

Reinventing the Proverbs of Government

*The field of public administration has a long history of popular reform movements. Many of these reforms have failed to deliver the improvements promised. The current "reinventing government" reforms, which follow largely from the writings of David Osborne and his coauthors, claim to establish a new governmental paradigm based on liberating employees and citizens to do their best and using new management methods to get the most out of what government does. However, a careful analysis of Osborne's chief works, *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy*, reveals that their advice cannot be applied because it is inconsistent. No new paradigm is established, and, more importantly, because of the ahistorical nature of these texts, Osborne proposes discredited ideas for administrative reform and misleads the reader concerning the significance of his observations.*

Public administration experiences periodic reform movements that exhibit the enthusiasm of a tent revival, but the success of the Soviet economy. Popularizers of these reforms are strong on charisma and communication. For example, two recent reform texts, *Reinventing Government (RG)* (Osborne and Gaebler 1992) and *Banishing Bureaucracy (BB)* (Osborne and Plastrik 1997), are largely written in narrative, rather than the more laborious format of many public administration texts (Goodsell 1992; Moe 1994). But these reformers and their texts are frequently weak on scholarship. As a result, they produce inconsistent recommendations that are uninformed by history. When such popularizations influence the direction of public administration practice, their errors must be examined and corrected.

Such is the case with the currently fashionable reinventing government literature. These texts appeal to the same audience as academic public administration, are used in teaching public administration as well as developing some elements of public administration theory, and may be the expressed views of people who have access to top political decision makers (details are given below). This literature has exerted an enormous influence over the language of public administration; for example, the use of "customer" language has become as ubiquitous in government as the similarly popular "quality" language is in the private sector. Also, the New Public Management movement is closely linked to this literature.

This movement, personified in its charismatic leader David Osborne, exhibits a lack of consistency within its

recommendations and an ahistorical understanding of public administration (Coe 1997; Fox 1996; Goodsell 1992; Kobrak 1996; Nathan 1995; Russell and Waste 1998; Wolf 1997). It is sometimes argued that inconsistency in public administration is a sign that the field reflects the designs of the Founding Fathers (McSwite 1997; Whicker 1998). However, inconsistency within a single work or in the collective advice from a single perspective cannot be beneficial. The illogic of these recommendations renders them useless to those who would seek advice from them. However, as Herbert Simon said 50 years ago (Simon 1946) in reviewing Luther Gulick's similarly illogical recommendations (Gulick 1981), they can be used retrospectively to justify whatever action one happens to take.¹

The remaining sections of this article examine five inconsistencies in *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy*, discuss Osborne and his coauthors' claim to establish a new paradigm of government, expose five harmful or misleading reinventing government ideas, and evaluate Osborne and his coauthors' research approach. This discussion shows that the reinventing government reform movement is seriously flawed, providing both contradictory advice and advice that is outright harmful.

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Proverbs

Simon argues: “A fact about proverbs that greatly enhances their quotability is that they almost always occur in mutually contradictory pairs. ‘Look before you leap!’—but ‘He who hesitates is lost’” (Simon 1946, 53).

His point is that such pairs provide no useful advice, but can be used to justify whatever action one prefers. In examining Gulick’s principles of administration, he shows that the key information needed is how to decide which bit of advice one is to follow and that this is the information missing in early twentieth century administrative “science.” Thus, such principles fulfill the same role as proverbs.

Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik exhibit the same tendency as Gulick. They provide conflicting advice without providing clear guidance as to when to choose which alternative. While others have asserted this conflict (Goodsell 1992; Nathan 1995), they have generally discussed conflicts at a rather high level of abstraction. For example, Goodsell says that Osborne and Gaebler are both for and against leadership. While such ambiguity is distracting, it is not fundamental in the way of providing useful advice. However, as discussed below, the inconsistency in this literature is also found at a much more concrete level. For example, they recommend that governments use competition to achieve certain goals and object to reducing duplication, yet elsewhere they condemn duplication. For each of the five topics discussed in this section—competition, privatization, decentralization, innovation, and empowerment—Osborne and his coauthors provide specific advice that contradicts, or, at minimum, is intensely difficult to reconcile with, other advice they provide. This sort of ambiguity renders their advice fundamentally inapplicable. Considering the contradictory nature of this advice, it should not be surprising that reinvention may be no more than “repackaging” of existing programs (Gianakis and Davis III 1998). There is “widespread disagreement” about reinvention objectives (Thompson and Jones 1995), or as Samantha Durst and Charldean Newell (1999) say, “We view this long list of possible actions as indicative of just how amorphous the concept of reinvention has become.” Five of these inconsistencies² are shown in Table 1.

Competitive Government

Osborne and Gaebler advocate the development of competitive government (*RG* 76 ff., 286–7, 307 ff.). They not only recommend competition between private sector service providers, but also between private and public sector providers (*RG* 76) and within government it-

self (*RG* 79), and they explicitly reject the view that “competition within government [is] ‘waste and duplication’” (*RG* 79). Osborne and Plastrik offer similar views (*BB* 31–2, 40, 118, 120–56, 170–84, 189–92, 307–9, 347–8). Competition allegedly improves government the same way it improves the private sector: by increasing the risk of failure for unsatisfactory work, such as work that is less efficient or effective than that supplied by others. Much of the focus, however, is on cost, “Where public and private providers have competed head-to-head . . . savings are averaging 21 percent” (*BB* 31–2). This view is the corollary to Niskanen’s familiar assertion that governments or their subordinate units will act as monopolies and aggrandize benefits to their superior officers (Niskanen 1971). Although empirical evidence is inconclusive (Blais and Dion 1991), this is a relatively orthodox and unsurprising claim.

