

# Public administration in South Africa: The state of the academic field

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## **Abstract**

*This article is an overview of the state of the academic field of Public Administration in South Africa. The major argument is that there has been a lack of a knowledge-based approach to the discipline in both the apartheid and democratic South Africa. The evolution of the discipline from apartheid days through to the present is traced. During apartheid the administrative processes approach was the dominant academic paradigm. This approach was narrowly focused and did not engage with the governance problems of apartheid. In democratic South Africa the administrative processes approach has largely been replaced by approaches influenced by New Public Management (NPM). While the discipline is more legitimate, as a knowledge-based discipline it has not really advanced. There has been a shift away from social sciences towards a management and business-type approach in the discipline. Traditional academic concerns with knowledge are being supplanted by a narrow focus on skills and techniques. This has had detrimental effects on both teaching and research. The article concludes by arguing for a more knowledge-based approach to the discipline.*

## **Introduction**

The Mount Grace Initiative (hereafter Mount Grace I) in 1991 was the South African version of Minnowbrook Conference. It was an attempt by progressive academics to transform the largely conservative Public Administration academic discipline, which had been closely associated with the apartheid regime. The Initiative called for new dynamic approaches to the teaching and research of Public Administration (McLennan & Fitzgerald 1992).

It is advanced in this article that the goals of Mount Grace I have largely been unfulfilled. Most Public Administration tertiary schools and departments in South Africa concentrate narrowly on building state capacity and training public servants and do not focus on knowledge-based teaching and research. The field has been heavily influenced by the market-orientated NPM movement in recent years.

This paper is a broad overview of the state of the academic field of Public Administration in South Africa. The major argument is that there has been a lack of a knowledge-based approach to the discipline in both the apartheid and democratic South Africa. It traces the evolution of Public Administration from apartheid days through the democratic transition to the present.

During apartheid the administrative processes approach was the dominant academic paradigm. This approach was narrowly focused and did not engage with the governance problems of apartheid. It has largely been replaced by NPM-influenced approaches in democratic South Africa. While the discipline is now more legitimate, as a knowledge-based discipline it has not really advanced. There has been a shift away from social sciences towards a management and business-type approach in the discipline. Traditional academic concerns with knowledge are being supplanted by a narrow focus on skills and techniques. This has had detrimental effects on both teaching and research.

One of the dilemmas that Public Administration faces is that there is no unifying paradigm in the field. Rhodes' review of the field (1991, cited in Greenwood & Eggins, 1995:14) concludes that what remains unresolved is, 'What is Public Administration?'. Is Public Administration an academic field or is it training for a public service vocation? What should be the balance between skills and knowledge both in research and training (Greenwood, Pyper & Wilson 2002)? After 100 years there is no agreed-upon body of theory in the discipline, even at the level of middle-range theory. The only constant theme in Public Administration literature is its concern for organisational questions (Kirkhart, cited in Marais 1991:238). It is argued that this lack of unifying theme has contributed to the lack of a knowledge based approach to the field.

The original version of this paper was presented at a conference in 2005 (Cameron 2005a). Many of the ideas presented in the 2005 paper were preliminary in nature. It was stated that more empirical research had to be undertaken in order to test at least some of these propositions. This paper is still theoretically based but the proposition that the academic field of Public Administration is in a poor condition is tested empirically later in this volume (see contribution by Cameron & McLaverty, pages 69–96).

## History of Public Administration in South Africa

Public Administration was historically taught at Afrikaans-speaking and ethnically-based universities in South Africa. Traditionally, English-speaking universities did not offer subjects in Public Administration, with the exception of the University of Cape Town. Technicons also offered diplomas in Public Administration although from the 1990s they were allowed to offer degrees. (In the early 2000s, all technicons became universities, some through amalgamation with existing universities.)

Public Administration as an academic discipline has had a chequered history in South Africa. Prior to the early 1990s the predominant academic framework was that of the generic administrative processes approach of JJN Cloete, which focused predominately on the internal work processes of government departments (Cloete 1967, 1981). The administrative processes were reduced to six generic functions only, namely policy-making, organising, financing, personnel administration, work methods and procedures, and control and rendering of accounts. Cloete is generally recognised as the founding father of Public Administration in this country and should be given recognition for that. It is argued that the narrowly-focused administrative processes approach (he later changed them to administrative functions) led the discipline into an intellectual cul-de-sac. Although there was nothing inherently racist in this approach, it was guilty of ignoring the political, economic and social context within which Public Administration was practised. It was a technicist approach that did not engage with the apartheid logic (Fitzgerald 1990; Picard 2005). The influence of Cloete was pervasive. A survey of eight Public Administration departments in the mid-1980s showed that six were headed by second-generation Cloete scholars (Rowland 1986). For many years the only textbooks in South Africa were those written by Cloete. Hanekom and Thornhill's (1983) *Public Administration in Contemporary Society* is a slight departure from the traditional administrative processes approach. They concede (1983:110–111) that Cloete's approach is imperfect but argue that it still serves as an acceptable framework for the study of Public Administration. For its time the book is nevertheless refreshing, in that it at least looks at broader theoretical issues and disciplinary debates.

