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On the Elusive Nature of Modernisation in Government

Tomas Bergström & Irvine Lapsley

Introduction

All governments are to varying degrees engaged in public sector modernisation. It is no longer an option, but a necessity, if governments are to respond to changing societal needs and to maintain a competitive economy in an uncertain international environment. (OECD 2005, p.186)

This impetus for modernisation in advanced economies is driven by economic circumstance. We live in a world of globalisation where multinationals have budgets which are the same size as, or greater than, many medium sized countries. The global markets attenuate the influence of governments to shape a domestic economic policy. Indeed, national sovereignty may also be weakened further by overarching bodies, such as the European Union, which limit the discretion of member countries. This context shifts the focus away from economic policy towards policy development for public services, as a domain over which governments can exercise greater influence even if membership in EU also has a large impact on national and local administration (Statskontoret 2016). This makes policy making in public services the essence of contemporary political thought and action in many countries. Decisions over the size of the sector, or its subsectors, policies of privatisation or marketisation versus more government-led public services dominate the political landscape. This is an important topic for political scientists, policy makers, elected officials, public service managers and of course, citizens as users of these public services and as the electorate. This is the topic which we address in this special issue.

The particular focus in this special issue is on Sweden and Nordic nations. This is also an important focus. While the modernisation agenda is most notably associated with Anglo Saxon countries such as the UK, New Zealand, Australia, the US and Canada, most commentators tend to overlook Nordic countries. However, there is a strand of writing within the NPM and modernisation literatures which identifies Sweden, in particular, as an adventurous moderniser

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(Hood, 1995; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). Even for these commentators, the Swedish case is presented as a kind of paradox. While most modernisation initiatives are associated with neoliberal policies of the UK's Margaret Thatcher and her successors, Sweden has tended to favour a centre-left alignment in its Governments, which does not fit the neoliberal stereotype (Hood, 1995). However, there are good reasons for Sweden to be regarded as a leading edge nation in its policies of modernisation of public services. Sweden is a receptive country which is open to new ideas; its traditional centre-left alignment may appear to favour public services, but this is not necessarily acceptable if services can be delivered more effectively (Lapsley, 2017). These are important reasons for a distinctive Swedish approach. This is also facilitated by the close relationship (historical, cultural and economic) between Sweden and the UK, which is one of the most intense and early advocates of neoliberal policies in public policy. While this provides a channel for UK ideas to travel, it also opens the space for distinctive Swedish interpretations of what may be regarded as the most recent best practice. All of this makes Sweden a most interesting study setting for scholars of government practice and reform (Lapsley & Knutsson, 2017).

The perspective taken in compiling this set of papers is interdisciplinary. The study setting of public sector organisations has been depicted as inherently complex, which requires a blending of different theories to understand and explain phenomena (Jacobs, 2012, 2016). Furthermore, this paper collection recognises the preoccupation of political scientists and of scholars of institutional change with the manner and nature of substantive changes to organisations as a consequence of public policy. In particular, the manner in which modernising reforms may not eliminate established practices and structures but coexist with them is explored. This layering of successive reform initiatives has been identified by a number of scholars (Thelen, 2003, 2004; Streeck & Thalen, 2005; Van der Heijden, 2011). More recently this perspective is evident in studies of accounting changes as part of modernisation programmes (Hyndman et al., 2014; Hyndman & Liguori, 2016). Indeed, it has been suggested that the kinds of continuities captured by layering of reform processes may fit the Swedish context (Lapsley, 2017). These issues are taken up further below. First we examine what "modernisation" means in practice before examining different strands of this phenomenon.

Modernisation: The Debate

We are compelled to modernise. The subject of modernisation of government is contentious though, not least because there is debate over what modernisation actually means. The debate over definition and scope is one feature of the elusive nature of modernisation. But there are other issues over its nature and its manner of implementation in different national contexts. In

this discussion we examine the general debate over what constitutes modernisation first. This elaborates different facets of modernisation: modernisation as NPM; modernisation as refinement; modernisation as recycling; and modernisation in the future. Then we examine a number of reform initiatives within these four strands of modernisation in both the Scandinavian context (as our primary focus) and UK context (as a key reference point) as examples of modernisation. In doing this we focus on organisational aspects, not technological achievements. The impact of technology in public administration, as in e-government, is certainly relevant but is beyond the scope of our discussion.

