

Introduction to Section 4: Working with practitioners

A recurring theme throughout this book is John Wanna's determination to observe close at hand the world of the practitioner – whether the politicians or the mandarins or the public servants down the line – to listen to them and watch as they respond to events, to see the processes and systems they use. He does this without in any way compromising his role as an academic, independently relating what he observes to theories of power, management and finance, questioning the assumptions and claims of the practitioners while recognising the messiness of the world in which they operate.

Perhaps John's key legacy will be his demonstration of the value, indeed the essentiality, of bridging the worlds of the academics and the practitioners. In a sense this legacy, and its appreciation of the pragmatism that so often guides contemporary practitioners, reflects a broader shift in politics and public administration over the last 30 or 40 years: a meta-narrative.

The ideological divide that characterised the twentieth century collapsed almost as quickly as the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. Within the space of a decade, pragmatism was on the rise in the crafting and administering of public policy. Markets were given a greater role in economic activities as governments around the world focused more on policy and financing and less on the actual delivery of services, especially where the private sector already provided similar services. Early, somewhat naïve references to 'customers' have over time evolved as the ideas of 'co-design' and 'co-production' of policy and social services delivery have been embraced by governments of all persuasions, where the state plays a greater role as facilitator. Long gone are institutions like the Postmaster-General's Department and the Commonwealth Employment Service, representing monolithic political-administrative forces. And, because hindsight is

often blind when comparing today's public administration to the 'good old days' or some 'golden era', it is easy to forget that Australian levels of consumption have increased substantially over the last 30 years, along with the wellbeing of the vast majority of Australians, and that this has coincided with the advent of what is too often referred to, pejoratively, as 'neoliberalism'.

The academic debate about neoliberalism (and, previously, 'managerialism' and 'economic rationalism') focused in particular on whether the pursuit of neoliberal goals involved abandonment of public service ethics. This portrayal of the reforms as an ideological debate contrasts with the practitioners' perspective of an ongoing pragmatic struggle to find what works, or what works better. In this meta-narrative of ideology versus pragmatism, Wanna has generally sided with the pragmatists. He still looks to identify the theories that might explain how pragmatism is applied, and he is also conscious of the context of differing political philosophies, but he eschews the emphasis of some fellow academics on an ideological divide that assumes a disposition of practitioners, including unelected officials. Framed in ideological terms, the debate too often degenerates into echo chambers where participants speak to their own audience.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, even the politicians have largely abandoned ideology in favour of pragmatism. John Howard reportedly informed the Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg, that 'there are no ideological constraints at this time'. While times of crisis may be particularly conducive to pragmatism, the electorate's interest in ideological debate seems more generally to be secondary to government performance and the credibility of the opposition to perform better. Arguably, this is more the case since the 1980s than previously.

John Wanna's work went against the grain of the aloof critic of public administration by actively engaging with the public service. At first, this approach was not popular among political scientists (notwithstanding the pioneering work of earlier postwar academics such as Robert Parker, Dick Spann, Gordon Reid and Fin Crisp, as well as Martin Painter, David Corbett, John Halligan and Jonathan Boston in New Zealand). But Wanna became a leader and has developed a following of research students who have adopted the same ethos (some transitioning or on leave from the public service and some of whom are authors in this volume). In parallel, there has been considerable effort from government to strengthen links with academia, including through the establishment

of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) with John as its inaugural head of research (as the Sir John Bunting Professor of Public Administration at The Australian National University [ANU]); governments have also introduced incentives for academics to undertake research relevant to ‘national priorities’ and likely to have impact, working with government practitioners and wider networks.

The chapters in this section address the complex relationship between academics and practitioners, and the contribution John has made. Paul ‘t Hart opens with a personal account of his involvement with John, and the antagonism he found, to his dismay, among political scientists in Australia, including at ANU, towards close interaction with practitioners. Public administration in the Netherlands is accepted as a standalone discipline. His own interest is in ‘useable knowledge’, combining traditional academic pursuits with contributing to the professional development of public servants. In this regard, he refers to John Wanna as a ‘trailblazer’.

