Abstract

Tactical choices in the design and implementation of civil service reform can determine whether it succeeds or fails. Yet researchers have paid scant attention to tactical issues in recent years. This article considers three such issues: the scope of reform, the role of aid donors, and the leadership of reform. In each area it considers what sort of approach is likely to maximize the chances of success. However, the article seeks to go beyond prescribing lessons, also looking at institutional and other reasons why reformers may be impelled to make the wrong tactical choices.

Key words

Civil service reform, public management reform, strategy, tactics, developing countries

WHY CIVIL SERVICE REFORMS FAIL

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Most reforms in government fail. They do not fail because, once implemented, they yield unsatisfactory outcomes. They fail because they never get past the implementation stage at all. They are blocked outright or put into effect only in tokenistic, half-hearted fashion.

Observers who have followed recent reforms in countries such as Britain, New Zealand and Australia may be surprised at this. Whatever else one can say about public sector change initiatives in these countries, one cannot deny that they were vigorously implemented. But there was an exceptionally high degree of political backing for reform in these countries. Elsewhere in the world, and in these same countries previously, the record has been dismal (Caiden 1991; Kiggundu 1998).

Various authors have sought to make recommendations on how to improve the prospects for success (Jacobs 1998; Wescott 1999). The difficulty is that quite often, the prescriptions that are offered have as much to do with the *content* of reform (what sort of initiatives should be taken) as with the *approach* (how to go about it). Moreover, there is a tendency to stop at prescription without asking why the lessons are disregarded time and again.

Here my focus is on the approach to reform, not its content. My assumption is that what matters most in improving the record of implementation are the strategic and tactical decisions taken in the course of putting the reforms into effect. The content of reform makes little difference to the success rate, in the sense that different kinds of reforms – decentralization, new public management, capacity building however defined – have shown themselves to be equally prone to failure (Polidano 2001).[1]

This of course equates 'success' in reform with proper implementation, which is to say that reforms are put into effect as intended and are not blocked or watered down. I accept that this is a narrow definition of success, one that disregards the question of whether or not the changes do subsequently yield their hoped-for beneficial impact. But I would submit that it is a valid perspective, given the overwhelming tendency of reform to fail at the implementation stage.

In this article I look at three key tactical issues: the scope of reform, the role of aid donors, and the leadership of change. The centrality of these issues has emerged in country after country (Hirschmann 1993; Schacter 1995; Harrigan 1998; Jacobs 1998; Wescott 1999), and it has been brought home to me by my own experience as a practitioner (see Polidano 1999).

In each of these three areas I seek to come to conclusions as to what approach is likely to maximize the chances of success and minimize those of failure. But my aim is to go beyond drawing up prescriptions for reformers to follow. For the problem is not simply that of reformers not knowing how best to manage change. Reformers are subject to institutional pressures or incentives that may well push them into taking the wrong decisions even though they know it. Here is the real key to finding out why reforms fail so often (and, perhaps, what can be done about it).

I do not pretend I can come up with any definitive answers. In so far as this is ever possible, it will require a more systematic research effort sustained over a longer period of time. This article is more of a preliminary survey aimed at putting tactical issues back on the agenda of scholars and practitioners, and adding to them the further issue of institutional constraints that could lead to the wrong choices being made. These were and are pressing questions, and they need answers if the record of reform is to be improved.

THE SCOPE OF REFORM: LEAPING A CHASM, OR CROSSING IT ON TIGHTROPE?

The key issue here is whether to go for a wide-ranging, comprehensive set of reforms or whether to limit one's ambitions to a more restrained, incremental programme of change. This question is relevant to industrialized as well as developing countries. But it takes on particular significance in the latter owing to the scale and intractability of the administrative problems they face.

How does one deal with widespread problems of low administrative capacity and poor performance, problems which can be rooted in social norms and patterns of behaviour rather than administrative structures? Does one seek to broaden the scope of reform to encompass those root causes, on the grounds that reform is meaningless unless it does so? Or is that tantamount to saying government should reform society before it can reform itself? Should one accept that low capacity places strict bounds on what can be achieved, however defeatist this may seem?