Modernisation has a temporal dimension. “Modern” indicates something contrary to old-fashioned and has positive connotations in our culture as could be seen in almost any commercial advertisement. The modern is therefore not only new it is also an improvement. This can be seen from the UK Coalition Government’s (2010–2015) rejection of the term “reform” as too negative and its replacement by “modernisation” which was seen as more positive, more exciting, more innovative (Anon, 2011). Best practice becomes even better in a linear progression. To present an idea of organisational reform as new is therefore a recipe to ensure its diffusion (Røvik 1998, p.109f.).

An important contribution to the debate over modernisation has been made by Latour (1993) who has argued that we have never lived in an age of modernity. He argues that the forces for modernity are, or perceive themselves to be, invincible (op. cit., p.39). These modernisers have power and influential positions. Their conception of a highly rational society in which cause and effect can be clearly demonstrated portrays a particular vision of society. In practice, there are many examples of irrational behaviour by humans (Sutherland, 2007). But, nevertheless, the vision of society as occupied with rational organisations and individuals can infuse the thinking of modernisers. This perspective resonates with the position advanced by one of Scandinavia’s most influential writers, Brunsson (2009), who contests the continual pursuit of the rational organisation by policy makers in contemporary society.

The theory of modernity in contemporary life has been articulated by Giddens (1990). In his writing Giddens attributes the phenomenon of reflexivity as the necessary basis for modernity (Giddens, 1990, p. 37). This is described by Giddens as the interaction of actions and knowledge (op. cit. p. 38):

The modernity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about these very practices, thus constitutively altering their character

This presents a picture of key actors in the policy making process who have the levers of power to act on their knowledge, expertise and reflections on practice.

Within the public sector such actors occupy space at the heart of government and in the upper echelons of large state entities.

Administrative reform has been one of the few growth industries in an era otherwise characterised by a declining concern with the public sector (Peters 1997, p.71).

This perspective also implies rational decision makers evaluating defined policy options. Indeed, the highly influential positivist theory of rational choice underpins many reform proposals. Rational choice theory presumes instrumental self-interested behaviour, not because its proponents genuinely believe such behaviour to be ubiquitous – but because it makes possible the kind of modelling that is the very rationale of this theory (Hay, 2011). Therefore, this choice may reflect analytical convenience rather than firm belief in rationality. The appeal of rational choice theory lies in its promise to deliver a naturalist science of the political. Crucial to this is the assumption of rationality which effectively serves to render (political) behaviour predictable in any given context (Hay, 2004). However, the assumption that there is only one rational course of action in any given setting is a starting premise in rational choice. But most non-trivial game theoretical models have multiple equilibria and are therefore indeterminate to some extent (Hay, 2011). Such indeterminacy arises not from human agency per se but from the structure of the context itself. Rational choice indeterminacy is not ontological but contingent upon the context in question. Moreover, rational choice is incapable of dealing with inherent indeterminacy injected into social systems by human agency. This means that the rationality assumption is in effect a convenient shortcut which appears to make a naturalist science of the political, which generates predictive and testable hypotheses (Hay, 2011).

The significance of modernisers is evident in a political landscape which is shaped heavily by the influence of rational and public choice models. This presumes rationality and behaviour in which political elites are depicted as acting in their own self-interest. The attribution of self-interest to all political actors may simplify modelling, but it may also complicate both reform design and implementation, thereby fostering a contested space for modernisers and their opponents. The problematic nature of modernisation arises from this tension which results in its multifaceted dimensions. Here we examine four strands of modernisation: modernisation as NPM; modernisation as refinement; modernisation as recycling; and modernisation in the future. Table 1 shows the papers in this special issue within this schema. This reveals that these different facets of modernisation are alive and well in Scandinavian countries.

Table I. Models of Modernisation

Modernisation as NPM

- Hjärpe (2017), Measuring Social Work – Quantity as Quality in the Social Services
- Carlstedt & Jacobsson (2017), Indications of Quality or Quality as a Matter of Fact? “Open Comparisons” within the Social Work Sector
- Mutiganda et al. (2017) Investigation of How a Private Sector Procurement Method Institutionalises in Public Sector Organisation: A Field Study in Aged Care Services

Modernisation as Refinement

- Carrington (2017), Consulting or Holding to Account? Riksrevisionen as an Agent of Change in Swedish Public Administration
- Bringselius & Lemne (2017), What Qualifications do Good State Audit Require? The Profiles of Ten Auditors-General
- Thomasson (2017), Professionalization vs Democratic Control – Are They Mutually Exclusive in Governance Network?

