

Reforms by the united kingdom



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The delivery of public services has always been directly connected with the stability of a country's economy. The more stable the economy, the better the public services. In recent years, as the world slowly adjusted to the rise of global markets, many countries began transforming their public sector management (Hughes 2003).

Today, management of public services is more flexible and market-based. It has moved from public administration to New Public Management (Hughes 2003). With this paradigm shift comes a shift in the role of government in society. It also redefines the relationship between government and its citizenry.

Together with this new orientation of public service management is the need for reforms in the whole structure. These reforms are required to strengthen services in protection, education, recreation and care (Flynn 2002). The stronger economies of the world have taken steps towards these reforms. The United Kingdom is one of these stronger economies that have progressively taken the initiative for public service reforms.

Major public service reforms began in the United Kingdom (UK) in the 1980's under the Thatcher government (Hughes 2003). The following pages will try to explain the different reforms in UK's public service management. It will address the bigger issues that surround it. It will identify the unique qualities of the UK reform programme and present the advantages they may achieve. Through these inferences, a more objective and balanced view of UK's reform programme will be achieved.

Response to the UK Public Sector Reforms

The United Kingdom's initiative to reform their public service programme is mainly due to fitting of the services with the changing demands of the times. The rise of living standards, coupled with the growing diversity of citizenry calls for the change in public services (Prime Minister's Office 2002).

In the 1980's, under the leadership of then PM Margaret Thatcher, the first major steps to public reforms were taken. At the center of these reforms is the wide-spread initiative to privatize services (Flynn 2002). Towards the end of the decade, management of basic services, gas, water and electricity, were transferred under private control (Flynn 2002). Apart from these, four other major government controlled corporations also were given up to private enterprises.

Privatization was not the only way to reform public service management. Soon after the turn-over of basic services to private control the central government and the National Health Services began outsourcing many of their functions and services.

In 1997 however, under the leadership of PM Tony Blair, a new campaign was launched to further reform the public service management. Public services were believed to have been suffering from under-funding (Prime Minister's Office 2002).

However a strong economy is essential for the reforms. The Blair administration then began working on building a stronger, more stable economy.

The ultimate objective of the 1997 reforms is to provide everyone with real opportunity and security (Prime Minister's Office 2002). In three years time,

the UK finally experienced a sort of rebirth within the public services. In 2000, health services and education have never been better. Reform plans did not end here. Long-term goals to uplift standards in the areas of transport, education, criminal justice system and health were designed.

The road to these reforms has been tough. The setbacks and controversies are inevitable. There needs to be a genuine partnership between the government and people in the front line. The desire for reforms has propelled public service in the forefront of many political and social debates (Darwall 2005).

One of the biggest concerns with the current reform programme lies in policy and communication confusion (Wintour, 2007). The government is clear with its vision for reforms. However, it does not provide a coherent framework for action (Darwall 2005). While the reforms are meant to increase efficiency, the citizens do not feel this happening.

Modernized civil service is actually the consistent delivery of better services and getting the best value for public funds (Darwall 2005). The question lies on accountability for the use of these public funds. The UK's public service history shows that bad decisions made create obligations and consequences across generations.

Debates arise because of this very reason. While one group sees the necessity of spending to provide better public services, the other fears that much spending may not necessarily increase the level of efficiency in delivering these services (Douglas, Richardson, and Dobson 2003).

The reforms brought about the founding of different agencies (Armstrong and Ford, 2000) to handle such use of public funds. However there is growing concern about the qualifications of people managing these agencies. Public servants are not necessarily managers. Improvement of efficiency requires a great deal of management (Darwall 2005). Even the best policies can easily crumble in the hands of those who are not fit to handle them.

The growing impression about these newly established agencies then is that they do not do not speed up delivery of services. On the contrary, these agencies, while under the supervision of less experienced managers, slow down the process of public service.

In fact the popular notion about these agencies is that they rather make collaboration and cooperation more difficult. The formation of these agencies is one of the most debated issues concerning the reforms.

Ethical issues are also being raised against the reforms. The shift of public service towards a market based orientation makes the definition of boundaries between what is public and what is private more difficult (Public Administration Select Committee 2002).

Interface between public sector and private enterprise is becoming more evident. Private businesses are becoming more involved in providing public services. More and more then, ethical concerns are raised.

There is growing clamor to cultivate and strengthen the ethical considerations in public service management. It is important to ensure that ethics are not lost or put aside, especially at a time when services are being

delivered in new ways by new providers (Public Administration Select Committee 2002).

In public service there should always be a way to check impartiality, accountability, trust, equity and probity. This is the key to keeping the ethical considerations in public service management whilst implementing its reforms.

From the time of PM Thatcher in the 1980's to the reform programme of PM Blair in 1997, the UK public sector has underwent alterations both in policy and implementation. However caution has been taken. Reforms have been worked on slowly. Unrestrained expansion usually results in policy failure (Lane 1993). Both the government and its citizenry agree.

There is no doubt that reforms are a welcome idea for everyone. The promise of better services being delivered more efficiently and consistently can be actualized (Public Administration Select Committee 2002). The government is confident about their plan. They have laid down the strategies to achieve them. Even then, the citizenry is skeptical. There are many issues surrounding these reforms.

The government admits there are hurdles along the way of reforms. The journey towards better services is long and hard. But the government has a strategy. It addresses the questions of improving national standards, devolution of responsibility, increasing flexibility and providing better choices (Prime Minister's Office 2002).

The citizens are waiting patiently. So far, reforms have been implemented but the issues still remain. Somehow the general impression is that the

strategies set by government are not being translated into actual action (Public Administration Select Committee 2002).

Some improvement in the areas of education and health has been achieved.

The question is, is it enough to address the growing demands of society?

The citizenry of UK sees very little results from the reforms. They seem to pale in comparison with the growing demands of an ever evolving society.

Successful reforms are transformational. This only means that the impact of these reforms should be strong enough to affect all areas of life.

Unique Qualities of UK Public Sector Reforms

While the UK's reforms remains heavily debated and scrutinized, there is no doubt that it is one of the most dynamic. In public service history, the UK programme has been one of the most studied. Many parallelisms have been made on the reforms. Many other similar programmes have been initiated based on its working history.

The reforms are based on the three important E's in public service management. They are economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. This is one unique characteristic of the UK programme.

The wide-spread privatization instituted by the Thatcher administration applied this premise (Flynn 2002) in all the transactions. Before the Cable and Wireless turn-over in 1981, a comprehensive study on its advantages was conducted to prove its viability under these three considerations.

Apart from this unique way of assessing possible changes in servicing, the programme has proven to be very resilient. It has withstood challenge in the past. And it continues to withstand challenges today. Even the strongest

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challenge against its agenda control and policy review (Parsons 1995) could not deter the progression of its reforms.

In fact it is this very same resiliency that brought about a big improvement in health care. The persistence in the area of health reforms provided increase in health care workers by at least 40, 000 in seven years.

There are two working concepts of the UK Public Sector Reform Programme, the “ best value review” and “ comprehensive performance assessment” (Harris, 2003). These two working concepts provide a basis for check and balance of the reforms.

This is unique to the programme. It also sets the tone on how reforms should be made. The UK government works very closely with organizations like Reform to objectively assess the veracity of the reforms. It is through studies conducted by organizations like Reform that insures that equity and environmental impact are not overlooked in the formulation of reforms.