

Connecting theory to action

First lessons from the New Synthesis Project

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1. Introduction

Box 1: A tempting offer for Françoise

Françoise is a senior policy advisor at the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. She works for a directorate that manages and controls the arrangements for the reintegration of the long-term unemployed. The ministry has been struggling for decades with a base stock of individuals it cannot help to find a job, irrespective of the efforts employed. In recent years, costs have soared and the whole system of social benefits has come under increased pressure. Society criticizes policy makers and civil servants for not helping more people to find employment while spending billions each year.

One day Françoise receives a tempting proposal. A group of business leaders offers to retrain and then hire a thousand of the long-term unemployed in the ministry's database. They convincingly argue that by doing so these individuals will permanently re-enter the labour market. The businessmen "only" ask that in return for their generosity they should be given control over the budget that otherwise would have been paid on individual training and benefits. They want to determine how and on what to spend these public funds and who in Françoise's database to employ. For Dutch government, such an offer is something completely new. It not only constitutes a breach with sixty years of policy practice, but also offers no guarantees for success. However, the employers' proposal is alluring too: public funding can cease after three years and a substantial group of long-term unemployed will have disappeared from the government's files. Françoise is faced with a dilemma: the business leaders' proposal will solve (part of) a wicked problem government has been struggling with for quite a while already but only by breaking a series of rules, rights and principles the very same government has put in place to fight abuse of the system.

It is Françoise's task to advise the minister. What to do with this proposal?

Françoise's case, based on a real-life situation recounted to us by a Dutch civil servant, is far from unique. Because of at least three developments, civil servants in many countries have experienced that government's capacity to deal with social problems has diminished over the last couple of years.

First of all, the financial means of governments have become scarce. A new *scissor crisis* in public finance (Tarchys, 1983) looms on the horizon, as public spending is again rising much faster than tax revenues. Many governments opt for drastic public sector economies to try and get this situation under control, increase taxes and expand cost sharing schemes, e.g. in health insurance and education, but so far it is far from certain whether this will indeed provide the means needed to keep the scissor crisis at bay.

A second major trend is the increased complexity of the societal systems states are supposed to manage. Governments now have to operate in a world that is characterized by a blurring of traditional categories and boundaries and in which a wide variety of public, private and societal actors operate (Billis, 2010; Karré, 2011). In our era of governance, government is only one and certainly not the most important actor anymore. Private and societal actors have become very active in the *public sphere* (Habermas, 1989) too, eg. by financing public infrastructures and services (as pension and private equity funds increasingly are doing, cf. Arts, Dicke & Hancher, 2008). Also these actors create public values (Moore, 1995; Bozeman, 2007) but mix those with their own private goals and interests. This can lead to the creation of synergetic effects but also produce friction.

A last development especially Western governments have to come to terms with, is a shift in the worldwide balance of power. Some speak of a *rise of the rest* (Zakaria, 2008), others of an increasingly *flat* world (Friedman, 2007). Capital flows around the world, but the direction of the flows has been reversed. While Western countries have to deal with stringent austerity measures, capital is piling up elsewhere, most prominently in Asia and the Arab world (Cohen & DeLong, 2010), and it now finds its way into the provision of public services in the West more and more.

Because of these three developments, the state has lost the dominant role it once had in society (at least in countries with a Rheinland and Napoleonic model). Simultaneously though society's expectations of what the state should and could do (especially in times of financial and economic crisis) remain sky high.

Civil servants now face the dilemma that they have to achieve a lot with fewer means. Alas, traditional steering mechanisms fail them in doing so. Traditional Public Administration does not help Françoise, as it is based on hierarchy and a system of control based on compliance. It is no help in this situation, as Françoise cannot force the businessmen to help her or to comply to government's rule.

New Public Management, as government's second conventional steering mechanism, is no big help either, as it propagates steering by performance and output indicators, whereas Françoise and the businessmen strive to reach an agreed *outcome*. How to achieve this, is difficult to define from the outset. Also, in exchange for their help, the business leaders ask for a *carte blanche* in how to achieve the outcome. This does not sit well with NPM's focus on closely monitoring the actions of agents employed by government.