Modernisation as Recycling

- Bringselius & Thomasson (2017), Balancing Stability and Change in the New Weberian State

Modernisation and the Future

- Knutsson (2017), Advocacy Coalition Learning: Biases and Heuristics in Policy Implementation
- Fred & Hall (2017), A Projectified Public Administration. How Projects in Swedish Local Governments Become Instruments for Political and Managerial Concerns

Modernisation as NPM

An interesting example of what constitutes modernisation can be found in the experiences of the UK. The UK has been regarded as a leading edge reformer in its public service for decades. Indeed, it is arguable that the UK is the specific locus where the label of modernisation of public services was first coined. A factor in this was almost certainly the appointment of the leading sociologist Anthony Giddens as a special adviser to Tony Blair, the first leader of what became New Labour, which formed three administrations in the UK from 1997 to 2010. This adviser articulated the theme of modernisation as fundamental to the New Labour approach of the Third Way (Giddens, 1998). The theme of “modernisation” was the *leitmotif* of the New Labour era. An illustration of this can be gleaned from key policy documents from this government. This included HM Cabinet Office (1999) on *Modernising Government*, the UK government’s spending plans for the public sector (Her Majesty’s Treasury, 1998), *Public Services for the Future: Modernisation, Reform, Accountability*, and its proposals for the National Health Service: *The New NHS – Modern, Dependable* (DoH, 1997). Its successor government, the Coalition Government from 2010–2015 initially described its policy programme as “reforms” but reverted

to “modernisation”. These policy documents herald the introduction of *Modernisation* as an overarching theme in the articulation of government policy which continues to resonate with the practices of contemporary governments. This phenomenon has been described by one of New Labour’s key policy advisors as the codification of NPM practices under the banner of modernisation (Taylor, 2011). Also in Sweden *Modernisation* is frequently used in government documents like directives and press releases. For a while the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) had “modernisation of administration” as an important operational category (SOU 2004:65, p. 65).

However, while these developments can be seen as the use of a particular language to advocate change in public services, the substance of what constitutes modernisation beyond the rather vague rallying cry of “modernisation” is necessary. The specific enactments of modernisation include: the introduction of choice or market like structures; private sector management styles and ideas; advocacy of private finance schemes; a results-oriented approach to management; the re-designation of the citizen as a consumer. In practice these reforms meant an emphasis on quantification and the search for value for money. All of these manifestations of what constitutes modernisation resonate with the NPM phenomenon of the 1980s, but which continued well into the 21st century in the UK (Simonet, 2015; Hyndman & Liguori, 2016; Hyndman & Lapsley, 2016; Pollitt, 2016). This is the case also in Sweden (Borchers & Kockum 2015; *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 2015/4) although sometimes with a critical twist (*Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 2016/1).

These modernising reformers are depicted in the literature as strong believers in the rationalistic organisation. However, the following quote by a former UK Cabinet Minister, Howell, gives a different perspective on policy implementation (Howell, cited in Hennessy, 1990, p300):

The history of post-war British Cabinets has been a continuous story of people trying to do too much, believing that they had power over events which in fact they lacked, treating national circumstances as entirely within their control and twirling the wheel on the bridge as though every move would produce an instant response in some well-oiled engine room below.

This phenomenon depicts modernisation as a kind of failure, but this can be captured by symbolic behaviour on the part of organisations which have pretended to be “modern”. Indeed, from the perspective of those who are subject to modernisation policies, there is the distinct possibility of sagacious conformity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This a reaction to modernisation policies which results in members of “modernised” organisations are going through the motions with a ritualistic rather than a substantive implementation, while claiming to be “modern”. Reactions to such sagacious conformity reveals why

modernising reformers are often depicted as “relentless” and “driven” (Brunsson, 1992; Brunsson & Olsen, 1993).

There are distinct examples of this kind of modernisation in Sweden and Finland. An example is the contest for “Sweden’s most modern authority” (<http://kvalitetsmassan.se/utmarkelser/sveriges-modernaste-myndighet/>). A jury consisting of representatives of government ministries, national agencies, trade unions and consultants declares a winner at a national conference for quality issues. Among values repeatedly estimated by the juries are: customer orientation, innovation and use of the latest technology. Indeed, using measures like Customer Satisfaction Index gives evidence of the fascination for image and “brands”, like any private company. The Swedish Tax Agency, winner in 2011, is very proud of having high figures for customer satisfaction. More Swedes than former party leader Mona Sahlin seem to think that paying taxes is “awesome”.