Peter Shergold and Andrew Podger in a shared chapter respond directly and firmly to academic critics who claim a neoliberal basis for public sector reform over the last 30 years. Shergold’s essay highlights the exclusively pejorative use of the ‘neoliberal’ tag, its lack of clear definition and the failure of the critics to engage with the practitioners. Podger complements the Shergold essay providing a detailed history of the reforms as described by public service practitioners themselves, demonstrating the iterative processes involved and the emphasis on pragmatism.

While firmly rejecting any conscious ideological agenda among the public service leaders, Shergold and Podger acknowledge the influence of economics and the use of its language of prices and efficiency. In a sense, this does reflect an underlying appreciation of liberalism, but not the implied ideology the critics claim of a ‘neoliberal’ desire to roll back the state. A more careful academic assessment of the direction of public sector reform over recent decades may well present it differently to how those involved in it directly portray it, as Jose suggests in his chapter in the previous section; but that would be very different from the loaded and almost indiscriminate use of the term ‘neoliberal’.

Isi Unikowski examines the interaction between research and practice, and the lessons to be drawn from John’s approach. These include the importance of consciously and explicitly grounding collaboration in the norms, values and principles of public sector work. A major

contribution of the researcher is in ensuring practitioners understand their own public service history, which is increasingly important as modern public sector practices make it more difficult for the public service to be the custodian of its history. The researcher also provides essential support by helping to frame the questions, problems and issues facing practitioners, taking a step back to contextualise current concerns.

Linking research to practice is not easy. The chapters in this section do not explore in any detail the challenges involved; rather they focus on how John Wanna has succeeded where so many others have failed. The problems, however, are not purely the fault of academics: often practitioners too quickly dismiss the relevance of research to the matters at hand. This has been the subject of much research itself, drawn upon by Meredith Edwards and others (including John Wanna) in a review for ANZSOG some years ago (Research Reference Group 2007). A particular challenge is to bridge different cultures based in part on different time horizons. The academic studies the past, the practitioner is focused on the present and near future; the academic needs time to undertake new research and is generally unable to provide responses in the time frames practitioners work to so that, by the time a practitioner's research question is answered, the practitioner has moved on to a new issue and problem. This is a perennial challenge for ANZSOG and it requires ongoing, iterative, two-way engagement where practitioners should be asking what is already known about a current issue, and researchers can be motivated to redirect future research as they discern from practitioners emerging research questions.

It is this messy, iterative, mutually respectful approach to engagement and collaboration that John Wanna has excelled at over his career, including nearly 20 years as editor of the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* and nearly 15 years as the inaugural Sir John Bunting Professor of Public Policy and ANZSOG's director of research, where he has guided ANZSOG conferences and orchestrated the publication of more than 50 ANU Press books (gaining well over 2 million downloads) that combine the work of academics and practitioners.

Notwithstanding this contribution, and John's efforts to develop new public administration scholars, there remains a significant capability deficit in public administration scholarship in Australia compared with earlier eras, a deficit likely to worsen as current leaders like John Wanna retire.

Public administration scholarship requires ‘fox skills’ (as Pat Weller describes Wanna’s approach in Chapter 6), encompassing history, politics, law, economics, sociology and management, a mix not easily achieved in academia today. But the public service also has a capability deficit: submissions by Australian Public Service (APS) agencies to the recent Independent Review of the APS (Thodey Review) had nowhere near the depth or breadth of those made to the Coombs Royal Commission in the 1970s. There was little evidence of knowledge of the history of the public service, its evolving role as an institution of Australian government or the impact of economic and social change on its structures, personnel and relationships.

ANZSOG clearly has some way to go in building public administration capacity in both government and academia, as well as in connecting the two.

Reference

Research Reference Group. 2007. *Enhancing ANZSOG’s Contribution to Better Government: Future Research Directions*. Report to ANZSOG Board by M. Edwards (Chair), G. Hawke, O. Hughes, A. Podger and J. Wanna, 14 October.

This text is taken from *Politics, Policy and Public Administration in Theory and Practice: Essays in Honour of Professor John Wanna*, edited by Andrew Podger, Michael de Percy and Sam Vincent, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.