With the problem solving capacity of the instruments in her toolbox severely diminished, Françoise might turn to the academic discipline of public administration for guidance. But will she be any the wiser after studying the various theories devised by academics on how today's society functions and will this help her to develop action logics relevant for her daily work? We doubt this, as we are sceptical about the impact of much of public administration and management research. Civil servants like Françoise have no need for complex and elaborate theories, nor the simplistic five or ten-step programs and instrumental models often brought forward by management consultants. They require practical solutions to the daily challenges they face, which are well grounded in state of the art academic insights but developed with an understanding for how government works *on the ground*.

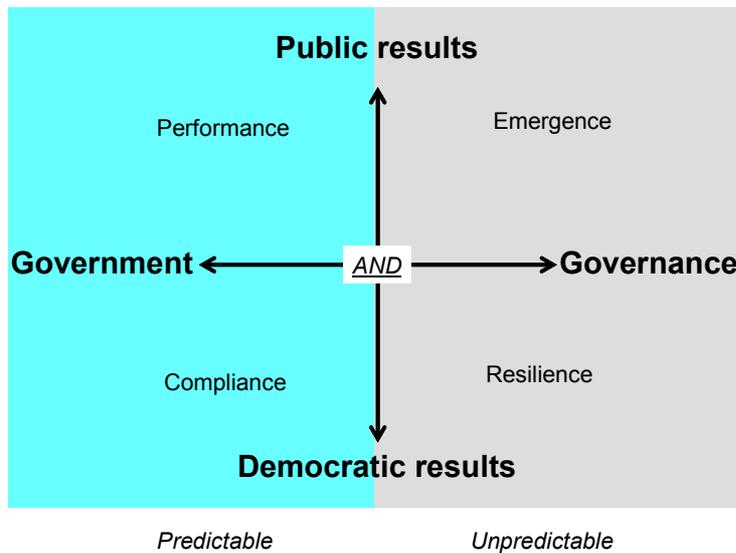
In this article, we describe the first results of a project conducted over the last few years in which academics and practitioners from six nations (Australia, Brazil, Canada, The Netherlands, Singapore and the United Kingdom) aimed at finding a new synthesis between public management research and practice. By developing a shared framework for how to approach society's challenges, they devised ways for civil servants to deal with them. We present some of these coping strategies in this article to start a broader discussion about the findings of the network partners.

We begin by describing the key ingredients of the New Synthesis-framework (section 2) and how it has already been used by the partners of the New Synthesis-network to discuss possible options for achieving a public administration for the 21st century (section 3). We summarize several of the lessons drawn from these discussions (section 4) and conclude with thoughts about the future of public administration theory and practice.

2. The New Synthesis-framework

The New Synthesis framework (see figure 1), first proposed by Jocelyn Bourgon (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010) but further developed and refined since in a dialogue between practitioners and scientists from six nations, is based on the premise that public administration has been operating without the benefit of a guiding theory or up-to-date framework that manages to encapsulate the complexity of today's society for far too long. This has not only deprived civil servants of a frame of reference for their actions but also led to risk aversion in public organizations at a time when, due to the challenge of wicked problems and the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis, innovation and creativity in government are badly needed. Civil servants that want to innovate, like Françoise in the opening case of this article, experience this lack of a new theory as a barrier to change, as the remnants of previous frames of reference (such as the traditional public administration model and New Public Management) limit their capacity to deal with new challenges.

Figure 1: New Synthesis Framework



The framework that Bourgon proposed, is based on the four key objectives government will have to achieve in the 21st century: compliance, performance, emergence and resilience. Moreover, public administration has to have a continued focus on *compliance* and *performance* today, the two core values of traditional public administration and the new public management paradigm. The rule of law still has to apply to public sector organizations that also have to strive constantly to operate more efficiently and effectively.

However, more is needed than compliance and performance to tackle today's societal problems. The models traditional public administration and new public management offer practitioners are perfectly suited to executing predictable tasks in a relatively stable environment or to deal with tame problems, but fail when it comes to wicked problems in the network society. In an unpredictable world in which many complex and adaptive systems operate next to and influence each other, government needs to develop the ability to anticipate, experiment and intervene by developing systems of *emergence*. Equally, it has a task in contributing to the *resilience* of society, characterized by an active citizenry and resilient communities.

Facilitating emergence and resilience are the two main challenges for public administration identified by the New Synthesis framework. These new core values do not replace but supplement the more traditional values of compliance and performance. By doing so, we argue, the framework enriches our understanding of public administration, as it shows that operating within the public domain is by definition ambiguous and leads to many dilemmas for which there are no simple and clear solutions. Therefore, a strategy to deal with them should not be based on models that propagate a simplistic picture of reality but one that incorporates complexity and (by doing so) makes it manageable.

