

Autonomy and regulation: coping with agencies in the modern state

Tom Christensen and Per Læg Reid (Eds), 2006

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An increasing common response to perceived interference by politicians in public services is the argument for 'depoliticisation' or removing political control over key national agencies. Gordon Brown's decision to create an 'independent' Bank of England was a prime example of this. However, Matthew Flinders and Jim Buller, in a chapter on 'Depoliticisation, Democracy and Arena Shifting', suggest that having analysed several such attempts at depoliticisation, the issue is not as straightforward as it might seem. Decision-making may have simply been shifted to another politicised environment or depoliticisation may, indeed, represent the seeds of a more meaningful and deliberative democracy.

The critical insights from this chapter are typical of a much-needed book focusing on an international comparative approach to governance issues in the aftermath of the 'New Public Management' (NPM). *Autonomy and Regulation* is an edited volume, comprising 13 chapters divided into six sections and covering themes such as: links between regulatory reforms and development of new 'autonomous' national agencies; depoliticisation and arena shifting; the reassertion of central control; issues of autonomy and coordination; regulation, the state and rebalancing state and agency relationships. So far, we have had excellent books on English governance developments, notably by Janet Newman, but this a welcome international collection. The contributions are indeed international, coming from Canada, England, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

The Introduction contains a chapter on 'Agentification and Regulatory Reform' by Christensen and Læg Reid. At the outset they theorise the development of new forms of regulation and the role of 'autonomous central agencies' in the era of the NPM 'movement' across Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The chapter looks at regulatory reforms from a number of perspectives, for example economic/rational, organisational/structural and institutional, and ends by problematising issues of power, accountability and legitimacy. The second section on 'Depoliticisation' contains three chapters, including one on the 'scientization' of central banking in which it becomes clear that Gordon Brown's modernisation strategy appears to be following an international trend rather than creating it. The third section concerns the 'reassertion of the centre', which looks at how supposed autonomisation has actually resulted in new ways of asserting central control. This is not theoretical innovation in itself but the international perspective is useful. The section contains chapters on 'joined up government' in the New Zealand state sector, the role of the centre in first-generation NPM systems and political control and administrative autonomy under New Labour. These chapters are essentially about Anglo-Saxon countries, where NPM has achieved the greatest penetration. Section 4 has rather similar themes to Section 3, although it looks at issues of balancing centre and autonomous organisations in Nordic countries. The final two sections, containing three chapters, are reflective and look at issues of trust, regulatory reform and arguments about movement to re-regulate across the different countries.

The latter part of the book contains some interesting perspectives about the direction of future reform. Hansen and Pedersen in their chapter on the 'Dynamics of Regulatory Reform' suggest that national systems in the aftermath and fading power of NPM may be adopting different models—ideologically driven deregulation, rational bureaucratic approaches to better regulation, internationally inspired re-regulation and alternative regulation emerging from, for example, the environmental agenda. The final chapter by Christensen and Lægreid argues that any future models will have to balance the issue of central control, autonomy and coordination.

The final chapter, in my view, reflects the strengths and limitations of the book, although the former undoubtedly outweigh the latter. On the one hand, it is an essential collection for governance specialists because of its international perspective and comparative approach, cross-national theorisation, careful argument and well-documented national cases. On the other hand, it is quite technical and not an easy read. For those involved in the English debates about governance, it will provide a broader set of theoretical frameworks in which to locate our national specificities. However, its international comparative approach appears to drive it down an essentially rationalist and systems view of regulatory issues. What I found absent at the end was a sustained discussion about how political and democratic agendas might create new balances between the centre and local, a focus of fierce emerging debate under New Labour. But that may be because the NPM movement has reached furthest in England and, in doing so, stimulated a very radical political debate.

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