In conflict, Osborne and Gaebler object to duplication in government agencies (*RG* 132–3, 187–94).³ As an example of dysfunctional duplication in government, they say, “In 1989, the assistant secretary for health testified that there were 93 federal programs administered by 20 different agencies related to the reduction of infant mortality” (*RG* 187). Here they are squarely in the tradition of government reformers who have tried to reduce “irrational” duplication of government services throughout the twentieth century.

They want “competition,” but oppose “duplication.” As a result, the reinventor is given no useful direction for action. Should she allow government units and programs to compete with each other in order to provide the best services? Or should governmental units be rationalized to eliminate duplication? How much duplication is too much? What considerations should lead to streamlining and which to competition? Despite their extensive discussion of competition, Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik do not clarify this matter.

Table 1
Five Inconsistencies in *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy*

Domain of	Recommendation	Contrary recommendations
Competition	Use competition to drive down costs and drive up quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate fragmentation
Privatization	Prefer the private sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a profit. • Take an investment perspective. • Acquire businesses to meet policy goals.
Decentralization	Shift authority to front line workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rationalize government through analytic decision techniques. • Use raw political power. • Regionalize. • Devolve power to the public.
Innovation	Value workers, tolerate and even favor failure as a sign of innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay only for results. • Create “real consequences” for failure. • Suppress “resistance.”
Empowerment	Share real power with workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use rational decision making techniques. • Establish real consequences for failure. • Shift power to communities. • Uncouple steering and rowing.

To Privatize or Not to Privatize

The contradiction between competition and streamlining government is precisely the diametric opposition described by Simon. The conflict over privatization is more complex. Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik sometimes recommend privatization, as with denationalization of businesses in socialist economies (*BB* 22–3, 49 ff., 76–89), but other times they recommend its opposite, as when government ownership of business fulfills objectives related to slowing development and mitigating against traffic congestion (*RG* 208–9). Osborne and Gaebler also recommend load shedding (*RG* 86) and “catalyzing” the private sector (*RG* 26, 28, 293) as methods of achieving public objectives through the private sector. Chapter 3 of *Reinventing Government* emphasizes the use of competition, either through the private sector or by emulation of the private sector, as a means of driving down costs and increasing effectiveness. Despite protesting that reinventing government is not “synonymous with privatization” (*BB* 11), Osborne and Plastrik enthusiastically describe governmental reform in the United Kingdom and New Zealand in a manner that implies that privatization is the final step of reform (*BB* 22–3, 49 ff., 67 ff., 89, 301). For example, they quote Margaret Thatcher, “I cannot rule out that after a period of years Agencies, like other Government activities, may be suitable for privatization” (*BB* 301). In any case, criteria recommended by Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik (*RG* 343–8, *BB* 110–11) clearly show that the public sector should defer to the private sector where private goods are produced.

However, Osborne and Gaebler also recommend that the public sector turn its attention to governmental profit making and investment (*RG* 195–218), which are activities ordinarily found in the private sector. Governments are advised to ask, “How could we profit from solving this problem?” (*RG* 198) They should charge user fees above service provision costs where the market will bear them (*RG* 199), sell raw materials, and rent the use of facilities (*RG* 203). Santa Clara, California is praised for its decision to buy an amusement park to control development (*RG* 208–9). Where there is profit to be made, government should act like a private business. Where a policy objective can be met, government can intervene in the private sector up to and including acquiring businesses. However, as the objection to socialist business ownership indicates, not all policy objectives are allowed.

This conflict reveals an undisclosed agenda. Government is permitted to act like a private business when it raises revenues without direct taxation. It can intervene in the private market to control development. However, it should not intervene in the market to meet socialist employment or income distribution objectives. The reinventor

is left without clear guidance as to when the government is permitted to participate in the private sector and when not, unless she has some insight into the rationale permitting some interventions while rejecting others. This rationale is the hidden agenda. Based on the cases discussed above, the agenda is one of centrist social policy dominated by conservative economic policy. Thus economic intervention to achieve economic objectives—that is, nationalization of businesses to maintain employment and economic distribution—is treated as faulty, but economic intervention to protect the property interests of the relatively affluent—that is, nationalization of a single business to control development—is permitted. This lack of policy neutrality produces several problems for the reinventor:

- He must either know or guess the political agenda in order to apply the principles correctly;
- He must work in an environment that is not hostile to the political agenda to apply these principles;
- As the political agenda may develop over time, correct applications of the reinventing government principles may retrospectively become incorrect.

Thus, taken at face value, recommendations for and against privatization reflect the same sort of decision indeterminacy as competition. However, at this more analyzed level, decision indeterminacy is overcome, to a degree, for those who are adequately initiated in the correct political agenda. For dissenters to this agenda, no useful advice about privatization is provided at all.

Decentralization

Decentralization is a frequent theme in both of the Osborne texts. For example, chapter 9 of *Reinventing Government* is titled “Decentralized Government: From Hierarchy to Participation and Teamwork.”²⁴ Similarly, chapter 7 of *Banishing Bureaucracy* is called “The Control Strategy: Shifting Control Away from Top and Center” and further develops the decentralization strategy. Decentralization is an integral component of entrepreneurial government as it allows the devolution of power from central bureaucrats to local public servants who can develop unique solutions to unique problems. For these texts, decentralization consists primarily of abolishing rule-based decision processes and requirements for approval from higher authorities for any significant, and many trivial, decisions.