Both arguments are commonly made. Paul Obeng of Ghana says that 'countries that have begun civil service reform programmes from the donor-driven angle [presumably with a narrow macro-economic focus] have to quickly transcend the limitations of the system into the comprehensive reform approach within the shortest possible time' (in Langseth *et al*. 1995: 88). In the case of Uganda, we are told that: 'A wide-ranging, holistic approach is necessary because administrative failure in Uganda stems from far more than mere technical incompetence. The collapse of the 1970s and early 1980s was caused by a political breakdown' (Langseth 1995a: 366). Dia (1994: 19) echoes this argument, saying that countries with a high level of patrimonialism in government need a comprehensive institutional reform programme to 'correct patrimonial distortions in the institutional environment, the incentives framework, and the performance of core government institutions' (1994: 19). In like vein, Kiggundu (1998) calls for a new model of reform called transformational capacity development, which essentially takes in all institutions of governance including civil society.

This all boils down to an 'advance on all fronts' argument. It is expressed most succinctly by a participant at a 1996 conference who argues that half-hearted reform is almost worse than no reform at all: 'Don't leap a chasm in two steps' (reported in Borins and Warrington 1996: 28).

On the other hand, several observers will point to the dangers of this approach. Clay Wescott complains about overelaborate reform projects which 'attempt to address too many objectives simultaneously and can sometimes be beyond the capacity of [aid] recipients to implement' (in Langseth *et al*. 1995: 72). Nick Manning argues that 'Grand reform designs tend to squeeze out local innovations' (in Langseth *et al*. 1995: 41). Klitgaard (1997: 497) makes the same point in the context of performance incentives: 'The idea of designing an incentive master-plan for every part of the civil service at once is misguided. Performance measures are so problematic that we are well-advised to begin with experiments and then learn from experience'.

Practical experience must be the arbiter, and such evidence as exists appears to favour the incremental approach. Public management reforms in developed Commonwealth countries, New Zealand partially excepted, succeeded to a large extent because they were much more incremental than is commonly supposed (Polidano 1995). Portugal began with a 'grand design' approach to reform during the 1970s but got nowhere; it achieved greater progress with a more devolved approach in which line ministries were given greater room for initiative and the centre limited itself to 'selective radicalism' (OECD 1995). Overambition is cited as a common cause of project failure in various countries (Schacter 1995; Jacobs 1998).

Perhaps the clinching evidence comes from Uganda. In the early 1990s the government sought aid funding for its reform programme. It produced a 'comprehensive, well-presented Strategic Framework' which 'impressed the donor community and resulted in an additional US $23 million for civil service reform in Uganda' (Langseth 1995a: 378). (We can infer from this that the document's express purpose was to impress donors.) Yet we also learn from Langseth that most of the money was used for nothing more ambitious than the payment of retrenchment benefits.

The debate about the scope of reform is often bound up with the question of uncoupling civil service reform from structural adjustment programmes. This is unfortunate, for they are completely separate issues. To argue that developing-country governments should keep the scope of reform limited is not to say that they should stick to privatizing parastatals and sacking civil servants. It is, or should be, for governments to decide what measures to take as part of their reform programmes, bearing in mind the state of the economy and the resources at hand. But the fact is that most governments have neither the political capital nor the administrative capacity to sustain more than a limited range of concurrent initiatives.

Under most conditions, reform is less like leaping a chasm than crossing it on tightrope. Stopping midway is not an option: one has to press on. But forcing the pace can lead to disaster. One has to proceed slowly, pace by pace, all the while watching one's step very carefully indeed. This does not mean giving up all hope of making major change: an incremental process of change can add up to a radical transformation if it is sustained long enough. It does mean, however, that any hopes of doing it all at once should be discarded.

It should also be said, however, that there are strong pressures in favour of a comprehensive approach. Some initiatives, such as the service-wide performance management schemes which Klitgaard abhors, may be a response to the very centralization of government: people who have always worked within a tradition of centralization may find it hard to envisage doing things in any other way. An environment which generates the need for reform also conditions the response to that need.

Moreover, comprehensive reform programmes may be necessary to attract the aid money without which reform cannot proceed in many countries. The more a project promises to achieve, the more it is likely to get the necessary funding. To say that a project is only an experiment with limited scope and uncertain outcome is to risk rejection. The fact is that project proposals function as marketing tools as much as management tools. We have caught a glimpse of this dynamic at work in Uganda. Another glimpse is provided by Mark Schacter of the World Bank, who admits that 'The World Bank and its clients recognise this need, in principle, to address a host of difficult issues at the same time. This is perhaps the key factor leading to projects that turn out to be overly ambitious' (1995: 342).

