged bureaucrats became widespread. To the extent that ministers began to believe their own bureaucracy-bashing rhetoric their trust in the bureaucracy could not but diminish to new lows.

Lack of Confidence in the Public Service

To make matters worse for the relationship, public service bureaucracy became increasingly compared to private sector management in terms of management capacity and performance, with the comparison painting a thoroughly dismal picture of management in the public sector set against an excessively glowing account of management in the private sector. Just two years after Yes, Minister appeared on the scene, In Search of Excellence was published (Peters and Waterman 1982). This hugely successful and influential book helped transform the business of management consulting, with an enormous consequence for public administration.

The business of management consultancy grew by leaps and bounds during the 1980s and 1990s as traditional or conventional management thinking and practices were trashed and new theories and techniques heralded (Saint-Martin 2000). A new breed of management gurus (or ‘witch doctors’ as two editors from The Economist labelled them (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 1996)) not only advised as consultants, they began to write best-selling books for what appeared to be an expanding coterie
of managers, many of whom were armed with an MBA and fervent disciples of their favourite guru. These same books also marketed consultants’ wares to the private and public sectors.

In a booming marketplace brimming with constantly changing fads and fashions in management, the practices of management in public administration and public services delivery could not but look deficient and they were widely denounced for being so. Bureaucracy became a label associated almost entirely with the public sector. The term came to have an exclusively pejorative connotation (Barzeley 1992). In this milieu, ministers came to have little confidence in the managerial capacities of the senior public service. It became a common assumption that, whatever their strengths might be, the capacity of senior public servants to manage large and complex organizations and their public service operations in order to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness was not among them. The senior bureaucracy was regarded as amateurish by comparison to their private sector counterparts (Pollitt 1990). This was especially the case in Britain where the educational backgrounds of the senior public service were not thought to have sufficiently prepared them in the modern social sciences, let alone in the modern management disciplines.

Political Control of Administration in Question

A paradox in the development of NPM was the fact that the very same ministers who doubted the management capacity of the public service also tended to think that these public servants were too powerful in the administration of public affairs (Aucoin 1990). This was a second defining thesis in Yes, Minister, namely that the minister’s senior bureaucrat was all too often, even if not always, successful in having his political master come to agree with him and thus with the preferences of the bureaucracy. In this sense, it was increasingly acknowledged that ministers were not able to adequately direct and control their public servants or to hold them to account. Ministers were constitutionally and politically in charge, that is, responsible for the administration of their departments and the public services they delivered, but they were not in control. Real power to effect what they wanted done invariably eluded them.

A variant of this concern was that even if public service bureaucracies could not have their public policy preferences accepted by ministers, they could and would act as obstacles to ministers being able to have their preferences implemented as they intended. Bureaucrats were thought to be able to obstruct policy implementation in many ways, including causing delays in required administrative decisions, devising subtle shifts in implementation processes that result in a displacement of stated policy goals, and paying inadequate attention to securing the necessary linkages between different elements of interdependent operations.

One reason for this concern was the result of the increasing need for de facto, if not de jure, delegation of authority to a wide variety of managers and professionals, including so-called street-level bureaucrats who cannot perform their functions at
all without the exercise of some discretion. To the degree that this discretion is exercised in ways that make observation by superiors, including political superiors, difficult, if not impossible, there exists room for bureaucrats to make decisions that depart from ministerial policy. Exacerbating this inherent bureaucratic reality was the major expansion to the role of the state in the post-war period and thus the number of state officials who must be allowed to exercise such discretion. In brief, size matters in terms of securing effective control over decentralized power.

Restructuring the Political-Administrative Relationship

Concentrating Power

The Westminster system of parliamentary government gives primacy to the prime minister and cabinet. This is a form of strong executive government with fewer and weaker checks and balances on the part of the legislative branch of government than found in the classic regime of checks and balances with shared executive and legislative powers between the two political branches of government – the American system. But just as the strength of the political executive grew with the growth of modern government, the very centre of government – the prime minister and her/his coterie – has witnessed a concentration of power that has pushed even cabinet and thus most ministers to the sidelines (Savoie 1999). Donald Savoie has described this phenomenon as ‘court government’ and while his focus has been primarily on the Canadian experience of the past four decades, he has reached the same conclusion for Britain, especially with the Blair and Brown regimes (Savoie 2008). Australia under John Howard, particularly in his latter years, evinced the same pattern (Halligan 2006). New Zealand was once very much in this mould, but the consequence of coalition government, following the dramatic change to the mixed-member proportional representation electoral system, reinvigorated cabinet government.