This decentralization theme is, however, incompatible with another major theme: rationalizing of government decisions. The effective use of rational decision making techniques relies on the existence of a strong centralized authority structure that can require that these techniques be used, assure that the outcomes of rational analysis lead to decisions, and prevent bureaucrats from subverting rational decisions while implementing policies. Some of these

techniques, such as cross-departmental budgeting, are difficult to envision where central authority is weak. The rational decision making theme occurs in both books. For example, chapter 8 of *Reinventing Government* recommends strategic planning (232–4), long term budgeting (236–41), cross-departmental budgeting (241–2), and elimination of heavy reliance on consensus-oriented politics (243–6, 247–9). *Banishing Bureaucracy* recommends long term budgeting (105), performance budgeting (106), and the general use of performance measurement techniques (114–56).

Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik intend that these techniques be used to support decentralization. Rational techniques, or at least some of them, put more information in the hands of front-line managers and, possibly, shift upper level management away from micromanaging functional units and towards a focus on outcomes. At best, however, these techniques increase the possibility of such decentralization. Heavy reliance on them, however, produces strong centralization forces. These techniques require relatively high levels of skill. These skills will be found in central offices such as budgeting or planning. Increasing central office staffing with skilled analysts increases the capacity for oversight. Naturally, analysts will want to see their recommendations implemented, thus the stage is set for centralization through the use of these techniques.

It is ironic that the use of such rational techniques is so widely recommended throughout these texts, as the authors specifically fault Robert McNamara for his centralizing tendencies (*RG* 255). McNamara is linked to the 1960s implementation of planning, programming, budgeting system (PPBS), which is commonly cited as the paradigmatic attempt to rationalize American government in the twentieth century (Arnold 1995; Downs and Larkey 1986; Farber 1993; Meacham 1993). Osborne and Plastrik are also equivocal about rationalizing government: they recommend use of flat budgets to force financial reform (*BB* 164), which is an irrational but effective use of raw political power.

Decentralization is also at odds with another important recommendation in *Reinventing Government*. Osborne and Gaebler recommend that fragmented city governments merge into regional governments (*RG* 246–7). Regionalization may be a reasonable response to problems that arise from excessively fragmented governments; however, it is a movement towards centralization. The apparent message is, “If things are not going well with centralized government, decentralize; however, if fragmented government seems problematic, centralize.”

Osborne and Gaebler further confound matters by using the term “uncentralize” (*RG* 280–1) to refer to the devolution of power away from government back into the hands of the citizenry. They assert that this devolution is merely

an extension of the empowerment of government employees found in their decentralization thesis. Elsewhere, however, they view professional government as being in conflict with the interests of the citizenry (*RG* 49 ff.). Consequently, they are not at all clear about how devolving power to the citizenry is consistent with devolving power to street level government officers.

Finally, although not a conflict within the text, decentralization can conflict with an important social value held by many Americans—equity (Frederickson 1996; Kellough 1998). As a practical example, the discussion of centralized (national) or decentralized (state) welfare programs in the US often involves questions of whether citizens of the various states, or citizens who are diverse in other ways (such as race), will be treated equally in a decentralized system.

Innovation

Closely linked to the theme of decentralization and competitive government is the recommendation to empower employees to innovate. To empower workers, governments must show employees that they and their ideas are valued. To this end, Osborne and Gaebler recommend that governments accept failure as a sign of innovative thinking (*RG* 110–13). Osborne and Plastrik also recommend tolerating failure (*BB* 205, 235 ff.) and even rewarding it (*BB* 261). They specifically recommend avoiding financial penalties for poor performance (*BB* 148–9) because such penalties suppress innovation. Further advice of this sort includes investing in employees (*RG* 275–6) and honoring honest disagreement (*BB* 289).

On the other hand, Osborne and Gaebler recommend that governments should pay only for results (*RG* 152) and that there should be “real consequences for failure” (*RG* 315). Osborne and Plastrik recommend that governments hold employees accountable for producing results (*BB* 215), and they favor the firing of agency heads when short-term results are not satisfactory (*BB* 68). They also favor strategies that include significant risk of layoff (*BB* 286) and support suppressing “resistance” (*BB* 287–8).

This pair of recommendations reflects a tension between various elements of the reinventing theme rather than an outright contradiction. As elaborated by Osborne and coauthors, accountability is reconciled with a non-threatening work environment through the market-like conditions of competition. Employers must generally create the conditions for competitive or near-competitive evaluation while avoiding micromanagement. While this reconciliation may be possible in the abstract, implementation of these recommendations is more problematic. As these books are offered as instructions for those who would reinvent government by banishing bureaucracy, the user would expect to receive clear directions on the cor-

rect action to take. Therein lies the problem: the reinventor must still decide what to do; for example, whether the conditions call for accepting or even rewarding failure, or for delivering real consequences for failure. This is, in fact, Herbert Simon's point in criticizing the principles of administration approach of the first half of the twentieth century (Simon 1946). It is not helpful that in one of the few concrete cases discussed, that of jailbreaks in Britain (BB 68), Osborne and Plastrik give the appearance of approving the firing of a government minister out of political expediency.

Empowerment

Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik propose to improve efficiency and effectiveness by sharing real power with employees (RG 108–37, BB 218). This expression of human development management theory is neither new nor surprising. However, it is in conflict with many of their other recommendations. As discussed in the past two sections, empowerment conflicts with use of rational decision-making techniques and with recommendations to establish real consequences for failure. Sometimes Osborne and his co-authors use the idea of empowering public employees to mean extending discretion to professionals who work for government (RG 211, 219–49), yet they also advocate the abandonment of professional government in favor of community-managed services (RG 49 ff., BB 218).