THE ROLE OF AID DONORS

This brings us to another major issue: the influence wielded by overseas aid donor agencies. Donors provide much of the funding for reform initiatives, particularly in Africa. This power of the purse, plus some quite definite ideas regarding what sort of reforms are desirable, has led donor agencies to take centre stage in the selection and definition of reform projects (Polidano and Hulme 1999).

In theory donors respond to the needs identified by client governments. In practice they often identify clients' needs for them. One example is the World Bank's service delivery survey methodology, which aims to develop service quality standards for public bodies on the basis of user surveys. The initiative originated in the autumn of 1994 as an internal Bank report titled 'Service Delivery Survey: A Diagnostic Tool for Country X'. This paper was then 'customized' for Nicaragua and Uganda and proposed to these countries, both of which agreed to its incorporation in existing Bank-financed institutional development lending projects. A similar process took place in Jordan (Langseth 1995b).

There is nothing wrong with the service delivery survey methodology as such. It is a well-conceived initiative. But it appears to owe its origins to little more than policy entrepreneurialism on the part of Bank staff: a classic case of a solution in search of a problem. Governments are unlikely to reject such initiatives when they are put forward by donors which are providing important development assistance. In Malawi, for instance, civil servants consciously avoid raising objections to donor-financed initiatives in order not to be seen as 'a person who is blocking aid' (Hirschmann 1993: 126).

But acquiescence is not commitment. Indeed, genuine commitment or 'ownership' of a project – particularly among the officials who have to make the project work, as opposed to the political leaders who merely have to approve it – is less likely to come about when the project originates from abroad in this way. The connection comes out clearly in a recent evaluation report on a UNDP-sponsored civil service reform programme in a southern African country. The consultant who wrote the report complained that the project was undermined by a serious lack of local ownership; yet he went on to propose an entirely new component for the project, apparently off the top of his head.[2]

Lack of local ownership is a critical issue in many countries. Donors recognize this, but they do not always see the link with their own way of working. They tend to see lack of ownership as a problem of project management which can be solved by the appropriate techniques: seminars and consultation meetings with local officials, and a public commitment to reform by political leaders (the latter was the solution put forward by the author of the above-mentioned UNDP evaluation).

Unfortunately, public expressions of commitment are easily dismissed by hard-nosed officials as so much more political rhetoric. And a frequent problem of seminars is that even if the participants are willing to be forthright in voicing any reservations they may have about a project, this may come at a stage when the latter has already gone through two lengthy, formalized processes of approval – those of the government and the donor agency. The project may be all but set in stone by the time the consultation meetings are held, giving those in charge very little leeway to respond to participants' concerns. In practice, seminars and consultation meetings may be more a mechanism of retrospective validation than an input to project design (Polidano and Hulme 1999: 128).

Even where donors do not explicitly aim to push their pet ideas onto governments, their power of the purse can distort decision making as governments adopt initiatives that are likely to bring in the most aid money rather than those that are the most necessary. Zanzibar (Tanzania) is a case in point. In the mid-1990s, 85 per cent of its development budget and half of all recurrent expenditure was financed by donors. As a result:

> What gets funding is what donors want to fund, not what Zanzibari officials think the government needs. One very large project in COLE's {the Zanzibari Commission for Land and Environment's} budget is a Dutch program for toxic chemical removal . . . Toxic chemical cleanup matters a great deal to the Western green agenda, even if Zanzibar has only a minor problem with toxics.
>
> (Myers 1996: 232)

At an extreme, aid dependency can bring about a decision-making vacuum and huge problems of project co-ordination within the host country government as approval is given to whatever is likely to bring in money. The flow of aid money can even encourage irresponsibility among host country officials. Wescott mentions attempts to divert funds towards 'pointless study tours, use of local consultants, vehicles, cellular phones etc.' (1999: 161). I have seen a project proposal relating to civil service reform in an eastern African country which seemed to offer few tangible benefits for the expense involved – except for the number of overseas study visits envisaged for the officials who prepared the proposal.[3]

Donors exacerbate problems of co-ordination when there are several of them involved in the same field. This appears to be a common occurrence. In Malawi, for example, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the UNDP, the European Union, and the British, US and Canadian government aid agencies were all involved in civil service reform in mid-1996, overloading the capacity of the government and slowing down project implementation (Adamolekun *et al.* 1997). At around the same time, Mozambique's ministry of health had to cope with no less than 405 donor-funded projects, many run as semi-autonomous units (Wuyts 1996). And in an evaluation of training for Tanzanian local councillors, Taylor finds the picture to be equally complicated: 'The Dutch, Germans, Irish, South Africans and the UN have all taken limited initiatives in this area' (1999: 89). Turf battles can break out between donors, as well as (perhaps) ideological arguments. The World Bank came into serious conflict with the UNDP over civil service reform in both Guinea and Burkina Faso (Schacter 1995: 339).