Rowland (1986) argues that this entrenchment of the generic administrative process led to a stagnation of Public Administration thought. An early challenge to the administrative processes approach came from Marais (1988), who argued, *inter alia*, that the narrowly defined administrative approach cannot be a

theory of public administration, that it was already outdated long before it was introduced in South Africa, and that it introduced the discredited politics-administration dichotomy and consequently lost touch with values.

The influential writings of Dwight Waldo were largely ignored in this administrative processes approach. Waldo believed that politics and policy cannot be excluded from administration and facts cannot be separated from values (Waldo 1984).

However, as the apartheid edifice began to crumble the administrative processes approach was challenged by a number of 'young Turks', most notably Fitzgerald and Schwella in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fitzgerald (1990) argued that Cloete's administrative processes approach is a variant of Gulick's POSDCORB (Planning, Organising, Staffing, Directing, Co-ordinating, Reporting, Budgeting) approach, which was prevalent in America in the 1930s. Gulick was primarily interested in efficient management and was criticised for paying little attention to issues such as democratic responsibility (Denhardt 2004). It can be seen that Cloete was the spiritual descendant of this technicist and largely normative approach, which prescribed how organisations and concepts should work.

Schwella (1990) criticised the administrative processes approach for three reasons. First, it was accused of being reductionist: reducing public administration to the generic administrative process. Second, it was criticised for reification: elevating the generic administrative approach to the status of reality. The third critique was that of lack of relevance: it did not reflect the serious problems of governance and administration in South Africa (also see Schwella 1999; Groenewald 1992). The discipline was also accused of being largely atheoretical (Mokgoro 1992).

It also needs to be noted that Public Administration in practice was seen as bureaucratic, hierarchical and unresponsive, aimed at controlling rather than developing the citizens of the country (Fitzgerald, McLennan & Munslow 1997).

Hubbell (1992) undertook a qualitative content analysis of the *Journal of Public Administration* between 1986 and 1990. (Published by the South African Institute of Public Administration, SAIPA, this was the only South African Public Administration journal until 1989.) The analysis concluded that the articles fell largely within the administrative processes approach and lacked critical analysis.

Schwella (1999) proposed a different model, namely the open systems theory approach which regards Public Administration as a complex phenomenon

consisting of a system of structures and processes operating within society as environment. He includes Public Management as an important component of this model. Rowland (1986: 66) believes that Schwella still accepts the generic administrative/management functions as the primary focus of the discipline, a charge that Schwella himself disputes (2000:110). While Schwella's model is an advance on the administrative processes model, its shortcoming is that it is a variant of the self-adjusting David Easton's systems theory, which in social sciences, at any rate, has been discredited for many years (Hill 1997). The dangers of the Public Administration community uncritically accepting the outdated systems theory approach as a new framework had already been pointed out by Erasmus (1994).

## The transition

The New Public Administration Initiative (NPAI) was formed by a number of progressive Public Administration academics in order to help transform the discipline. The NPAI held the Mount Grace conference in 1991 where a number of resolutions were passed calling for a more progressive approach to the theory, teaching and practice of public administration in South Africa (McLennan & Fitzgerald 1992; Picard 2005).

Among the resolutions passed were that:

- Public Administration was too descriptive: it lacked sufficient analytical, explanatory and predictive techniques;
- it is reductionist, restricting and reifying public administration to the one view of the administrative process only.
- more rigorous scientific analysis, explanation and prediction of governmental and administrative phenomena are necessary, supplementing their mere description; and
- for this purpose, an open and critical debate on explanatory models must be encouraged (McLennan & Fitzgerald 1992: 23-24).

Mount Grace I was more of a 'call to arms' than a rigorous analysis of the discipline. It was perhaps understandable in those heady days of the democratic transition from apartheid. The term 'Public Administration' was discredited, being regarded as an antediluvian field inextricably linked with the rigid training of apartheid public servants.

While Mount Grace I did not specifically call for the introduction of NPM,

this article argues that it created propitious circumstances for its development in academic circles. Certainly, some of the presented papers argued strongly for a Public Management approach to the discipline (Schwella 1992; Carstens 1992). Public Management was regarded as the knight in shining armour that was going to train a new generation of public servants. It was seen as the only show in town. The emerging international criticism of Public Management was ignored (Hood 1991), along with the fact that important Public Administration institutes in America (among other places) chose not to go down the Public Management route.

