

Public sector restructuring: implications for employment relations: current research and future areas for research

A proposal for a special seminar at the IIRA Congress, Sydney, August 2009

Convenors: Michael O'Donnell (Australian National University) and John O'Brien (The University of New South Wales)

The proposal is to bring together a number of researchers from around the world who have looked at public sector restructuring, particularly its implications for employment relations.

Where are we now? What is to be done?

While there has been considerable research undertaken on managerialism in the public sector in political science and public administration contexts there has been, until recently, much less of a focus on the implications of these changes for the structure of employment, for work organisation and for employee 'voice'. It will be a key purpose of this seminar to bring that research together and to identify areas and topics for further research. This could be done as a keynote or overview paper.

Issues to be considered include:

'New Public Management'

- 'Managerialism' in public and civil services: 'path dependency' as an explanation for differing national systems of NPM;

It is widely recognised that NPM has been more influential in Anglo-Saxon countries than elsewhere. Nevertheless in English speaking states, where neo-liberal approaches to the State, have been most prevalent there are still significant differences that reflect differing institutional arrangements. Arguably managerialism has been more influential in the civil and public services in the unified states of United Kingdom and New Zealand than in federal Australia, Canada and the United States. But even in those countries state and provincial public services have been influenced by more explicitly private sector managerial approaches. We would seek a paper that explores the more theoretical issues such as the influence of neo-liberalism and path dependency on state structures.

- The impact of NPM on work organisation in public agencies;

In this context there is an increased use of 'customer' discourse in the delivery of public services such as health, education and welfare services. We would seek a paper examining this issue and, in particular, the impact of this discourse on the structure of public sector jobs.

- 'Loose – tight' management structures – devolution as a means of tightening control.

Associated with customer discourse has been the widespread use of HRM approaches and techniques that promote individual employee and middle management 'empowerment' discourse. While this is represented as enabling the staff to provide more customer focused services, it often is realised within a tighter managerial framework from senior management driven by significant shifts in government policies, particularly the shift from primary emphasis income maintenance to a greater emphasis on participation. How far does this affect the work of state employees who are expected to deliver these more targeted services while administering a government policy that is more targeted and rule-bound?

Privatisation / contracting out

- Implications for employment and work organisation.

Privatisation of public services has usually had a significant impact on the work of (former) public employees. Either they are delivering services in a new organisation with very different employment arrangements or are delivering the services as contractors to the public organisation or a former public entity. What implications does this have for employment relations?

Delivery of Government welfare policies

- Through public agencies and private and third sector networks: implications for work organisation.

Increasingly governments are distancing themselves for the actual delivery of service through various purchaser – provider frameworks, either through government agencies that contract to provide services to other government entities or through private sector or community – based ('third') sectors. In the employment areas there is an increasing tendency to emphasise participation over income maintenance – 'active' rather than welfare arrangements. What impact does this have on employment relations especially when the government delivery agencies do not have the final say on budget provisions through dependent relationships with purchasing agencies or when delivery agencies are the instruments of more stringent welfare policies as well as the facilitators of participation?

Union organisation in public services

- Union capacity for organisation;
- The public sector as a site for union renewal,
- Changes in collective bargaining arrangements;
- Employee resistance as substitute for union organisation;
- Social Movement Unionism in the public sphere.

Union density has held up better than in the private sector in most industrialised countries. Nevertheless the restructuring of employment relations has provided new challenges for public sector unions. These can include more limited opportunities for

workplace organisation and for collective bargaining as well as the trend to encourage and to mandate employment relations at agency level rather than service-wide level. Does trend towards operational decentralisation (albeit within tighter government control) disable unions or does it provide opportunities for union renewal or does it lead to increased centralisation of union activity to meet the resource challenges of decentralised organisation.

Where unions are less able to operate collectively in the public sector does this lead to greater employee resistance through activities such as absenteeism? What is the relationship between collective rights and individual employee resistance?

In the education and health sectors, unions have long sought community alliances in order to secure public funding and employment conditions. Has the restructuring of state services undermined this capacity or has it made it a greater necessity when governments seek to deliver services through intermediate agencies while maintaining tighter control over public expenditure?

Possible contributors

We have made preliminary contacts with colleagues in the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand and Australia about such a seminar and interest has been expressed in it. We also have contacts with colleagues in Korea and the United States, but we would endeavour to spread the coverage of contributions as widely as possible although NPM has probably been more influential in Anglo-Saxon countries than has been the case elsewhere, although private sector models of management have had some influence on public and civil services in countries as diverse as France, the Scandinavian countries and Mexico. We would do this by contacting colleagues directly and also by issuing a call for papers via networks available to us? We would envisage about 8 – 10 papers of short duration (say 10 minutes) with the ultimate object of publishing more extended papers via a special issue of an appropriate journal or an edited book.

The following people have already indicated interest in contributing to the special seminar:

Patrice Jalette, University of Montreal, Canada
Jean-Noel Grenier, Laval University, Canada
Peter Fairbrother, Cardiff University, United Kingdom
Glynne Williams, Leicester University, United Kingdom
Michael O'Donnell, Australian National University, Australia
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