Undoubtedly, aid donor organizations make vital technical and financial inputs into public sector reform in developing countries. They can also, let it be said, play an important gatekeeping role against badly designed or inappropriate initiatives. Gatekeeping is one thing, however; originating proposals for reform and foisting them onto client governments is another. This can destroy any sense of local ownership of reform and undermine donors' own efforts to bring about change.

Many donor agency staff acknowledge the problem. But their hands are tied by the institutional incentives and constraints within which they work. Given a choice between stopping for lack of local ownership or pressing on regardless, most donor agency staff in the field would probably press on. In Malawi, says Hirschmann, 'both because of a need to disburse money and because many of the undertakings are urgently needed, donors are mostly set on continuing with their programmes whether or not the Malawians show evidence of, or even concern for, maintaining them' (1993: 126).

Ultimately, donor agencies have to show results to taxpayers and parliaments back home. The job of donor agency staff in the field is to deliver those results. The representative in the Caribbean of a bilateral aid donor agency once told me quite bluntly that any colleagues of his who recommended cessation of a project on account of insufficient local backing would be putting their careers at risk. From the head office's point of view, lack of ownership of a project within the recipient country was a field problem to be sorted out in the field. A field officer who admitted being unable to do so would be marked down as someone who gives up too easily.

THE LEADERSHIP OF REFORM

Even if the ownership of reform can be made to leap the gulf between aid donor agencies and the host government, there is still the crucial issue of how to diffuse it sufficiently widely *within* the government. For no government is a monolithic whole.

Even if we exclude regional or local governments from consideration, there remain many internal gulfs to be bridged.

For instance, central management functions are usually parcelled out among a diversity of bodies: the ministry of finance, the ministry of public service, the president's or prime minister's office and the public service commission. These central agencies often have different perspectives: McCourt (1998: 181, following J. Corkery and A. Land) speaks of 'the almost universal distrust between ministries of finance and public service'. Public service commissions are likely to have not only a distinct perspective but considerable statutory autonomy from the rest of government (Polidano and Manning 1996). A reform initiative hosted in any one of these bodies could have considerable difficulty extending its reach to those aspects of management that are the concern of the others. Yet this is sure to become necessary, even if reform is kept narrow in scope as suggested above.

Beyond the nerve centre of government, one will find the usual vertical boundaries between different line ministries and departments. Line ministry staff may, in addition, harbour a common antipathy towards central agency officials who know nothing of life outside their ivory towers yet persist in trying to tell everybody else what to do. Staff in departmental field offices may feel the same way towards their own superiors comfortably ensconced in the department's head office. How can reformers bridge all these divides?

An answer to this question must come in two parts. The first part concerns the establishment of central structures of direction for reform that involve and co-ordinate the efforts of different agencies and ensure that they make reform a priority. The second concerns the structuring of the entire reform initiative itself so that it is aimed at the activities of departmental staff rather than central agency bureaucrats. Let us take each of these two aspects in turn.

Achieving effective central co-ordination

At central level, a commonly asked question is whether to set up a new unit to co-ordinate reform or whether to rely on existing central agencies for the purpose. Both approaches have their advocates. Caiden (1991) favours using existing structures as far as possible. On the other hand, Wilenski (1986) argues that reform will forever be kept on the back burner unless a dedicated unit is set up to drive it forward.

Wilenski is probably right in that there must be a small core of people working full time on civil service reform. It needs no conspiracy theorist to see that reform may never get off the ground if it is added to the responsibilities of people who have many other things to do. But it is important to bear in mind that a free-standing central reform unit would have very little power of its own. Civil service management powers and prerogatives would remain the preserve of the 'traditional' central agencies.

Alternative arrangements – powers held concurrently by the reform unit and central agencies, or their divestiture from the latter – would be unworkable.