There were certainly legitimate criticisms of the classical Public Administration approach that resonated in international literature, most notably about rigid and inefficient ways of providing services (Hughes 2003), but it is arguable that the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. This theme is taken up in the next section.

One would nevertheless be churlish not to recognise the contribution of Mount Grace I. It was a decisive attack on Public Administration orthodoxy in South Africa. It was an extremely important watershed in the discipline and many Schools and Departments of Public Administration drew spiritual inspiration from this conference.

## The rise of New Public Management

A number of universities set up schools of Public Administration and Management in the early 1990s, with the specific aim of training public servants for the new South Africa. Public Administration as a discipline, post-apartheid (1994), is certainly more legitimate. However, as a knowledge-based discipline the advent of the new democratic era has heralded a false dawn. If anything, the discipline has headed off in a different intellectual cul-de-sac. Many Public Administration schools and departments (although not all) have moved away from the 'generic administrative processes' approach. However, that approach has largely been replaced by NPM-influenced approaches, which are also deficient in many respects. It is arguable that there is little difference between the two approaches and this theme is taken up later in this article.

In the 1980s, the traditional bureaucratic public administration model of Max Weber and Woodrow Wilson was challenged and in countries such as England, Australia and New Zealand was largely supplanted by NPM-influenced

systems. NPM is not a coherent theory but rather a discrete set of ideas that can be broadly divided into two categories. First, there is the use of private management ideas, such as the provision of more responsive and efficient services, performance agreements including service standards, greater autonomy for managers and new financial techniques. Second, there is greater use of market mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships in service provision. NPM is generally inspired by the values and concepts of the private sector (Hood 1991; Pollitt 1993; Laegrid 2001; Hughes 2003; Gow & Dufour, 2000; McCourt 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000; Olsen 2003; Kikert 1996). In the United States of America (USA) the NPM movement was known as 'Reinventing Government' (Osborne & Gaebler 1992).

Certainly, NPM had its advantages in that it was seen as a way of cutting through the red tape and rigidity associated with old-style Public Administration (Hughes 2003). However, the NPM movement has come under increasing criticism, particularly in the past few years. Argyriades (2000) takes issue with the use of the market paradigm in public administration. In many ways, NPM is anti-intellectual. Argyriades states that the New Zealand model, which was aggressively marketed internationally in the 1990s, was:

*driven primarily by practitioners and private sector consultants rather than academics or theoreticians. (2000: 6)*

This does not mean that NPM was supported by all practitioners. For example, Bourgon, Emeritus President of the Canadian Public Service, argues that NPM starts off with the wrong value proposition (2007:15).

Goodsell (2004:151) states that a major criticism of the application of the business model to governance is that it introduces privatised individual values in place of common community ideals.

The evidence on the success of NPM in developed countries is sparse and indifferent. Frederickson and Smith (2003:14), in an overview of NPM literature, state that the application of these principles can result in selective and short-term increases in efficiency; are negatively related with fairness, equity and justice; seldom reduces costs; and have produced innovative ways to accomplish public purposes. McCourt (2001:113) points out that it is difficult to demonstrate that the much-touted NPM service delivery reforms have led to significant improvements, although there is sufficient negative evidence to refute some of the more extravagant claims. Bourgon (2007:15) quotes an

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Report) which suggests that there is no evidence that performance pay in the public sector has led to performance improvements.

The evidence in developing countries is even less convincing. McCourt (2001:166) states that the evidence there is anecdotal and fragmentary but there have been very few cases of recorded service improvement. Manning (2001) suggests that the effects of NPM in developing countries have been modest, with some improvements in efficiency and mixed effects on equity.

In South Africa, a number of the new Schools of Public Administration embraced the NPM movement, or at least a variant thereof. Most changed their names from Public Administration to Public Management, although some added a development component as well. The Public and Development Management (P&DM) School at the University of the Witwatersrand, heavily influenced by Osborne and Gaebler's Reinventing Government, was the champion of this approach. As a previous Director of the School said:

*The new discourse of Public Management aimed to apply a more responsive, accountable, innovative, entrepreneurial approach to the business of government (Cawthra 2000:61).*

While some schools/departments have seemingly nailed their mast to the NPM, other institutions, such as the University of Stellenbosch, have tried to draw a distinction between Public Management and NPM. There are conflicting views here. A leading author on NPM (Hughes 2003) does not distinguish between different types of managerialism. However, there is some literature to support the Management/NPM distinction. Gasper (2000:182), drawing on international literature, argues that Public Management connotes a results orientation plus, implicitly, flexibility about means as a response towards the state-centred, organisation-focused traditional Public Administration. It is broader than NPM, which he views as the importation of private sector techniques. On the other hand, Christopher Pollitt is sceptical of attempts to differentiate between Public Management and NPM, stating that they were both influenced by attempts to introduce private management techniques into the public sector.<sup>1</sup>

Lynn (2006:8-10) points out that efforts to draw clear distinctions between administration and management have been less than successful. Some academics would argue that Public Management is a major component of the broader field of Public Administration. For others the two terms are virtually indistinguishable.

