

# Overview

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I had two immediate thoughts when I read the chapters in this section. The first was how disparate they were—at least on the surface. Helen Dickinson provides the bigger picture on where public governance has come from and how we arrived at the hybrid forms we have today. The second paper, by David J. Gilchrist, presents an only too rare evaluation of processes around new contractual arrangements from the perspective of not-for-profits (NFPs) in Western Australia. The third chapter, by Tessa Boyd-Caine, presents some key themes to govern the relationship between the public and NFP sectors and civil society. So you could well ask—as I did—what these three chapters have in common.

As I see it, the common thread across the three chapters is the respective roles of the public and NFP sectors into the future at a time when no one sector can solve complex problems on its own and when considerable uncertainty and change are compounding the complexity of sectoral relationships.

The second thought I had is that what is being discussed in these chapters is hardly new. By way of example, more than a decade ago a forum was held by the University of Canberra with Canadian and Australian presenters on the topic ‘New Players, Partners and Processes: A public sector without boundaries?’ (Edwards and Langford 2002). Our broad goal was to ask critical questions about the nature of governance in an era when boundaries are blurring across the public, private and NFP sectors. As a Canadian participant at the forum remarked: ‘Despite the rhetoric there have not been enough examples of genuine collaborative partnerships between government and the third sector to begin to adequately measure the effectiveness of this mode of boundary spanning’ (Edwards and Langford 2002: 9).

Sadly, the same could be said today despite the excellent Australian Government publication *Connecting Government* in 2004, with its assessment, case studies and practical suggestions for more collaborative arrangements (APSC 2004). Indeed, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has regularly bemoaned the fact that '[m]ost OECD countries are still at [the] early stages of public engagement' (2015: 33).

First to Dickinson's chapter, which is an eminently sensible overview based on a solid evidence base of interviews with public sector players. A main conclusion is the mismatch between the rhetoric relating to more horizontal relationships and the reality, which is much more mixed, suggesting that now and into the future there will be layers of different reform processes rather than more wholesale shifts in organisational arrangements, behaviours or cultures.

My pessimistic comment here is that, unfortunately, there is evidence in the public sector of some backward moves that need to be built into any mixed-modes framework. There is evidence that some agencies have become more and not less hierarchical with stronger executive control, and public servants have become more and not less risk-averse, with middle management becoming less and not more empowered (for example, Behm 2015: 135–36; APSC 2014: 41). Unless considerable change beyond the incremental takes place into the future (as is indicated below) then it follows that the reality will be a widening gap or mismatch between the problems to be solved on the one hand and, on the other, public institutions and behaviours. There is a need to adapt the organisations to fit the problem wherever the problems do not fit the boundaries, rather than expect the problems to change to fit organisational structures.

The WA Government is to be commended for the transparency it is showing in its evaluation of the Delivering Community Services in Partnership (DCSP) program, as reflected in Gilchrist's chapter. The government is working in partnership with the NFP sector on changes to contracting arrangements with a focus on individuals and their outcomes. Gilchrist points out, among other things, the inconsistency across agencies in dealing with NFPs that suggests that crossing boundaries is an internal public sector challenge at least as important as the challenge of external relationships. Gilchrist also suggests a difference in perceptions of the state government and

NFP sector organisations of the impact of the change; this could lead to government rhetoric on collaborative partnering arrangements differing from the reality, at least as far as the NFP sector experiences it.

Gilchrist's chapter raises questions about the role of government in the context of a greater focus on outcomes rather than outputs—for example, is there a greater role for government to facilitate learning across sectors about what works and what does not? Relatedly, the chapter raises several questions about the broader framework of principles on which the relationship between the two sectors is based—in particular, there are issues around who becomes involved and when in the process of learning as policies are developed and implemented as well as what working across sectors means for accountability of the partners—issues to which I will return.

Boyd-Caine's chapter has two parts to it—both seem to take a well-considered position on how to gain better sharing of power and collaborative arrangements between the public and NFP sectors and with civil society more broadly. Importantly, she emphasises the value of collaboration across sectors and with citizens in policy design and the development of policy as well as the delivery end; whenever this does not occur, I call it a 'decision-making deficit' (Edwards 2012).

The first part of the chapter, with its five themes, is the starting point for some principles about the relationship across sectors; the second part focuses on the particular advantages to both sectors of working with shared data. The availability now of large-scale digital systems and platforms has the potential to transform many aspects of the way in which governments work. A key responsibility of governments into the future is to ensure that this information and related analyses are shared with others—an important mechanism for improving power relationships across sectors.

This forum is about cross-sector workings for complex problems: climate change, Indigenous quality of life, homelessness, child abuse and domestic violence, to name just a few. In the light of such important and complex issues dominating the policy and political agendas, I want to turn to two issues I think were not well enough covered in the chapters before us.

The first issue deals with the learning that can come from close relationships across the sectors as the players together explore and experiment with what works. This is not the place to acquaint you with the experimentalist governance framework as espoused by Sabel and others (for example, Sabel and Simon 2011; de Burca et al. 2014); suffice to say, this framework emphasises several elements including participatory and deliberative as well as local processes of setting broad goals. The practice of learning is reflected in the monitoring of implementation and continuous improvement processes as well as the process of adaptive problem solving. The cooperation of civil society actors is indispensable to the success of experimentalist regimes. Although accountability is built into the framework, it is about cross-sectoral and peer learning from failures as well as successes.

The second and related issue that has not had sufficient attention to date I call the ‘accountability deficit’ (Edwards 2012). When sectors work together to achieve shared outcomes, it follows that attention needs to be given to shared accountabilities and how those are handled. The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), in its recent *Public Sector Governance* better practice guide, recognises this, calling for, among other things, ‘visible lines of accountability for managing multiple accountabilities’ (2014: 61). A key success factor it sees for cross-entity arrangements is management of shared risks and shared accountabilities—in terms of both shared outcomes and managing collaborative efforts (for further explanation, see Edwards 2013).

Let me leave you with a big-picture idea that I would like to see gaining traction. It is a picture painted by Geoff Mulgan (2012: 20), who argues: ‘in the next few years, governments should not only address trust indirectly through outputs and outcomes, but also directly, through their relationships with citizens, as well as citizens’ relationships with each other.’

This would commonly entail a transformative change in government relationships, organised around relationships and acting with others rather than doing things to or for them. The general idea here is that of a ‘relational state’ and, hence, the concept of ‘relational trust’ (Mulgan 2012). This would mean governments giving more feedback, co-designing services and experimenting and innovating in the context of collaboration.

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