Empowerment also conflicts with uncoupling steering and rowing, which refers to dividing policy-making functions from service delivery functions (RG 25–48). Street-level bureaucrats are not passive instruments of government policies. Frequently they go into government service because they believe in the objectives of the organization for which they work, sometimes passionately. It is a hollow form of empowerment to permit public servants to exercise discretion over the means of attaining goals defined by hierarchical superiors, but to have little or no input into the goals themselves. Here, then, is the conflict. Either empowerment is in such direct conflict with other recommendations, such as uncoupling steering and rowing, as to be incompatible with them, or empowerment is not really empowerment, but merely an extension of discretion over relatively unimportant technical matters. In the second case, there is no logical conflict, but merely an overselling of a relatively minor management reform.

As these five sets of conflicting recommendations show, Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik do not provide adequate guidance to the reader concerning what the reinventor should actually do. Advice is often found in the reader's predisposition. In the next section, this article examines their claim to be describing a new paradigm in public administration.

Old Ideas

Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik discuss Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1970) at length, arguing that *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy* are an account of a paradigm shift in government administration (RG 321–5, BB 263–7, 317). Kuhn provides an account of how science develops new sets of core ideas, which he calls paradigms. Kuhn accounts for the succession of paradigms, which he calls paradigm shifts. This succession is what we ordinarily call progress. Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik are less interested in Kuhn's account of paradigm shifts than in using the language of paradigms to attach the idea of progress to their own ideas.

With this discussion of paradigm shifts, Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik invite an examination of their claim to enunciate a new paradigm of government. This assertion is questionable. The overarching message of *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy* is that government needs to look to the private sector to learn how to work efficiently, effectively, and just plain better (RG 16–22, BB 127, 305, 315). Far from innovative, this theme has recurred throughout the twentieth century (Downs and Larkey 1986) and might even be thought to reflect Andrew Jackson's view that government duties are "so plain and simple" that the common people should be able to discharge the duties of public office (The White House 1999).

Perhaps, however, Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik would argue that it is not the general idea that is innovative, instead, it is the details: earlier attempts to emulate the private sector lacked their innovative mechanisms for improving government. If this is their view, it is unsupported. As the two books list dozens of techniques large and small for accomplishing their ends, it is not possible to review them all for their innovative implications. Nevertheless, the techniques reviewed here reflect the sorts of techniques discussed throughout their texts. Consider, for example, performance measurement: Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik advocate the use of performance measurement throughout both texts and Osborne and Gaebler provide a handbook for performance measurement as an appendix to *Reinventing Government* (249–59). Furthermore, the emphasis on performance is carried over to Vice President Gore's reform commission, the National Performance Review, and to subsequent legislation labeled Government Performance and Results Act. Clearly, performance measurement is an important technique for these texts. All too often, discussions of performance measurement leave the inexperienced audience believing that it is a new technique. In fact, the performance measurement literature begins as early as 1910 according to endnotes in Clarence Ridley's 1927 text, *Measuring Municipal Government* (Ridley 1927). While

there has been development within the practice of performance measurement over the past 90 years, there are no particular paradigmatic changes that originate in the last 10 to 20 years.

Acknowledging that performance measurement by itself fails to generate the motivation necessary to accomplish the reforms they have in mind, Osborne and coauthors advocate a variety of methods to leverage performance measurement through the budget process. For example, a five-page section of *Reinventing Government* is headed “Budgeting for Results” (161–5). This section discusses variations on a budget technique known as performance budgeting. Performance budgeting is also recommended in *Banishing Bureaucracy* (104–6, 146, 306). The origins of performance budgeting are obscured by time; however, in the 1950s it was one of the major recommendations of the first Hoover Commission (Seckler-Hudson 1978; U.S. Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of Government 1982). From this base, it spread throughout the United States and the westernized world. Again, although performance budgeting may be a good idea, it is difficult to make a case for its being a paradigmatic change at the end of the twentieth century.

Another candidate for the “new” and innovative public technique is privatization, particularly as it is so highly touted in these texts. However, use of private sector services has been common in American government since its foundation. Alexander Hamilton used a contract for government printing as a means of funding the newspaper of his political ally (Pasley 1999).⁵ James D. Kent points out that privatization was in the governmental tool kit as early as the 16th century (Kent 1998). Privatization does not appear to be the foundation for a claim of a paradigm shift.

Perhaps it is not the private sector, but the use of the “third sector” that is the breakthrough innovation that leads to a paradigm shift. Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik discuss the third sector and the closely linked idea of local community-managed service delivery (*RG* 43–75, *BB* 230–5). By giving service delivery back to the absolutely most local form of community government, frequently not even government at all, but a voluntary association of citizens or a not-for-profit corporation, government empowers the community to help itself. We need only look about ourselves to see that not-for-profits and voluntary associations are indeed a major component of the service delivery system: charity hospitals, volunteer fire departments, not-for-profit museums, etc. Decades before the commercial success of books-on-tape, the blind could get tape-recorded books from Reading for the Blind, a volunteer organization. Much health care research is supported by the Heart Association, the Cancer Society, etc. The volunteer and not-for-profit sector is large enough to attract specialized education for its administrators.

However, this is not a new phenomenon. Alexis de Tocqueville noticed the importance of voluntary associations while doing his research in America in 1832 (de Tocqueville 1956). He says, “Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association” (de Tocqueville 1956, 198). While the use of voluntary associations may have waxed and waned over the past 170 years, it is specious to suggest that any current turn towards greater reliance on such groups is particularly innovative.