What is indisputable is that Public Management has been associated with Public Administration for many years (Pauw 1999:16). There are references

to Public Management in the Public Administration literature going back to the 1920s (Lynn 1996). Kickert (1996) goes further than this and states that management thinking through the influence of Gulick was responsible for the birth of American public administration. One would substantially agree with Pauw (1999) and JJN Cloete (1992) that Public Management, while an important aspect of Public Administration, is only part of the subject. Certainly, the reduction of Public Administration to Public Management only leaves one open to similar criticisms of the administrative processes approach, namely the introduction of the politics-administration dichotomy, the acceptance of the facts-values distinction and the elevation of efficiency as the primary goal.

Perhaps the most incisive contribution is that of Lynn (2001), who points out that the recent reincarnation of Public Management is more action-orientated and prescriptive than the traditional view, which was more concerned about the responsible exercise of administrative discretion.

One of the great mysteries of the discipline is why there was not a systematic attempt to develop a home-grown version of the American NPA movement in South Africa (see Frederickson 1980). Frederickson (1995a) himself argued in 1995 that the Mount Grace Resolution can be compared to the NPA movement. However, 12 years later it looks as if the field is closer to the Reinventing Government/NPM movement of which he was so critical (Frederickson 1995b).

NPA ideas, such as the uncritical pursuit of efficiency, as well as the promotion of values such as responsiveness, social equity, citizen (not customer) choice and administrative responsibility, did perhaps get the attention they deserved. What changes there were in the discipline were largely NPM-influenced, with an over-reliance on private sector terminology and concepts albeit with developmental discourse thrown in.

## The shift towards management in the discipline

There has been a shift away from social sciences towards a management- and business-type approach in the discipline in South Africa as a whole. Management rather than social science faculties have become the favoured location of the discipline. Traditional academic concerns with knowledge are being supplanted by practice-oriented teaching. There has been a move away from studying subjects such as politics and philosophy towards management-focused courses. Limited case study teaching devoid of contextual teaching has arguably become

the most important Public Administration teaching method in South Africa. Knowledge-based education is gradually being supplanted. Lecturers are seen as facilitators rather than academic experts. Important knowledge-based issues, such as governance paradigms, comparative Public Administration, the politics-administrative interface and ethics, are seemingly being sacrificed on the altar of 'nuts and bolts' skills-based NPM courses.

This is part of an international trend. Greenwood and Eiggins (1995) discern a similar trend in the United Kingdom, namely that Public Administration shifted from the social sciences. This shift to skills-based teaching reflects greater concern with management issues within Public Administration curricula. Masilo (2003) argues that in South Africa there has been a move towards Public Management at the same time that academics in the USA found this business-orientated approach wanting. He argues that there is a shift in the latter country back towards the traditional model of Public Administration, along with key values such as public accountability and democratic administration.

## The teaching of case studies

While the case study teaching approach is not inherently linked with the managerial approaches, and in some South African institutes had already been used in the 1980s, skills-based case studies are in many ways the handmaiden of the NPM approach.

The Mount Grace I Resolution specifically called for new approaches to the study, teaching and practice of public administration. It was alleged that the 'chalk and talk' type of lecturing so prevalent in many Public Administration classrooms was a particularly sterile way of teaching. This proposition is probably correct, but to my knowledge there was no systematic analysis of how dysfunctional 'chalk and talk' Public Administration teaching was in the past and, if traditional teaching was defective, whether it was due to the methodology or the content. Arguably, the administrative processes approach did little to advance knowledge-based teaching either.

From 1992 to 2000 Otis Elevator sponsored case studies learning workshops for Public Administration academics in South Africa. At least in the early years, faculty from the John F Kennedy School of Government ran these workshops. Case studies describe real-life situations faced by managers and, if linked with theoretical debates in a sophisticated way, can be a useful supplementary teaching tool (Brynard & Erasmus 1995; Schutte et al 1995).

The case studies referred to here are not case studies in the traditional Social Science sense of, for example, studies of policy implementation in a government structure or the behaviour of individuals within organisations (McNabb 2002). Rather, these case studies are discussion-based learning where the lecturer is a facilitator and the classroom allows for discovery of knowledge through shared experiences and active and interactive sharing of views and opinions.

However, potential disadvantages of the case study approach were not discussed in either the Brynard and Erasmus or the Schutte books, nor did they receive wide airing at any of the Harvard workshops (at least, not at the six I attended).