What has come to fruition in terms of a concentration of power at the centre by the end of the first decade of the present century was already beginning to occur by the end of the 1970s. Prime ministers began to gain ascendency over their cabinets as they sought to reassert political leverage over the bureaucracy. In Canada, this resulted, ironically, from a continuous effort to establish effective collective decision-making structures so that ministers would not be captured by their departmental bureaucrats. This form of capture was regarded as the principal way by which bureaucrats assumed power and influence in the executive branch of government. By acting collectively with their cabinet colleagues in cabinet, and especially in cabinet committees, ministers were expected to be able to reduce the influence of departmental officials over them individually. These collective structures were to help weaker ministers especially. And they were supported by what in Canada are called central agencies, that is, the agencies that perform the corporate (or whole-
of-government) policy and management challenge and coordination functions on behalf of and under the direction of the prime minister and the handful of other corporate ministers. These were enhanced to constitute an effective bureaucratic countervail to departmental bureaucrats (Campbell and Szabowski 1979).

This strengthening the centre of government by building the collective structures of cabinet and its central agencies in order to reinforce the primacy of ministers was paralleled in the modern private corporation by various matrix type structures. In both sectors, however, these gave way as chief executives soon grew weary and wary of the complexity, confusion and cost of these excessively complicated structures. In the Westminster systems, increased prime ministerial aggrandizement was the outcome. The collective decision-making capacity of cabinet withered accordingly, and even almost disappeared at times in some governments, and the central agencies that supported the collective cabinet increasingly became the agencies of the prime minister as first minister or chief executive (a similar trend occurred in the private sector under a much more positive spin from the management gurus; here, aggrandizement was characterized as leadership).

This concentration of power did not necessarily rule out bureaucratic influence altogether, for the central bureaucratic agencies were, of course, at the centre. Yet insofar as it meant that bureaucrats from these agencies had to work alongside the partisan-political staff of the prime minister, they were now no longer working alone in providing policy advice; at the centre, and even in departments, they no longer enjoyed a monopoly over this function. At the same time, trusted bureaucrats at the centre became arguably even more powerful than their predecessors, especially, as discussed below, if the prime minister had been personally engaged in their appointments and if the prime minister’s political staff shared the prime minister’s trust in these senior public servants. They had to be, in Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s words, ‘one of us’. In Savoie’s model, they had to become courtiers (2008).

Deploying Political Staff

An even more explicit instrument to change the relationship was the expansion in the number, roles and influence of political staff (ministerial partisan advisers). These staff are not public servants. They are not members of the public service bureaucracy. They are a category of government official on their own. They are appointed at the discretion and pleasure of ministers and thus have no tenure beyond that of their political masters. In the Westminster systems their number varies, but numbers are not necessarily correlated with either roles or influence. In part, political staff are also affected by the concentration of power, that is, the influence of staff is determined primarily by the influence of their ministers. Where power is highly concentrated, as it is in Australia, Britain and Canada, the prime minister’s political staff are that much more important and they can be much fewer in number, assuming that the prime minister’s court is an elite group.
Political staff constitute another countervail to the influence of public servants. They provide ministers with a partisan-political perspective on public policy matters and this perspective can also serve as a challenge function to the advice of public servants. Political staff is intimately involved in the political communications function and this means that they continuously rub up against, if not covertly run, the public service communications of ministers’ departments and the government’s corporate communications. They also are central players in the interaction with important stakeholders whose interests are politically salient to ministers.

Political staff in both Australia and Canada had their numbers, roles and influence expanded in the 1980s as a consciously adopted alternative to the overt partisan-politicization of public service staffing in the American fashion. As a result, political staff remain in staff, as opposed to line, positions in the government bureaucracy. Accordingly, while they may have the ear of ministers, they do not have formal authority over the minister’s departmental public service. As such, they cannot direct public servants. But they can speak for their minister to public servants, albeit with the proviso, in theory, that public servants have the right to seek confirmation from the minister for any directive. Under the Blair government, exceptions to this prohibition against line authority were made in the area of the government’s communication function, exceptions later removed following politically adverse reactions to what was perceived as an excessive overload of political spin in government communications. In practice, of course, the reality does not always conform to formal structure.