Table 2 Some Overlooked History

“Innovation”	Origins (not later than)
Performance measurement	1910
Performance budgeting	1950
Privatization	1600s
Not-for-profits	early 1800s
Long range budgeting	1960s
Management by objectives	1960s
Recognition of rule dysfunctionality	1942

More briefly: Long range budgeting (*RG* 236–46, *BB* 106, 138) has a long history but was particularly prominent as a component of PPBS in the 1960s. Management by Objectives, which receives a five-page endorsement in *Reinventing Government* (156–60), made its first appearance in government when PPBS failed at the end of the 1960s. Recognition of the dysfunctional effects of rules (*BB* 213, 218 ff.) dates to Robert Merton’s 1940 article “Bureaucratic Structure and Personality” (Merton 1981), and he attributes these insights to earlier work by Veblen, Dewey, and, tangentially, Edmund Burke. There is no point going on: as Cheryl Miller says, “none [of these techniques] ... are new” (1998, 168–9).⁶ A summary of these supposed innovations is shown in Table 2. *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy* do not represent a paradigm shift in the understanding of government or delivery of government services. Such an assertion can only be made out of ignorance or avoidance of history. Instead, they are well-written popularizations of ideas that have been around for half a century or longer (Goodsell 1992). Some are undoubtedly worthwhile. Others, as discussed in the next section, are not so benign.

The Hazards of Reinventing Government

If the reinventing government movement were merely inconsistent and inaccurate in its claim to be innovative, it might be enough to ignore it. However, this movement dispenses advice that is antithetical to effective and democratically controlled government and information that is so misleading as to be deceptive. These difficulties are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Hazards of Reinventing Government and Banishing Bureaucracy

Error	Significance
Policy-administration dichotomy	Treats administration as merely technical. Fails to relate experience to policy making.
Homogenous organizations	Promotes excessively small organizations that must coordinate with each other, increasing veto points.
Hostility to democratic controls	Promotes illegitimate seizure of administrative discretion.
Inaccurate account of privatization.	Promotes unrealistic expectations of privatization.
Profit making model	Promotes inappropriate administrative discretion, hidden taxation, and use of taxation in harming those taxed.

Knowing the Known

Consider the chapter titled “Catalytic Government: Steering Rather than Rowing” (RG 25–48), which recommends separating policy-making functions from administrative functions by placing them in separate bureaucracies. This prescription is another very old idea, the policy-administration dichotomy (Frederickson 1996; Kearney and Hays 1998; Kellough 1998). This dichotomy was popular in turn-of-the-century administrative writing beginning with Woodrow Wilson’s “The Study of Administration” in 1887 (Wilson 1981) and Frank Goodnow’s *Politics and Administration* in 1900 (Goodnow 1981). The “principles” approach to administrative theory discussed near the beginning of this article rests, in part, on the assumption that administration is a technical field that can be divorced from policy making.

By mid-century, the doctrine that policy and administration can be separated was generally discredited (Rosenbloom 1993), although, as with many such broad ideas, adherents remain even today. Carl J. Friedrich challenged this dichotomy in “Public Policy and the Nature of Administrative Responsibility” (Friedrich 1981), which formed one side of his well-known debate with Herman Finer. His point was that policy is made as a consequence of administrative actions. Paul Appleby (Appleby 1981) also denies that there is any significant difference between policy making and administrative decisions; policy, he says, is merely the decisions made by those in higher authority than oneself. Careful qualitative review of actual administration demonstrates the utter peculiarity of this dichotomy (Gawthorp 1993; Perl and Dunn 1997).

In the 1950s, another dispute with the policy-administration dichotomy developed out of the work of Charles Lindblom (Braybrooke and Lindblom 1970; Lindblom 1992). He argues that small incremental changes in policy, informed through the benefit of experience, are far superior to radical policy making dependent on the policy maker’s theoretical understanding. While Lindblom is not ordinarily thought to be objecting to the policy-administration dichotomy, his analysis shows two defects in this dichotomy. First, he argues that theory-bound rational analysis, the special contribution of the policy side of this

dichotomy, is frequently unreliable. Second, the practical element of experience involved in incrementalism requires a close linkage between policy making and administration, thus undermining the institutional separation of these activities.

Moshe Maor (1999) argues that separating steering from rowing also creates a paradoxical loss of trust between political and administrative officers. When

political officers cannot afford to let go of policy implementation, they develop methods for remaining involved in supposedly administrative functions, such as inserting political appointees into administrative functions and reducing the job security of senior administrative officers. Guy Peters and John Pierre ask why we should think that interorganizational steering would be more effective than traditional hierarchical steering? (Peters and Pierre 1998)

In concession to the complexity of the real world, Osborne and Plastrik acknowledge a limitation in the steering and rowing dichotomy. They recognize that rowing organizations (those that actually provide services) still need a steering function (BB 109). They omit the obvious conclusion. If steers only steer and rowers both row and steer, then steers are superfluous. Osborne and Plastrik would object that rowers should only have limited discretion to steer their rowing organizations. This, however, leads back to the hollow autonomy discussed above. If those who perform the actual functions of government have no input into the major decisions that give direction to their action, they are being rather demeaningly treated as cogs in the government machine, and their knowledge is lost. If, on the other hand, they are provided a real voice in government decision making, it is not all that clear that other organizations are needed to provide the steering function. It is rather odd, in this period of flattening organizations, that Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik recommend multiplying organizations and thereby increasing the height of the transorganizational hierarchy.

Small Organizations with Big Problems

In addition to dividing steering from rowing, government organizations are advised to determine what their missions are and discard responsibilities that are in conflict or only loosely associated with their mission (RG ch. 4). Where there are important, but incompatible purposes, organizations should be broken into smaller, more functionally homogenous bureaucracies. This seemingly common sense advice has two serious problems. First, it is a throwback to the idea of organization by purpose, process, clientele, or place. These factors are too ambiguous to be useful. A classroom example of this ambiguity is to ask the “purpose” of the Farmers Home Administration? Is it

farming, housing, or banking? The answer depends on the prominent issues of the day. A set of seemingly homogenous organizations today may be out of step with the policy agenda in a few years. Similar concerns are raised by Simon (1946, 59ff.).