Caught up as it was in the spirit of transformation, the Public Administration community largely accepted the case study approach uncritically. A number of schools and departments now make heavy use of case studies in their postgraduate programmes.

It is suggested that using case studies as a learning tool turned out to be hopelessly too ambitious for the new South Africa. Most lecturers were not able to link theory and practice. Case studies largely became practical problem-solving exercises, which became the major teaching method in Public Administration departments. These case studies were often no more than stories taught in no particular context. Traditional knowledge-based courses were gradually supplanted.

The jury is out on the efficacy of case study teaching internationally. One concern is that 'practice wisdom' such as case studies is largely self-serving and seldom verifiable (Lynn 2000:18). Case studies do not build up a generalisable body of knowledge. As Lynn et al (2001:156-157) point out, this type of research is generally inductive and based on observations provided by practitioners of specific cases and experiences. For the most part, the lessons and prescriptions emanating from 'best practice' have not survived systematic tests of their validity, most notably around issues of causality.

## South African Qualifications Authority: The skills vs knowledge debate

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) was established by the ministers of education and labour to oversee the development of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in 1995. The NQF aims, *inter alia*, to create an integrated national framework for learning achievements. It is based on

outcomes-based education and training and its must be seen as a focus on education that is more vocationally orientated. It draws on qualifications frameworks used in countries such as United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Coetzee 2002). Cloete (2002:1) states that one of the characteristics of the NPM approach to governance is evidence or outcomes-based focus of governmental interventions in society. Such an outcomes-based approach is leading to changes in university curricula and assessment systems in Public Administration and Management.

National Standards Bodies (NSBs) were established by SAQA in 1995 for different policy sectors. The task of these bodies is to co-ordinate the formulation of education and training standards as required by the Act (Cloete, 2002). SAQA also established 12 Standard Generating Bodies (SGBs) in 1998. The functions of the SGBs include recognising and establishing qualifications and standards. Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQAs) are responsible for assuring the quality of learning achievements within the domain of the respective Sector Educational Training Authorities (SETAs) (Coetzee 2002). NSB03, which deals with business, commerce and management studies, set up a SGB sub-group to deal with Public Administration and Management issues in 2000. This group began to develop unit standards for degrees in Public Administration (Cloete 2002:6).

The SAQA accreditation process has been slow. Universities originally had to accredit structures through the relevant SETA. It was announced in 2004 that accreditation of higher degrees and short courses would be through the Higher Education Quality Committee. This means that the sub-group on Public Administration and Management no longer deals with tertiary qualifications. A number of universities have, however, already converted their curricula in line with the skills-based approach. SAQA requirements have been a major issue at local Public Administration conferences in recent years. The real danger is that SAQA requirements are forcing the debate in the field to be on what public officials should do rather than on any analytical understanding of bureaucracies.

This tension between knowledge-based and skills-based approaches in the discipline is not unique to South Africa. Public administration internationally suffers from this double-sided identity. To some academics in this field it is a vocational subject that should focus on providing 'hands-on' skills to public servants. To others, including this author, it is an academic subject with its own theoretical and disciplinary debates. Greenwood and Eggins (1995) provide a

useful overview of the battle between skills-based and knowledge-based Public Administration academics in the United Kingdom.

There is the danger that the skills-based approach is supplanting knowledge-based education in South Africa. Books, lectures and essays are being downplayed at the expense of skills to 'do', taught within no particular context. The ability to comprehend, analyse and question is regarded as less important (also see comments of Kingdom in Greenwood & Eggs, 1995). The paradox is that the more that Public Administration gets enmeshed in a skills-based approach, the further it moves away from a proper knowledge-based academic field.

A knowledge-based approach does not imply an 'ivory towered' theoretical approach to the discipline. The failure to teach Public Administration in a knowledge-based manner also has practical implications. For example, given greater globalisation public servants need a solid social science grounding in subjects such as trade, tax and environmental affairs (Saner 2001). How can senior public servants advise their ministers properly if they have not been given a thorough education in these subjects?

More generally, there is a need for a theoretical framework in the field. Denhardt (2001:527) states that 'theories of public organisation provide a basis of understanding practice and should inform everything that a "reflective practitioner" does'. McCurdy and Cleary (1984:53) state that despite the applied nature of Public Administration, it must still have an empirical, rigorous and systematic core in order to promote knowledge in the field. Empirical research is used to test existing Public Administration theories in order to see if they are strengthened or weakened. The methods of research have to be carefully designed to ensure the validity of the findings.

According to Frederickson and Smith (2003:5), theory is important in an applied, practical and interdisciplinary field such as Public Administration. It provides greater conceptual clarity in the treatment of the discipline. Theoretical analysis attempts to create knowledge that is reliable, cumulative and to some extent replicable. This can be of obvious use to practitioners requiring systematic knowledge when designing policy or programmes.