Aside from constituting a general nuisance factor for professional public servants, especially on the part of the most junior and inexperienced of these political staff (who, given the nature of their assignments, tend to be very young and to burn out quickly), political staff necessarily add a tension to the relationship of ministers and their public service officials. This is not always negative in its outcome. Political staff can assist in this very relationship by relieving public servants from ministerial demands or expectations of assistance in what are patently partisan-political activities.

The outcome is negative on the other hand to the extent that political staff seek to engage public servants in activities or decisions that are inspired primarily, if not exclusively, by partisan-political interests. Leaving aside anything that is illegal, these activities or decisions are sometimes contrary to administrative regulations, sometimes merely contrary to the values of non-partisanship. What is inappropriate is often a matter of interpretation. To the degree that the grey zone is made to cover a significant range of activities and decisions, political staff have lots of room to intervene in public administration on behalf of ministers. Insofar as NPM witnessed a major deregulation of administrative regulations, in favour of decentralized discretion, the room for intervention without challenge expanded, and is not much constrained by an increased rhetorical attention to public service values.
The independent staffing of the public service has long been a central feature of the Westminster jurisdictions, even if not judged to be inherent in the Westminster constitutional regime itself (Aucoin 2006a). Indeed, failure to observe the dictates of non-partisan, neutral staffing of the public service has a long and continuing history in many, if not most, Australian state and Canadian provincial governments, notwithstanding the formal adoption of merit systems of independent staffing by these constituent orders of sub-national government in these two federal systems many decades ago. In many cases, partisans were appointed to public services posts, some at the most senior ranks, with partisanship being the primary, in some cases the only, reason for their appointment.

A critical factor in the staffing of the public services in each of the central governments in the Westminster jurisdictions has been the exclusion of the most senior posts in the public service from independent staffing, with prime ministers and/or cabinet formally making these appointments. There are differences in both the traditions and the current realities of the different jurisdictions. In every case, nonetheless, there has been increased interest and attention given to appointments to these top public service posts (deputy ministers in Canada, permanent secretaries in Britain, departmental secretaries in Australia, departmental chief executives in New Zealand). As expected, ministers by the late 1970s were no longer content to be on the sidelines, formally or informally, as the most senior positions in the public service were staffed. Even if they agreed that those appointed should come from the ranks of the public service, or from professional public service posts in other jurisdictions, rather than from the ranks of fellow partisans, ministers, and especially prime ministers, wanted them to be fully onside with the government’s agenda and/or its approach to public management. Only in New Zealand, and somewhat unintentionally, did the NPM reform effort end up with a staffing process that effectively kept ministers at arm’s length. Everywhere else, prime ministers and their political staff gave greater attention to these appointments.

Since then there has been something of a running debate about whether there has been a politicization of the public service as a consequence of this greater political attention to staffing, whether there has been introduced a new type of politicization that is different from traditional understandings of explicitly partisan appointments to the public service, and what the consequences of increased political attention to staffing has meant if the charge of politicization does not hold (Peters and Pierre 2004). These issues cannot be resolved here, but it can be said that since prime ministers and their political staff, advised at times by ministers and their political staff, not only have the decisive say in appointments but that they actually spend time in considering whom to appoint, then it is unrealistic to assume that considerations of expressed sympathy and enthusiasm for the government’s agenda and/or management approach, or lack of the same, are ignored. This is especially the case when there are not competitions, open or closed, for such appointments.

The adoption of a more active role on the part of prime ministers in staffing these top appointments was indicative of the aim to change the relationship. These
top officials would be the prime minister’s public service executives, not officials chosen essentially by the public service leadership itself. Whether or not they were partisans, they would be the prime minister’s personal appointees. The prime minister becomes their boss, not simply their political master. Appointment at pleasure, as in Canada, or for term, as in Australia, helps transform an institutional relationship into more of a personal one, a development promoted by the idea that a leader should impose her or his personal leadership paradigm on the organization, to make the senior executive cadre her or his team.

Revising the Policy and Administration Dichotomy

The traditional view of the policy and administration dichotomy was that it did not portray reality, for there is policy in administration and administrative issues can become matters of policy. (Framing the dichotomy as politics and administration does not change the basic dynamic here.) What was at issue in the traditional approach to the dichotomy was whether the attempt to separate the two spheres put ministers at a disadvantage in that it often was successfully used to keep ministers out of administration, except in the making of formal rules as policy governing administrative practices.