The NPM preoccupation with quantification is evident. The ethnographic study by Hjarpe (2017) of a social service office in Sweden reveals the conviction on the part of modernisers that only numbers can provide an objective picture of the effectiveness of social care. This is a challenging situation for caring professionals who have a different training and perspective on caring for vulnerable citizens. New Public Management really corresponds to Old Private Management. The quest for evidence based social services based on numbers and calculations is not very different from Scientific Management as proposed by Taylor.

This critique of the NPM style numbers games is elaborated upon further by Carlstedt and Jacobsson (2017). This paper reflects on the audit mentality which accompanies NPM reforms. The particular focus of Carlstedt and Jacobsson is on a tool which is used to evaluate standards of services. This tool is called Open Comparisons. The drawback with this model is its use of approximate indicators which become accepted by oversight bodies and managers as precise measurements of levels of care given. Both of these papers urge caution on the part of zealous public administrators in the use of soft numbers as hard facts.

Another facet of this kind of modernisation is the practice of private sector mimicry. The study by Mutiganda et al. (2017) in Finland shows how the process of mimicry has costs of translating ideas into practice, in making private sector models portable and in the assumption of both availability of expertise and the presumption of a straightforward implementation in a public sector setting. The specific practice examined by Mutiganda et al. (2017) is an example of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in the care of the elderly. CCT has its origins in manufacturing industry where there is a long-established practice of comparing the costs of components to see if it is cheaper to make them or buy them in from an outside supplier. That kind of practice is straightforward in the manufacturing sector context. But the application of CCT in public services has

been widely decried as simply crude cost cutting without regard to issues of quality. However, the practice of CCT as a quasi-privatisation is widely used. In this case it is a product of European Union directives. The compulsory nature of this tested the expertise of the local politicians and the outcome was a failure with significant cost overruns. This is an interesting account of how the most straightforward of private sector practices may not be readily portable to more complex public services.

Modernisation as Refinement

Lapsley (2001; 2008) has argued that continued manifestations of modernisation resonate with the NPM ideas first promulgated in the 1980s. This phenomenon has been described by De Tocqueville (1856) as the process by which successive administrations engage in refinements of what went before. This can be depicted as evidence of a desire to do away with the mechanisms of the *ancien regime*, but which results in ever more elaborate replications and refinements of what has gone before. If we use a metaphor, that of a building, organisations are renovated to be up-to-date but you could still track elements remaining unchanged. Layer is put upon layer also in organisations (Poulsen, 2007). The discontinuity between old and new might consequently be overstated. "It is important to note that there are important areas of continuity in public service management – many things have not changed and 'traditional' ideas and practices coexist with innovations" (Lowndes 1997:50).

An example of this is the 2010 UK Coalition Government spending plans The Comprehensive Spending Review which is an interesting example of De Tocquevillian refinement. It had predecessors. But it introduced refinements: a new name, a multi-year plan, agreements on service delivery with specific targets. When the 2010 Coalition Government took office it made some changes. It changed the name to Spending Review. It dispensed with the targets and spending agreements. However, it retained the multi-year planning period, while targets went, government departments still had objectives with performance indicators; the overarching criterion of spending remained value for money and government departments were expected to produce business plans which demonstrated the achievement of value for money.

The process of refinement in modernisation is evident in Sweden, too.

Since the market-economics approach and crisis awareness were established in the early 1990s there has thus been substantial continuity regarding the main features of various government's measures to enhance efficiency in central-government activities. A new Government has, broadly speaking, carried on where its predecessor left off. This applies e.g. to management of the

agencies, use of performance management and the emphasis on structural changes in central government (Statskontoret 1997:72).

Carrington (2017) reveals how the Swedish National Audit Office is an agent for change in Swedish public administration. This agency uses its performance audits as a mechanism by which it seeks to change the behaviour of public services. In effect, the national auditors are acting as consultants to bring about service improvements. This is a very distinct refinement of standard practice and extant literature which depicts auditors as policing rather than helping. This is a very distinct Swedish practice. Furthermore, Bringselius and Lemne (2017) observe that the Swedish National Audit Office has been criticised severely in the past. Bringselius and Lemne reflect on what it takes to make a good auditor and offer refinements around the scope of their duties and the nature of their qualifications.