The most recent contribution comes from Bourgon (2007) who argues for a new theory of Public Administration to guide public administrators. She argues that there is a growing gap between the reality of those serving in the public service and the theory which, in principle, is there to guide their actions. Public servants are left without a theory to guide their actions.

What is interesting about Bourgon's contribution is that she is also a practitioner and she approaches this attempt to build a new theory from a practitioners' perspective.

## Is the administrative processes model still dominant?

The viewpoint that the management approach has become the dominant model in the academic field is not universally accepted. Schwella (2000:38) argues that despite the heavy criticism of the basic administrative processes approach, it still reigns supreme in many South African institutes and still heavily influences teaching and research in the discipline. He believes that the management model has not really taken off in many tertiary institutions.

However, from the point of view of creating a proper knowledge-based approach to the field, I am not sure whether it really matters, in that both models are deficient. NPM and the administrative processes approach are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Marais (1994:116) argues, in fact, that the management approach to public administration is nothing more than the logical successor to the outdated administrative processes approach because both have the same substructure. One possibility is that in some institutes NPM has simply been tacked onto the administrative processes approach and there is perhaps some evidence to support this proposition. NPM would simply be taught in the traditional administrative process manner, namely normatively and lacking explanatory and analytical value.

What about the argument that the administrative processes approach, despite its flawed premises, at least promoted knowledge-based education? This argument is debateable. The purist administrative processes approach did little to advance knowledge-based education either. For example, J J N Cloete (1992), in his updated version of his seminal 1981 book, does not cite a single reference. A cursory bibliography is provided at the end of each chapter. This is hardly an indicator of knowledge-based education. The looser administrative processes approach of Hanekom and Thornhill (1983) is, however, more knowledge-based.

## New Public Management and the state

The Minister of Public Service and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, has been critical of the managerialist NPM training approach, suggesting that in some ways this neo-liberal conception runs counter to the development

orientation of the state. She was particularly critical of public managers 'showing impunity to those who have the legitimacy that democratic elections bestows upon them'. The Minister implicitly blamed Public Management schools for educating managers imbued with the principles of NPM (Fraser-Moleketi 2003:3).

Furthermore, the Minister is critical of such schools' failure to deliver quality graduates (Mabin 2003). While she provides no evidence for this claim – and indeed, there do not appear to be any impact studies to substantiate it – there does appear to be an element of truth in what she says. Speeches by senior cabinet members at the 2004 Senior Management Service conference confirmed that the view that the schools are not delivering is widespread in government. Dralle (2000), It is now a practitioner, supports the Minister's view, saying that officials who hold Public Administration and Public Management degrees and diplomas are generally of a poor quality. The reasons for this could well be multi-dimensional, including low admission standards, poor teaching and inflated marks. More empirical research is needed to test this.

While the Minister's comments need to be taken seriously, it can be retorted that the South African state itself largely adopted a NPM framework. Many of the recommendations of the President's Review Commission (PRC), which served as the midwife for public sector reform, were adopted by the state. While often touted as being consistent with international best practice (Moharir 2000:121), many of their recommendations were NPM-influenced reforms, including contract and performance-stated staff systems, alternative service-delivery systems, performance based budgeting and empowering managers (Hughes 2003.). The reality is that 'international best practice' is contested terrain. This Anglo-Saxon model would be disputed by many countries, including France and Germany.

The Minister has rejected the appropriateness of NPM values in government and has called for the strengthening of the core apparatus of government to meet the needs of the development state (Fraser-Moleketi 2006) However, there are doubts about what extent the state has moved away from NPM in practice.

## Public administration research

Mabin (2003) cogently argues that research is essential for schools providing public sector training. He contests that there are serious concerns about the quality of research in South African Public Administration.

Perry and Kraemer (1986), in an analysis of American Public Administration

research, argued that there were three important methodological deficiencies in the discipline. First, little theory testing is performed. Second, the research lacks cumulateness in that little attention is paid to earlier studies and little effort is given to build upon that earlier work. Third, little published research has been funded by outside sources.

It is suggested that similar deficiencies apply in South African Public Administration. Firstly, there is little theory testing. A perusal of the two main South African Public Administration journals over the past three years, namely the *Journal of Public Administration* and *Administratio Publica*, led this author to conclude that very few articles attempted to generate new theory. Many of the articles were descriptive articles of the operation of public sector bodies. These were often superficial overviews. A number of articles focused on providing practical solutions to problems facing administrators. Such articles often lacked a knowledge base.

There is very little use of theory, with the works of Wessels and Pauw (1999) and Wessels (2004) being notable exceptions. The emphasis on skills and problem-solving has led to the virtual disappearance of Public Administration theory at local conferences. Theory is often regarded as some foreign invader to be avoided at all cost. Where empirical research is undertaken it often focuses on the problem of professional practice rather than developing or testing theoretical propositions.