The practice varied in the Westminster systems in the post-war period, but by the 1970s ministers in all jurisdictions had begun to reassert their authority as everywhere there was greater appreciation of the extent to which the public service had the capacity to subsume policy under administration. The growth of the state and its bureaucracy was a primary reason, as ministers of the largest and most complex bureaucracies increasingly realized, as public administration scholars had argued for some time, the extent to which the assumption that ministers made policy and public servants administered the policy no longer captured reality. If ministers wanted to direct policy and control administration something else was required.

The something else came in the form of contracts, or contractual-type agreements, between ministers and their chief public service executives. The logic here was straightforward: the ministers specify what they want achieved by way of public services outputs or deliverables as they would in any situation where they contracted with a third party to provide services in place of their department. The assumption here was that contracts between ministers and their chief executives, even when there are no meaningful negotiations, could still elevate the extent to which what is expected of a minister’s department, in the form of an expectation assigned to the department’s top public servant, would be subject to greater specificity than traditionally was the experience.

NPM thus introduced a new twist to the policy–administration dichotomy. It explicitly exchanged the minister’s right to intervene in administration with the requirement that their public service executives administer according to a contract that specified precisely not only what was expected in terms of products but also
what level of productivity was expected, given that the resources provided to these executives were specified in the minister’s departmental budget.

Enhancing Management Authority and Accountability

As noted, NPM is regarded by many scholars and practitioners as essentially about the delegation, devolution or decentralization of management authority so that managers can actually manage their organizations and their resources, financial and human. This makes public management conform to the paradigm of modern management (meaning management in its generic form, although this almost always means private sector management). This understanding of management goes beyond the traditional notion of the public administration of policies, programmes and activities, insofar as it assumes that managers have discretion in managing resources and operations rather than merely obligations to see that corporately imposed processes and procedures are followed. It also assumes that an enhanced emphasis is given to the accountability of managers, as the incentive (using rewards and sanctions) to secure required levels of management performance (Aucoin and Heintzman 2000, Aucoin and Jarvis 2005).

NPM focused on three aspects of management and accountability. First, there was the devolution of authority from central management agencies to executives of line departments or agencies in order that managers have greater and sufficient authority to manage their operations. Second, there was the differentiation of discrete operational/service delivery organizations from one another in multi-service departments and from departmental policy units (the so-called ‘agencification’ phenomenon when applied to the British and New Zealand experiences (Pollitt et al. 2004), with more modest versions in Australia and Canada) so that the missions and outputs for which managers are accountable can be (more) clearly identified (Christensen and Lægreid 2006). And, third, there was performance management with transparent measures and evaluations of performance that made it more difficult for managers to hide behind their ministers (Bouckaert and Halligan 2008).

NPM was new insofar as this approach departed from the tradition of strong central management agencies that had developed over time to govern management in government departments and agencies, primarily by way of centrally imposed rules and regulations that applied uniformly across all departments of government. This highly regulatory model for the governance of line management in departments imposed a regime of standardized administration on both departmental ministers and their public servants that provided little or no discretion for line department managers and little or no acknowledgement of the great diversity of operational circumstances faced by the managers of different departments (Pollitt 1990, Aucoin 1995).

One cannot overemphasize the extent to which these central management agencies were dominant in the Westminster systems (but not in all other Western democracies) in the pre-NPM era, and in the sphere of public service personnel
administration, especially staffing, virtually independent of ministers. The NPM revolution here was substantial, even though, contrary to some rhetoric, not all centrally imposed rules disappeared. Under NPM the major shift was from bureaucrats in central management agencies to line department managers, especially the administrative heads of departments and agencies. Departmental ministers did not obtain more authority over departmental management as a consequence but they could now demand more of their departmental managers in terms of management performance.

Organizational differentiation (or agencification where it occurred) gave managers a cleaner line on what had to be accomplished, at least to the extent that the organizational context could be characterized by stability in policy objectives, output targets and various performance measures. Greater organizational differentiation, it was assumed, meant that ministers could have greater confidence that their objectives would not be bent by the bureaucratic pathologies extant in all large integrated departments that in most cases are little more than conglomerate organizations with multiple overlapping, and invariably competing, objectives.