This means that the reform unit would have to work through existing central agencies. Developing a good relationship with the latter would, or should, become its top priority. It would be disastrous for the reform unit if existing central agencies came to see it as a threat. To avoid this, it would have to take a low-key approach and avoid the limelight. The case of Malta's Management Systems Unit is a cautionary tale of a central reform unit that disregarded this precept, generating such hostility as a result that it became virtually ineffective even though it was well resourced and had political backing (Polidano 1999).

Given these caveats and limitations, one may ask whether it is not preferable to entrust the co-ordination of reform to an existing central agency after all. But quite apart from the drawback already noted, that reform could be relegated to secondary importance, the agency would still at some stage have to build bridges between itself and the other central agencies. In so doing it would face exactly the same difficulties as a dedicated reform unit. Indeed one could argue that, as a long-established body with traditionally well-defined boundaries, it would face greater difficulty in broadening its role than a newly established reform unit without historically defined functions.

One way to draw the various central agencies into the reform process is to include their representatives in a committee which would oversee change efforts. Such a committee (or a hierarchy of committees, each considering a successively broader set of issues, and including also the leadership of line ministries) could play a very useful co-ordinating role. But it would be a delusion to suppose that representation on a committee would automatically guarantee ownership of reform on the part of the central agencies concerned. Ultimately only manifest backing for reform on the part of political leaders could ensure that the various ministries and departments make reform a priority. Put bluntly, officials are more likely to pick up the baton of reform and run with it if the head of government is breathing down their necks (and the necks of their respective ministers).

In the absence of top-level political commitment to reform, no structure of committees is likely to function effectively for long. It would soon degenerate to a forum for recording events rather than taking decisions. Participants may eventually lose interest, skipping meetings or sending ineffectual lower-level officials in their stead. This was the fate of civil service reform in Lesotho, among other countries (Matete 1998).

The most evident tangible manifestation of 'political commitment to reform' will often be the creation of a specialized cabinet committee and its placement at the apex of the machinery of direction of reform. But just as putting officials on lower-level committees does not guarantee that they will throw their weight behind reform, setting up a cabinet committee does not guarantee that ministers and the head of government will do more than take an intermittent interest in the subject. A cabinet committee can focus political direction, but will not in itself bring it about. This body too may degenerate into a forum for receiving reports or rubber-stamping proposals, without ever following them up or calling officials to account for progress.

Focusing on line departments

Let us suppose that there is genuine political backing for reform and effective central structures of direction have been set up. In other words, the vertical divides between the various central agencies have been successfully bridged. We must then turn our attention to the horizontal divide between the centre and the street-level offices where most government business is transacted, and where change must ultimately make itself felt if reform efforts are to succeed.

For the latter to happen, reform must quickly develop a sustained focus on end results, however defined: greater efficiency, quicker or more equitable service delivery, reduced corruption. Reform must transcend the administrative concerns of central agencies, even though it may be under the direction of those same central agencies. All too often, reform efforts are limited to procedural initiatives such as the improvement of personnel records or the introduction of new budget planning techniques. This is not to deny the potential value of such measures – they could lead to substantial savings from cuts in payroll fraud or tighter financial control, for instance – but they can easily become an end in themselves, turning civil service reform into a rather introspective exercise.

Procedural initiatives such as these would make reform look like the exclusive concern of central agencies. They would seem peripheral to the line managers who are called upon to carry them out by gathering data or putting onerous new procedures into effect. The centre would then find itself in a tug-of-war with line managers, who would try to get away with the bare minimum of compliance with its new requirements. Almost invariably it is the centre which emerges the loser in such contests. Central agencies may find that their reach, their ability to influence what actually goes on in line departments, is very short indeed.

The reach of central agencies can be extended if it is backed by pressure for change from politicians. But an excessively centralized, procedure-oriented approach to reform would encourage even politicians to see central agencies as the primary custodians and implementers of change. Central agencies would find themselves in the very awkward position of answering to ministers for line managers' inactivity. In this situation, all the political pressure in the world would prove ineffective in bringing about change. Line managers are always the ones who must implement reform at the end of the day, but an overly centralized approach would – paradoxically – let them off the hook.

This is not to say that a clear focus on end results would turn managers in line departments into the champions and cheerleaders of reform. But it would make the whole enterprise seem less alien to their concerns and responsibilities. And it would make it easier to ensure that they (rather than the centre) are held accountable for implementing change.

What does a focus on end results mean in practical terms? While the requirements of reform should not be specified in too much procedural detail, politicians cannot simply tell the heads of line departments to improve their performance without giving them a fairly clear indication of what sort of results they need to deliver and how they might go about achieving them. A balance has to be found between centralized prescription and laissez-faire.