Another difficulty with this recommendation, as well as the recommendation for a division between organizations that steer and those that row, is that they ignore Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky's finding that coordination of activities among various organizations decreases the probability of policy success (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Increased risk of failure arises because each organization has the opportunity to veto the implementation, whereas only the collective of all organizations has the ability to successfully carry out the implementation. The implication is that governments should avoid multiplying organizations that must coordinate with each other, such as by creating separate policy making and policy implementing organizations or overly narrow policy implementing organizations that must coordinate with each other to achieve significant purposes.

As an example of this coordination problem, *The New York Times* recently reported, "Medicare Safety Nets Fail To Catch Many of the Poor" (Kilborn 1999). The federal government administers Medicare (health care financing for insured aged and disabled) and Medicaid (health care financing for the poor) through the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA). HCFA is the ultimate "steering" organization. Based on its 1997 annual statistical report, in 1995 HCFA spent \$159 billion for Medicare and \$120 billion (including state share) for Medicaid (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1998). Yet, because HCFA does not deliver services, it manages this nearly \$300 billion program with fewer than 5,000 employees.⁷ For Medicare, HCFA contracts with the Social Security Administration for enrollment and with regional intermediaries to process claims. The intermediaries deal with health care providers who actually perform services. For Medicaid, grants are given to states, which operate their Medicaid programs in much the same manner as HCFA operates Medicare. HCFA's role is to provide policy advice to superior government officials, primarily the Secretary of Health and Human Services and whom ever the Secretary must advise, and interpret the policy decisions made by these superior officials for implementation by inferior organizations. Based on Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik's advice, this structure ought to work well. Not only is steering separated from rowing, but also within the rowing arena, administrative functions are divided into homogenous functions and contracted out either to other government agencies or to the private sector, while direct service delivery is handled almost entirely by the private sector.

However, Medicare and Medicaid in combination are a classic case of the unavoidable ambiguity that arises when programs are organized by purpose, process, clientele, or place. As Medicare and Medicaid provide similar services to different people—they provide health financing for clientele of differing descriptions—they can be viewed as organized by clientele. However, some actual people meet the descriptions for receipt of service from both organizations, in this case poor people who are at least partly insured by Medicare. As Pressman and Wildavsky predict, these people, whose receipt of benefits depends on the highest level of cooperation between organizations, are most at risk. Rather than successfully coordinating services, the various agencies point fingers at each other: "'The states have no control,' said Bruce Bullen, the Massachusetts commissioner for medical services and chairman of the National Association of State Medicaid Directors. 'They must follow these Medicare, cookie-cutter approaches to providing services to seniors.' Ronald F. Pollack, executive director of Families USA [an advocacy organization for the poor], explained part of the shortfall [in enrollment] this way: Social Security says, 'we don't run these programs. They're run by the Health Care Financing Administration.' HCFA says, 'We have oversight, but they're administered by the states'" (Kilborn 1999).

Administration in a Democracy

While Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik recommend community empowerment (*RG* 49–75, *BB* 69), this advice should not be confused with support of democratic institutions. Their discussion of actual democratic governance suggests hostility. In *Banishing Bureaucracy*, Osborne and Plastrik quote Ted Gaebler with approval saying, "The public sector never has any incentive to look at its product mix. And so it's always more, more, more ..." (*BB* 91). This talk of no incentive to stay current is a veiled discussion of the elective cycle and its twin problems of short voter memory and heavy interest group influence. These are significant problems for democracy; however, the reinventing government solution appears to attack democratic control of government. Osborne and Plastrik say:

- "Most public entities are accountable to elected officials, who create them, determine their functions, and fund them. Because these officials are under constant pressure to respond to the demands of interest groups, they often care more about where public resources are spent than about the results they purchase" (*BB* 41).
- "In parliamentary systems, the ruling party has the power, with *few checks and balances*, to clearly define its purposes and goals.... Hence it is much easier for leaders to get some degree of clarity [emphasis added]" (*BB* 91).
- "In most political environments, elected officials are far more interested in achieving their short term political

goals—meeting constituents’ pressing needs, satisfying key interest groups, getting reelected—than in increasing the government’s capacity to choose long-term goals and strategies to achieve them” (BB 107).

- “In the service arena, we would recommend using competitive choice whenever possible.... But many reinventors do not have this option, because their elected officials do not have the courage or imagination to create competition ...” (BB 187).
- “Seasoned officials know that, although politicians will speak of empowering employees and serving clients better, what matters most to them is how to diffuse a political crisis ...or how to pilot a new policy or program through the governmental approval process,” quoting Donald Savoie (BB 326).
- “I think it’s one of the last refuges of scoundrels that when you do something they don’t like, they act like you violated the law,” quoting Bob Stone, a reinventor whom they recommend for an award for courage because he *violated a law* to achieve his reinventing objective (BB 334).

Reinventing Government also contains many examples of hostility to democratic government:

- Osborne and Gaebler recommend that public entrepreneurs “go off shore”; that is, create nonpublic organizations with more administrative discretion than allowed in their public role (RG 109).
- They argue that by using a “mission driven budget,” managers “don’t spend months sweating over a budget, negotiating with the finance department, carefully balancing three dozen accounts—only to *watch part time legislators who know nothing about their area cut it up at the last minute, on a political whim* [emphasis added]” (RG 123).
- They quote Alvin Toffler with approval, “Simply put, the political technology of the industrial age is no longer appropriate.... Our politics are obsolete” (RG 249).
- They argue that the involvement of constituency groups in policy making is inappropriate (RG 286).