In a different vein, Thomasson (2017) addresses the tensions between professionals, managers and democratic accountability in public services. The specific study setting for this paper is a collaborative venture between municipalities. This is often called new public sector governance. This study setting adds an extra layer of complexity to management and governance processes. This is an important topic. It is described as a refinement here, but that is because it offers a glimpse into a bottom-up planning process where street level bureaucrats or operatives in this can advocate new working practices. This particular refinement raises big questions about the efficacy of complex, multi-party, layered activities for democratic accountability.

Modernisation as Recycling

Everything modern is not new and innovative. Transferring ideas from one context to another could make them appear “modern” like for example the UK Next Steps Initiative in the 1980s where the relative independence of agencies was seen as modern while in Sweden this phenomenon had been present for decades or even centuries. What is modern is relative as shown by the fact that a popular textbook called *Modern administration* was published in Sweden already in 1966 (Gorpe). Changes in practices could also be described as swings of a pendulum, as waves, as fashion (Berggren 2013, p.116; Bergström 2014). There might not even be an infinite number of possible organisational structures and processes. Hood & Jackson (1991) show how a limited number of “administrative doctrines” recur over time.

Authorities are not unified and totally coherent units. They are simultaneously permeated by a number of different, and sometimes contradictory, organisational ideas (March & Olsen 1989). Trends make certain solutions to perceived problems popular at particular times. Often changes try to remedy

problems in the existing organization by moving in the direction of other solutions that actually have been tried before (cf. Smoke 2013).

For instance, centralized organizations tend to generate complaints about insufficient consideration of local knowledge and local needs for adaptation, while decentralized organizations will discover that they are not paying enough attention to the benefits of coordination and standardization. (Brunsson 2009:94)

This is why modernisation sometimes returns into old ideas, recycling them under other labels if necessary. In such a vein Olsen deals with “rediscovering bureaucracy” (Olsen 2005). Other proponents of the bureaucratic model of public service delivery include Schofield (2000) and Stazyk and Goerdel (2010). Similarly, Kjell Arne Røvik (2008, p.133f) talks about a “neo-rationalistic turn” because changes revive the instrumental and rationalistic thinking that dominated organisational ideas from the end of the 1940s to the beginning of the 1970s. Ideas of central planning and control that were the paradigm of the 1970s have returned to Swedish agencies as evidenced in, for instance, the Social Insurance Agency (Andersson et al. 2012). Within this strand of thinking there has emerged an argument that we live in a Neo-Weberian State (Bringseilius & Thomasson, 2017). This thesis is based on the contention that the impetus of NPM has stalled and key actors seek to fashion continuity and stability in government affairs rather than the turbulent disruption of NPM ideas. The Bringseilius and Thomasson (2017) thesis is that key facets of public life, including the recruitment process, the standardization of work and the promulgation of classic bureaucratic values all work together to reinforce bureaucratic norms and usher in a new era of stability and continuity in public services. This is a challenging thesis. There is evidence that NPM continues unabated (Hyndman & Liguori, 2016; Hyndman & Lapsley, 2016), contrary to the proposition that we live in a post NPM world. The prolonged global financial crisis which commenced in 2008 has had far reaching effects. Within the UK, the private sector banking failure created a public sector crisis, with NPM-type cost reduction and efficiency programmes (Hodges & Lapsley, 2016). Furthermore, within the Eurozone, the fiscal crisis resulted in NPM-type efficiency programmes, privatisations and cost reduction drives (Cohen et al., 2015). These findings run against the idea of a stable bureaucracy. Indeed, the idea of the Neo-Weberian State was first mooted in 2011, before the full effects of the global financial crisis had impacted on public services (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Furthermore, Pollitt (2016) appears to have abandoned the thesis of stability and the Neo-Weberian State. However, it may be that Scandinavian countries are exceptions to this fiscal turbulence which intensifies NPM practices. However, Mutiganda et al. (2017) report on NPM practices in the wake of government financial cut-backs and Fred and Hall (2017) identify novel practices in local government

which may be shaped by budget pressures. The stability and continuity thesis deserves further research to see if Scandinavian countries are indeed so distinct.