One way of finding the necessary balance would be to develop a certification scheme whereby performance improvements by line departments are audited and, if found to measure up to requirements, formally recognized through the bestowal of an award upon the department concerned. The political imperative for reform would then take the form of a demand that line departments seek and gain certification for key functions. In this way, departments would have a clear direction to follow while retaining the leeway to respond in a way that is tailored to their needs and circumstances. The government might also make certification attractive to departments by tying it to incentives: extra resources perhaps, or greater managerial autonomy. This would back the scheme with carrots as well as sticks.

This kind of approach was pioneered by the Citizen's Charter programme in Britain from the early 1990s. A more recent developing-country example is the Malaysian government's ISO 9000 certification initiative. In the latter case certification awards are made with the involvement of a specialized, semi-autonomous body (MAMPU 1997; Bin Besar 1998): this can be an added means to ensure that line managers take certification seriously.

This approach, it should be said, is no guarantee of success. Certification requirements may fail to be enforced with the necessary rigour, turning the whole exercise into a superficial paper-chase. The government may develop a preoccupation with issuing as many awards as possible instead of making sure they are meaningful. And there is always the danger of the certification standards themselves taking on an excessively procedure-oriented focus: this has been alleged of ISO 9000, for instance (Seddon 2000). Nevertheless, this approach would seem to offer some promise.

An alternative approach to reform that is sometimes put forward is to mobilize public pressure for better services – to make managers accountable downwards as well as upwards. The UK Citizen's Charter (or Service First, as it is currently known) and its derivatives elsewhere are often cited as an example of this approach. But one should not make too much of this. The reality is that it can be very difficult to mobilize the public in favour of administrative reform (Borins and Warrington 1996: 7; Ng 1997). Important grassroots initiatives have taken place in India (Paul and Sekhar 1997; Goetz and Jenkins, in this journal issue), but these have remained localized and have yielded limited results.

At an extreme, calls for greater public participation in and support for reform may amount to no more than hand-wringing on the part of reformers who feel unable to get anywhere on their own. Thus a 1995 workshop on civil service reform in Africa reported that:

> Civil society is important in reform: an effective civil society is required for an effective reform programme, because the pressure must come from the bottom. But in the absence of an empowered civil society, no pressure will be brought to bear on reforms. How does one break the vicious circle?
>
> (Langseth *et al.* 1995: 29)

Most importantly, it should not be forgotten that schemes such as the Citizen's Charter incorporated avenues of downward accountability within a framework of accountability upwards along the lines I have briefly outlined above. That is to say, internal machinery had been established within government to hold managers accountable for acting on public complaints. Pressure from below would have little effect on government performance without the backing of such internal mechanisms of accountability. Thus service delivery surveys have had little impact on the quality of public services in Tanzania and Uganda, except perhaps in the case of Ugandan primary education – a sector to which that country's president pays direct attention (Clarke and Wood 2001: 75).

The lesson for reformers here is that they should pay most attention to establishing internal mechanisms of accountability for results, and they should ensure that these are in place before thinking about mobilizing pressure from below. Nor should they hold high expectations for the latter: even in the UK there has been limited public awareness of charters (McCourt 2001: 112). For sure, public concern about service quality can have a major influence on government performance – the work of Putnam (1993) comes to mind – but it is usually too diffuse for reformers to marshal as a direct instrument of change. Such benefits as the UK charters yielded came about largely through internal target setting and accountability mechanisms. The latter will remain the most important lever of change.

Putting the lessons into practice

It is easier to outline a set of principles for reform on paper than it is to put them into practice. The countries which pioneered the approach outlined above arrived at it after long trial and error and many failures. Other countries followed suit without paying much attention to the approach: they were simply replicating initiatives that happened to have been implemented in this way originally (as in the case of client charters). Nowhere has the approach been adopted out of the pages of a book.

There are reasons why reformers may prefer the traditional centralized, procedure-oriented approach. As I have noted earlier, people who have known nothing other than centrally driven, service-wide change initiatives can find it very difficult to conceive of anything different. Moreover, central agency officials, engaged in their perpetual tug-of-war with line managers over the latter's adherence to centralized rules and procedural requirements, may develop a lower opinion of the competence and even probity of line managers than the latter really deserve. Central agency bureaucrats can develop a control-oriented mentality. They would come to believe that allowing any scope for line management discretion in the design and implementation of reform initiatives would be a recipe for failure.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that a results-oriented, departmentally focussed approach does not *guarantee* success. All it does, essentially, is to give a better focus to political pressure for change. Its prospects for success depend on that political pressure being there. And all too often, it is simply absent.