According to Ronald Moe, this hostility, or at least its implications for the rule of law, is passed on to Gore’s National Performance Review (Moe 1994). In response to this view, Moe and Robert Gilmour (1995) have pointed out that government is essentially different from the private sector. For government, the legal structure and hierarchical connection between senior decision-maker authorization and subordinate action is not merely a contractual relationship between employer and employee, it is the means of fulfilling our constitutionally guaranteed right to representative government. Hindy Lauer Schachter attributes a similar view—efficient citizenship—to the Progressive reformers of the early twentieth century (Schachter 1995). Herman Finer (1981) made

similar points in his 1941 retort to Carl Frederick, “Administrative Responsibility in Democratic Government.” Despite this citation of Finer, the objection raised here is not to administrative discretion, but to the advocacy of arbitrary seizure of that discretion and the harsh attack on democratic institutions.

Osborne and Plastrik make a concession to these sorts of concerns through the notion of “dual accountability” (BB 178–9, 201), the idea that public service providers must be responsive both to elective leaders and to consumers. This concession is inherently ambiguous. How is the administrator to determine that consumer demands are contrary to the political will? How does the administrator manage her advocacy role, or is that role eliminated? If the legislative body has been silent on a matter, what is the administrator to do? The notion of dual accountability provides no guidance at all.

To fix the current problems with government, Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik wish to establish procedures, rules, and alternatives to government that will block government officers from behaving badly. Madison foresaw the shortcoming of this approach in *Federalist No. 10*. To get government to work well, one should not try to suppress the natural motives of government officers. Instead, one must look to how government officers’ natural motivations can be channeled to the outcome desired. It is by ignoring this advice over the last half-century that we have developed the rule-bound government we have today.

Privatize What?

Osborne and Plastrik rely heavily on the experience of the United Kingdom and New Zealand in their discussion of privatization (BB 22–3, 75–83). Saying, “The United Kingdom has shrunk its national civil service by 33 percent with few layoffs over the past 18 years” (BB 133), they imply that the same sorts of result could be achieved in the United States. This suggestion is deceptive (Roberts 1997a). At the beginning of their respective privatization initiatives, both the United Kingdom and New Zealand had absorbed huge components of their business sector into their public sector. The United Kingdom’s public sector included, “British Petroleum, Britoil, Jaguar, British Telecommunications, British Steel, British Airways, and Rolls-Royce” (BB 22). In New Zealand, public sector business activities covered “coal, electricity, property management, land, forestry, the Post Office, the Postal Bank, telecommunications, and air traffic control” (BB 80). For the most part, these activities are not significantly nationalized in the United States. A huge component of privatization in the United Kingdom or New Zealand consists of returning the business sector to the private sector. For these countries, this action is a change of economic policy, abandoning or scaling back their socialist economies in favor of

capitalism (Roberts 1997b). The United States cannot abandon socialism, as its economy has never had significant socialist components. In the United States, privatization focuses more on finding private sector suppliers of public services. Anticipating a 30 percent reduction of public employment through this mechanism is unrealistic.

Profits Revisited

Osborne and Gaebler advise governments to ask, "How could we profit from solving this problem?" (RG 198). In an earlier section of this article, this recommendation for governmental profit making was considered contrary to the advice to shift services to the private sector. Governmental profits also involve larger problems. The first of these is accountability. By obtaining revenue without direct connection to citizen outlay, government officers gain discretion over expenditures and, implicitly, over the activities of government itself. When governments derive revenue from the public through taxes and other overt transfers of funds from the public, the public is acutely aware of the government. Consequently, the public watches the government and expects its actions to comply with democratic governance. However, when the government receives its revenues through more obscure means, such as profits from business enterprises, public awareness is dulled. This concern may underlie the public finance expectation that, "A revenue system that stirs tax consciousness among all voters is much to be desired" (Moak and Hillhouse 1975).

In any case, government profit does not truly relieve citizens of a tax burden. Government obtains a profit by engaging in some activity that could also be profitable to someone in the private sector, that is, by producing some private or quasi-private good for which some entity will pay not only the cost of production, but also some profitable premium. If this is not so, there is no profit. The hypothetical private-sector competitor of government could be some particular person whose business makes less profit due to government competition, but it need not be. When government fills a profit-making niche, it may simply close the opportunity before any particular entrepreneur enters that niche. Regardless of whether the private sector competitor has reduced income, is driven out, or is preempted; government profit reduces private sector income. Consequently, government profit making fulfills the same role as taxation, except that the distribution of tax burden is unclear.

Beyond taxation is the issue of what might be fair and reasonable for government to do. It might be reasonable to expect citizens to contribute to government in order to gain some service from it, or even to support generally accepted services to which one is relatively indifferent (Williams and Wooldridge 1999). However, it is not reasonable to expect citizens to support activities that are harmful to

themselves (Cullity 1995). When governmental profit making has the effect of competing with private sector income generation, government action is questionable. There is no reason to limit this conclusion to the case of those who are aware they are harmed. Where government makes a profit by blocking or driving out competition, we are all harmed. Consequently, it would appear that any profit making that could occur in the private sector should not be absorbed into the public sector.

Is It Really Entrepreneurial Government?