Part of the problem is that, with the possible exception of ASSADPAM (the Association of South African Schools and Departments of Public Administration and Management), Public Management/administration conferences in South Africa are aimed at both academics and practitioners. These are often uneasy bedfellows, even at international conferences. For example, improving relationships between academics and practitioners was an issue in the Vice President election of the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA) in 2006.

For academics, peer recognition is the pinnacle of success. This often involves the use of sophisticated theoretical frameworks. Many (although not all) practitioners consider theory as irrelevant to their work.

Public Administration can be primarily theoretically focused – see the Public Administration Theory Network's *Administrative Theory* and *Praxis* journal. However, for the most part it is an applied discipline where there is a strong link between theory and practice. The top Public Administration journal in the world (in terms of citations) is the *Journal of Public Administration Research*

and Theory, which links theoretical and empirical scholarship thus enabling theories to be tested through rigorous research.

Theory can add value to public practitioners. One of the world's leading Public Administration academics, George Frederickson, offers a course on the intellectual history of Public Administration. When asked what the response of practitioners *qua* students to this theoretical course was, he retorted: 'When I get questions about the relevance of theory my response would be that practice is informed by theory whether practitioners are aware of it or not'.<sup>2</sup> In his book (with Smith) he argues that there is a need for greater conceptual clarity and theoretical reliability in the treatment of Public Administration (Frederickson & Smith 2003: 3). Denhardt (2001:257) argues that theories of public organisation provide a basis for understanding practice. Theory is viewed as the 'logic' of the field, so regardless of how today's details of practice may change the logic will continue to apply tomorrow.

As second part of the problem is that there has been a lack of cumulativeness in the South African journals. Cumulativeness is an important academic issue in that it helps writers build on previous historiography in the field and conversely, to be aware of research that has been criticised. The review of these journals reveals that authors often 'cherry pick' references. Important international and local works are often ignored. Some years ago this author examined a Public Administration thesis PhD from another university. My recommendation was that it should be rewritten because, *inter alia*, it did not look at one of the seminal texts. The supervisor of this PhD wrote back to me with the response that this was not possible because the text was not in that university's library. The most obvious response is that books and journals have been available on interlibrary loans for many years. This would also be the response to those that argue that disadvantaged institutes have limited library resources.

A third part of the problem is that most published research is also not funded by outside sources. There is little tradition of Public Administration research being funded by research bodies such as the National Research Foundation (NRF). The NRF focus groups are extremely limited. There is, not surprisingly, no specialised group dealing with governance issues. Public administration academics have to compete with colleagues from all other disciplines in the Distinct South African Research Opportunities. Perilously little Public Administration research has been funded by the NRF in recent years.

Most other donor agencies seemingly fund projects that support capacity-building of the state and society and are not inclined to fund projects that are

seen to be capacity-building of academics' research potential. The obvious riposte to this is that better trained academics can, in turn, train better quality public officials who are able to conceptualise, critically analyse and formulate alternative policy options.

Some Public Administration empirical research derives from consultancy work. While scholars should be encouraged to write up their experiences of consultancy, this should be presented in a proper academic format rather than in consultant terminology. Indeed, some of the articles in top international Public Administration journals, such as the *International Review of Administrative Sciences* and *Public Administration and Development*, are research articles that emanate out of consultancy reports. In South Africa there is often a failure to distinguish between a consultancy report and an academic article. There are little attempts to locate such works within academic debates (Cameron 2004).

Another concern is that if research is largely funded by government departments that are themselves under investigation, how objective can the reports be? There appears to be limited independent Public Administration research in the country.

At the Mount Grace II conference in 1999, set up to reflect on the progress of Mount Grace I, Fanie Cloete (2000) (as opposed to JJN Cloete), in an earlier review of the two main South African journals in the field, came to similar conclusions. He cogently argued that the problems identified in the resolutions at Mount Grace I still persisted. He stated (2000:14) 'There are far too many cases of problem identification and too few problem-resolution exercises reported' and 'there is a need for more systematic policy option generation and scenario-building instead of uncritical acceptance and summary of current government policies'.

While there is a debate about whether Cloete's suggestions about scenario-building are appropriate for a discipline struggling to be taken seriously, there can be little argument about his diagnosis. In a similar vein, Clapper (2000: 58) suggests that a perusal of Public Administration/Management publications in South Africa revealed extremely limited material on the 'theory of practice'. Hubbell's 1992 analysis about the lack of critical research is certainly still valid today.

What are the implications of this for Public Administration research in South Africa? At Mount Grace II research was identified as something that needs more prominent attention in Public Administration and Management (Theron & Schwella, 2000:203).