There are a number of reasons why political leaders may fail to pay enough attention to reform. They may simply believe that civil service reform should be left in the hands of civil servants, and they may be surprised to discover what heavy demands successful reform makes on their time and political capital; they may see reform as an exercise in political window-dressing; or they may be going along with it solely to attract aid money or satisfy conditionalities.

Or else political leaders may be serious about reform, but lack a firm with enough political base from which to pursue it. The government may be electorally weak; the institutions of democracy may be too insecure; or the country may be too divided ethnically, turning public administration into a game of spoils and robbing the head of government of power to stamp his or her authority on a cabinet of regional power-brokers.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have sought to highlight what I consider to be three important success factors in civil service reform: keeping the scope of change narrow, limiting the role of aid donors, and giving reform firm leadership while simultaneously allowing for line management discretion. These are strategic and tactical issues in relation to which the wrong choices are made again and again, whether by design or default, often leading to the failure of reform efforts. I have, however, sought to go beyond setting out yet another list of 'lessons', in the belief that it is important to understand *why* reformers keep making the wrong choices (or, at least, fail to make the right ones).

Yet I am happy to admit that I have done no more than take a first step in this direction. I have not hesitated to draw conclusions from the evidence available to me; but they should ideally be tested against further evidence, if it can be collected. Moreover, having sought to identify some of the obstacles which keep reformers from making good choices, I have not taken the logical next step of proposing ways to overcome those obstacles. For these reasons, this article represents a preliminary survey of the terrain to be studied rather than a definitive map of any kind.

I have necessarily concentrated on the pitfalls of civil service reform. But I do not want to paint a picture of unrelieved failure. There are signs of an emergent recognition of the errors of the past and the beginnings of a conscious search for alternatives. Some aid donors, for instance, have become concerned about the high workload their combined activities can generate for recipient governments. To alleviate this burden, the British government has committed itself to seeking better co-ordination among donors (Department for International Development 1997: 38). Proposals have also been floated within the World Bank to 'de-projectize' Bank-supported civil service reform initiatives so as to introduce greater flexibility in the design and implementation of reforms and allow for more experimentation by host governments (Nunberg 1996: 9–11).

Likewise, interesting experiments are under way in some countries. In Tanzania something akin to the certification approach outlined above has begun whereby departments and agencies which put in place a system of performance management would be guaranteed a stable flow of budgeted funds (as opposed to the normal practice of unpredictable cash flows). They would also gain access to a donor-financed performance improvement fund which would, among other things, allow them to pay better salaries to professional and technical staff. Tanzania's neighbour Uganda is also attempting to link the achievement of objectives with the availability of resources (Clarke and Wood 2001: 80–3).

Governments and donors here appear to be involved in a joint process of learning, the outcomes of which deserve to be closely followed by researchers and practitioners alike. As ever with public management reform, success is by no means assured: I have already noted the risk that such a scheme could degenerate to a formality. In time, however, a formula may emerge which would be worthy of use by other countries as a reference-point in developing their own reform programmes.

There is no telling where in the great world-wide laboratory of practical experience such a formula may emerge, and what form it would take. The key is to identify it when it does emerge. Until then, the important thing is to be on the lookout for it. For this reason, if this article succeeds in putting strategic and tactical issues on the agenda of scholars and practitioners of reform, that would count as a significant enough achievement.

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NOTES

1 The distinction between content and approach is not watertight. One of the tactical issues I raise in this article is the need for reform to be oriented towards end-results as opposed to process. This is simultaneously a central tenet of the new public management movement. But it does not follow that NPM reforms are therefore inherently more likely to succeed than other types of reform. An orientation towards results does not *guarantee* success; non-NPM initiatives may also be results-oriented; and NPM reforms can themselves be highly process-oriented even if they are otherwise in theory. Several countries have introduced new processes (strategic planning or staff appraisal systems, for instance) in an effort to put more emphasis on performance, but most have succeeded only in generating annual mountains of paper. We have to look beyond labels.

2 The report cannot be cited to maintain confidentiality.

3 As before, confidentiality precludes giving further details.

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