There is a saying that nothing improves research outcomes as much as the absence of a control group. In *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy*, research consists of poorly documented case studies, actually little more than anecdotes (Fallows 1992; Fox 1996; Frederickson 1996; Goodsell 1992; Kearney and Hays 1998; Roberts 1997a; Russell and Waste 1998; Thompson and Jones 1995).⁸ Complaints about poor research could be dismissed as inappropriately holding a popular book to academic standards, except that the authors invite such criticism when they claim to be reporting research findings (RG 238).

Another reason for scrutinizing their research is that they seek to influence senior governmental decision makers, one of academic public administration's most important audiences. For example, Osborne has served as an advisor to Vice President Gore's National Performance Review (Moe 1994), for which *Reinventing Government* serves as the guiding model. Finally, the reinventing government literature is used in teaching public administration. A recent Internet search using Yahoo and Lycos⁹ found syllabi that use *Reinventing Government* or other Osborne related material at such institutions as Harvard, Cornell, University of Chicago, and the University of Georgia, among others.

Osborne, Gaebler, and Plastrik's results are not clearly linked to the causal chain they propose. In particular, the authors fail to rule out other likely explanations of the successes they describe. For example, they do not consider leadership as a possible explanation (Goodsell 1992; Hennessey 1998). In case after case, they describe the successful ventures of powerful and decisive leaders, such as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Mayor Steven Goldsmith, City Manager Bob O'Neill, and General Bill Creech. As described in these texts, these are leaders of heroic proportions. Negative outcomes are associated with indecisive leaders, such as Brian Mulroney. Nevertheless, success is attributed not to leaders, but to their programs, which are all said to approximate the entrepreneurial program recommended by Osborne and his coauthors. It is not clear whether these leaders are successful because of their entrepreneurial programs or whether, instead, Osborne and

company label their programs entrepreneurial because they are successful.

Conclusion

The reinventing government literature, as represented by these works of its chief architects, is severely flawed. Advice contained within these books is inconsistent, allowing the reader to justify contradictory action based on selective reading. The material does not constitute an important paradigm shift in thought about public administration. Instead, it is a popularization of various ideas about government, many of which have been around for 50 years or more, with a few dating to the last century or earlier. While undoubtedly some ideas are meritorious, these books provide no insights into which are and which are not. On the other hand, they offer a number of harmful ideas, such as the reintroduction of the policy-administration dichotomy, advocacy of excessively small governmental organizations, a general hostility toward democratic control of administrative agencies, a simplistic analysis of the benefits of privatization, and an advocacy of excessive and undemocratic administrative discretion. Much of these difficulties arise because, contrary to their assertions, their material develops not primarily from research but from enthusiastic narrative based on anecdotes. This literature is all the more disquieting because of the enormous popu-

lar following it has achieved, partly as a result of its adoption by high-ranking government officials at the federal, state, and local levels.¹⁰

In summary, the reinventing government movement represented by these texts is yet another overreaching effort to solve our society's ills through an overly simplistic panacea promoted by charismatic advocates. Little is to be gained by attempting to apply this model of government. Indeed, the contradictory nature of the advice contained therein prevents the reader from obtaining real advice concerning how to go about performing the real work of government. As with beauty and biblical interpretation, the advice found in *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy* is in the eye of the beholder. Consequently, this literature invites management misbehavior, such as with superficial repackaging of current practices in the guise of reinventing government.

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Notes

1. This article addresses the conceptual basis of the reinventing government movement, which is closely linked to the National Performance Review and to New Public Management. However, it is not an examination of these latter topics.
2. Three of these inconsistencies interact with some form of a recommendation to empower workers. As a more general issue, the empowerment language is offensive. As Chester Barnard (1938) pointed out, one cannot empower the workforce. That is where the power is in the first place.
3. Osborne and Plastrik do not explicitly endorse reduced duplication. However, in numerous citations and references throughout *Banishing Bureaucracy*, including many cross-references for further reading, Osborne and Plastrik do not revise or repudiate any element of *Reinventing Government*. It is, therefore, assumed that Osborne and Plastrik fully endorse the views of Osborne and Gaebler.
4. In Appendix A of *Banishing Bureaucracy*, each chapter heading from *Reinventing Government* is listed as a "principle" of reinventing government.
5. This well-known anecdote raises the question of whether government contracting can ever be free of corrupt influences.
6. It is certainly true that organizations have changed during this period. A reviewer mentions, "flattening of the hierarchy, teaming, expanding [employee] participation ... and an emphasis on service quality." Except for the first, which is sometimes attributed to the wide availability of modern computer technology, these appear to be ideas drawn from TQM, the implementation of which predated the reinventing government movement, but may have been facilitated by it. Whether TQM is a paradigm shift is not the subject of this article, although it, too, has long roots. It is a fine point, but this article is equally *not* about whether *Reinventing Government* somehow inspired or facilitated a paradigm shift. It has certainly inspired a fad, although one could argue that this fad is not a whole lot different from many other fads dating back at least as far as PPBS. The central question of this section has been whether *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy* articulate a paradigm shift in the thinking about government. They do not.
7. Based on email from HCFA received on March 3, 1999, HCFA has 4,251 employees.
8. Anecdotes are useful to illustrate or demonstrate the plausibility of an idea, or, following the principles of logic, to demonstrate the impossibility of a claim (a single example

can overthrow a claim with which it is incompatible). They are used in this article for these purposes. However, extensive reliance on anecdotes as the basis of empirical generalization is methodologically impermissible.

9. These Internet searches were made on February 3, 1999. A total of 27 syllabi were found.

10. A full examination of the reasons for the popular appeal of this movement is outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the popularity of fads in the field of public administration is well-documented (Downs and Larkey 1986) and also extends to many other American institutional cultures (such as the recurrent search for panaceas in the education establishment).

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