In the Cameron and McLaverty article later in this journal, the current state of Public Administration research is empirically tested.

## Capacity building and scholarship

The paucity of research described in this paper is symptomatic of a more general problem. Due to the imperatives of capacity building (and better salaries), many Public Administration academics have been sucked into capacity-building initiatives. Indeed, many of the brightest and best black Public Administration academics are now working for the public service, parastatals and local government.

The Public Administration academic community got caught up in the euphoria of the New South Africa. Capacity-building and the training of public servants became the primary focus of many academics. There were a whole host of initiatives to empower the Public Administration academic community to train 'New South Africa' public servants. Learning networks with practitioners were cultivated. While these initiatives were laudable goals, they have been the expense of research. Your status as a Public Administration academic is seemingly determined not by international standards of scholarship but rather by how good (or entertaining) you are in training public servants.

Initiatives to promote the ability of Public Administration lecturers to undertake high quality research were conspicuously absent. Donors were partially to blame by funding policy-orientated, praxis research which did little to build up intellectual capacity.

At Mount Grace II, Gasper argued that the discipline:

*may need to invest in some intellectual deepening and consolidation, after the helter-skelter phase of expansion and emergency response to training and advisory needs in the immediate transition from the apartheid regime (Gasper 2000:165).*

Seven years later there has been little progress in intellectual deepening and consolidation. Capacity-building rather than quality research dominate the agenda of many Public Administration lecturers. Earnestness in the sense of contributing to the new South Africa rather than academic rigour characterise the discipline. There are too many glib answers thrown around and not enough serious academic questions being asked.

Quick-fix capacity solutions are not only setting the agenda but they are

beginning to eat into the discipline itself. A collection of consultant articles were put together in the *Journal of Public Administration* in a special edition purportedly on local government research. While consultants should be encouraged to write up their experiences, the authors (two senior researchers in Public Administration, one of whom is a Professor in the field) went further than this, stating that these papers 'serve as examples of how investigations of this nature should be undertaken by scholars' (Atkinson & Bekker, 2004:5). However, in terms of scholarly standards some of these articles were of questionable quality. Problems included cursory research, unsubstantiated evidence and failure to cite references. (Atkinson & Bekker 2004, 2005; Cameron 2004, 2005b).

It needs to be noted that scholarship and capacity building are not mutually exclusive activities. Scholarship can be used to develop a unique and indigenous body of Public Administration knowledge which can be of utility to practitioners. As pointed out, theory can be regarded as the logic of Public Administration.

## Conclusion

Mount Grace II concluded rather presumptuously that Mount Grace I had 'a substantial and significant direction and focus of the public administration and management' (Theron & Schwella 2000: 202). However, this conclusion is not supported by some of the papers in the Mount Grace II collection, most notably those of Schwella (2000) and Cloete (2000), who, as pointed out above, argue that many of the limitations of the discipline identified in Mount Grace I persist.

While it is now politically more legitimate, the academic field of Public Administration has not really progressed intellectually since the early 1990s. The management approach to the field has not been a major advancement upon the administrative processes approach. Both models eschew knowledge-based education in favour of practical skills. Both are primarily interested in the practical problems facing public managers. The management approach elevates the principle of efficiency to sacrosanct status. Contextual and structural factors are largely given or ignored. Capacity-building has seemingly become an overriding aim.

In a thoughtful piece, Clapper sums up the life of the SAQA-threatened Public Administration lecturer in South Africa. He argues that there is very little of theory of practice:

*I find myself living – no, existing – with a theory-of-practice shaped vacuum in me. In order to fill this void I have to embark on a third enterprise. Let me explain: My first focus is my day job of teaching Public Administration and Management, pursuing the answer to ‘what the public official must be able to do so’ question. My part-time involvement as consultant, disseminating rather fragmented skills in response to the stated question, constitutes my second occupation. And my post-midnight hobby of clandestinely visiting with sociologists, philosophers, theologians and legal theorists in an effort to understand and contribute to the development of a theory of public administration praxis serves as a third employment (Clapper 2000:58).*

The solution is perhaps to turn Clapper’s dilemma on its head. Leaving the question of consultancy aside for the time being, one can suggest that the first focus of the day job should start off with a study of philosophy and related theorists. A broader social science approach to the subject is needed. Certainly, social contract theory should be taught which can help inform bureaucrats of the ideological implications of various policy options. While the teaching of skills and techniques in Public Administration is important, it needs to be done in conjunction with (and not at the expense of) theoretically based material. This could well lead to better research output and which could, dare I say, lead to a better quality of public officials.

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## *Notes*

- 1 Interview, Brussels, 6 February 2007.
- 2 Interview, Milwaukee, 4 April, 2005.