As noted above, there is a lot of recycling of old private sector ideas in public management reforms (Bromwich & Lapsley, 1997). Indeed, one of the most distinctive elements of this recycling of ideas can be found in Lean Management. The idea of Lean Management is rather old. It is attributed to the Toyota motor company, a development from the 1960s and even earlier (Womack et al., 1990) which predates the modernisation of the public sector of recent decades. However, the fundamental idea of Lean Management, to provide more with less resources has become something of a mantra for public sector modernisers. The adoption of Lean Management by public services is a classic case of the mimicry of private sector practice. The idea of shaping public services according to a factory model of production has not deterred its proponents. Indeed, there is almost an entire industry of management consultants, authors of guidebooks and a support industry of experts selling the merits of this latest fad in public services management which is, in fact, presented as novel and new despite being a recycled idea from decades earlier. Within the UK, there is an emerging field of scholars who are researching the nature, manner of implementation and effectiveness of lean ideas. For example, McCann et al. (2015) reported on the problematic nature of Lean Management in hospitals. The simplicity of Lean concepts did not transfer well to the complexity of the hospital setting. In Swedish public services, Lean has received less scholarly attention despite the interest of Swedish policy makers and managers. Some recent contributions though are Brännmark (2012) and Hellman (2016). This is a gap in our knowledge and an important area for future research.

Modernisation and the Future

The present offers a complex landscape for crystal-ball gazing. The “loose fit” of ideas of NPM and new public sector governance may pull together or push in different directions. This will continue. In many countries, austerity programmes are reducing the size of the public sector. This will result in leaner public sector organisations. The pattern of development of new policies, and management practices has not followed a linear pattern. This can be seen as a generic feature of the public sector which will be repeated. One major implication of this perspective is that to survive, public service organisations have to become learning organisations to continue in a turbulent environment. In many cases resistance to change could be detected though, a sense of “We shall overcome”. If we ignore changes, somehow they will disappear. A certain amount of scepticism could of course be healthy. Change

should not do away with basic public values like due process, transparency and accountability.

But what are the characteristics of the organisation of the future? The idea of “liquid modernity” has been introduced by Clegg and Baumeler (2010). In their view the public organisation of the future may exhibit, or be expected to exhibit, the ability to react to situations with speed of movement and response. In this vision of the future, the “iron cage” of bureaucracy melts. The rigidity of organisations and networks are removed and individuals in organisations face challenges to improvise and to adapt. The short-term pressures of NPM combine with the destabilising influences of fragile networks. The sovereign state’s influence is attenuated by global markets and influences. This implies that organisational strategies will become emergent, as uncertainty becomes endemic. All pressures are for the here and now... of the moment, for the moment. Total transparency in a liquid glass cage.

The above vision is dramatic. Perhaps it might be seen as fanciful. But there are distinct Swedish examples which resonate with this vision of the future. First, Knutsson presents an analysis of a learning organisation (2017). This paper identifies the strength of organisations functioning as learning organisations to overcome obstacles in policy implementation. This is an important contribution to the efficacy of policy formulation and implementation. Finally, the paper by Fred and Hall (2017) identifies a phenomenon which resonates with the idea of “liquid modernity”. This paper discusses the idea of a “projectified public administration”. This refers to the increasing use of temporary organisations within municipalities. The particular characteristic identified in this study by Fred and Hall is the “temporary mind set”. In effect, senior policymakers are supportive of the casualization of public administration.

The above perspectives on modernising government have identified numerous facets of this endeavour which merit further research. These include:

1. The ambiguity of modernisation of government both as a process and an outcome
2. The extent to which modernisation is a continuation of NPM practices (Hyndman & Lapsley, 2016)
3. Examples of refinements of practices which reinforce persistent patterns of modernising behaviour
4. Whether Scandinavian states portray the characteristics of what has been called the Neo-Weberian State (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011) and whether this phenomenon has supplanted the dominance of NPM practices

5. The efficacy of the multi layered concept of the contemporary public services landscape in which bureaucracies, managerialism and political practice coexist and meld (Lapsley 2017)
6. The practice of Lean Management in Scandinavian public services and the efficacy and effectiveness of its adoption
7. Whether Scandinavian agencies and government departments display the characteristics of the liquid organisation as depicted by Clegg and Baumeler (2010).

This research agenda is not exhaustive. But it reveals the complexity of political thought and action and its connectivity with ideas of public administration and public management and the need for interdisciplinary perspectives to make sense of these dimensions of modernisation in government.

Modernisation is a never-ending process where politicians and civil servants chase the perfect way to organise the public sector and its services. The perfect is elusive, alas, so the Sisyphus work has to go on.

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