Governments everywhere had become big government by taking on an increasing number of roles in an expanding number of policy fields. Given the limits to which the number of cabinet portfolios could be expanded in the Westminster systems, the conglomerate character of ministerial departments had become ever more pronounced by the end of the 1970s. Conglomerate departments were a problem for ministers not only because of their complexity; that could not be avoided under big government and conglomerate departments. In addition, however, there was the exacerbated problem of the traditional departmental hierarchy under which the various major divisions of the department report to the minister through the department’s top bureaucrat and not directly to the minister. In this circumstance, ministers could be forgiven for regarding themselves as formally on top but not in effective control. Organizational differentiation expanded a minister’s span of control by having departmental agencies report directly to them.

Finally, the performance management regimes introduced with NPM, in combination with the above two developments, sought to position ministers so that they could use performance evaluation as the means to better secure the implementation of their policy objectives. As noted, ministers introduced contractual-type relationships to better specify what they wanted. Performance management was the back end of this arrangement: ministers assess how managers perform and act accordingly, with rewards, such performance bonuses, or sanctions, such as dismissal or refusal to renew appointments.

Conclusion: Politics Trumps Management

Over the past three decades the political side of the political-administrative design of NPM has come to dominate the relationship, even though managers now have greater freedom from central bureaucratic controls. In some critical respects, this is
what political leaders and their public management reformers wished to achieve. They wanted ministers to be on top and in charge of the public service to set strategic directions and targets for public service organizations and managers; to measure both organizational and managerial performance; and, then to adjust courses and take corrective action as they deemed necessary. This approach, it was said, would enhance both democratic government and good public management.

In a number of ways the political pressures on the bureaucracy have had their desired effects. Although the evidence is mixed and any evaluation of reform generally is fraught with insurmountable methodological obstacles, various aspects of public management, including service delivery, appeared to have improved in the Westminster jurisdictions over time. The record has certainly not been one of continuous learning and progress anywhere and various correctives have had to be inserted over time. But everywhere a great deal has been achieved in addressing the impoverished management state of affairs that had developed by the late 1970s. Thirty years later there is more attention to efficiency in operations, robust financial management, citizen-centred service delivery, people management and results. The record is nowhere as great as the rhetoric, if only because rhetoric has become a tool of public service leadership, and one can easily find slippage where there once had been progress. At the same time, precious few, if any, advocate a return to past practices across the board, even among those whose experience or knowledge goes back to the past (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). This fact undoubtedly constitutes the strongest evidence for at least some advance.

In various other respects, however, the relationship between political leaders and their public services has not improved (Savoie 2003). If anything, it has deteriorated further. Ministers continue to distrust their bureaucracies and do not exhibit much confidence in them in matters related to public policy advice or the management of the politics of public administration. The result has been the strengthening of the political arm of government to assist ministers in directing and controlling public administration. In the process, the politicizing of public administration has actually grown in various ways. The original political impulse of NPM that sought to alter the political-administrative balance in public management as a corrective to what had become a bureaucratic state unresponsive to political direction and control has given way to a new phenomenon, what I have called New Political Governance (Aucoin 2008).

New Political Governance arises as a response to developments that emerged or intensified during the last three decades that have little or nothing to do with the pressures that gave rise to NPM. They include the radical transformation in the media and communications technologies that expose ministers and government around the clock to a more aggressive, assertive and, in most places, more partisan press; the proliferation of organized interest groups, social movements, partisan thinks tanks and advocacy institutions; the huge increase in the number of lobbyists for the most affluent interests; and, not the least, radical changes in the political culture of Western political societies, including a significant decline in deference to authority, a rise in know-nothing populism, a polarization of partisans combined with a decline in partisan affiliation producing high degrees of political volatility.
These forces are much more pressing than the forces that led to the demands for greater political direction and control under NPM. The New Political Governance resulting from them has included the primacy of political staff in advising their ministers on policy, often to the exclusion of any real effort to engage public service advisers and resulting in the diminution of the policy advisory capacity of the bureaucracy; the ability of political staff to dictate to public servants on critical political files in the name of ministers, more often than not that of the prime minister, whatever the formalities of the public service system; and, the politicization of government communications and advertising so that the partisan interests of the governing party override any public service requirements of impartiality, political neutrality and non-partisanship in these matters. Where these developments are most pronounced, the ministerial political staff of the governing party have replaced public servants, assumed power over them, and used them and other public resources to engage in a continuous election campaign against their partisan opponents in the parliamentary opposition. Relations between ministers and public servants are obviously altered by these developments, but none of them advance good democratic government or public management.