Another contribution of the New Synthesis framework is that it draws attention to the fact that government needs to balance its drive for better *policy results* with the need to improve *civic results*, as the citizen has to be placed at the heart of public sector reforms. After all, government cannot solve all of today's problems by itself but also has to rely on the strength of others. It can act as partner, leader or guardian of the public interest and will always be the 'last resort' when the public interest demands it. Government activity therefore has to result in something else than merely providing a service (such as waste disposal) or a public good. It has to strengthen the capacity of citizens to deal with wicked problems by themselves, in order to create a resilient society.

To summarize: the New Synthesis frameworks breaks through old dichotomies and other apparent contradictions, by pointing out that today's public administration both has to strive to achieve public policy results *and* civic results. It also has to use governmental authority *as well as* the collective power of governance to do so. Only then will civil servants like Françoise succeed in their aim to

'serve beyond the predictable'. The framework draws a far more adequate picture of today's public administration than many other models and theories. Its strength lies in the fact that it is no recipe, model or ten-point plan to improve public services but a framework linking through the breadth of choices available to people like Françoise. It is not based on the binary choices of yesterday but offers a balanced multi-faceted approach, which gives practitioners guidance in making context, mission and circumstance specific decisions.

Government will have to learn to play new roles, as its repertoire is expanding from decision-maker, lawmaker, enforcer and service provider and include new roles such as convener, facilitator, negotiator, enabler, conflict manager and partner. In addition, citizens become more active, take matters into their own hands and increasingly play new roles, which require greater capacity for cooperation and coordination. Government has to be careful not to suffocate citizens' initiatives but give them enough breathing space to come to fruition. This requires the development of new techniques regarding how to act. Old ideas of "command and control" will have to be supplemented with new capacities to "steer" societal developments into the right directions (so that they do not clash with the public interest) and to "enable" promising initiatives to blossom. This makes it necessary for governments to learn how to search for and discover such initiatives and thus how to anticipate. 'Smart' interventions can help governments to empower citizens to become active in public value creation as well. These new ways of tackling societal problems are no instant recipe for success and mistakes will be made. Governments therefore have to learn to fail small and fail safely, for example by experimentation and pilot testing.

In the next two sections we discuss several of the lessons that have emerged from the research and discussions we conducted during the New Synthesis project.

3. The New Synthesis in practice

Every country in the New Synthesis network has supplied at least two case studies from their national context, illustrating the dynamics of the New Synthesis framework in practice (cf. Bourgon, 2011). We highlight six of them below, addressing what the initiative is about, and what was particularly interesting about it in the light of this paper. What stands out in all case studies, is that they can be read as manifestations of a government deliberately adapting itself to follow the complexity and unpredictability of social change. Some case studies even demonstrate that government no longer has a steering role, but rather a managerial role, facilitating and course-correcting initiatives by other actors in society. Society is now less the object of state policy, but rather a source of solutions.

Homelessness in Canada

The Canadian federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) shows how states can address the wicked problem of homelessness *through* others (via funding) and *with* others (through processes of collective governance). The multi-actor programme allows communities to determine their own needs and develop projects to meet those needs. Built on the model of civil engagement, this strategy is interesting because it involves very little direct action, but it heavily relies on capacity building instead.

Total Place in the United Kingdom

The Total Place programme collects information about public expenditure and aligns this information with the needs of citizens. Local pilots were set up to identify efficiencies, incentives and barriers to collaboration. This process usually involved working across agencies and engaging with citizens, as well as experimenting with some innovative methods of generating new conversations, insights, and ideas. The Total Place programme is interesting because it recognizes and acts on the need to delve into new and diverse sources of knowledge and resources by unlocking and enhancing the insights, motivation, capabilities, and networks of citizens and communities, in order to boost social resilience, achieve greater public value, and catalyze innovation.

National Health Conferences in Brazil

The National Health Conferences of Brazil are large-scale institutionalized spaces for social participation: learning environments in which civil society and the state mobilize, discuss, and evaluate health policies. The conferences produce proposals and guidelines to incorporate into the government health agenda. The case study of the NHC is interesting because it establishes new relationship patterns between state and society, and the management of participatory mechanisms inside the state apparatus. In addition, it promoted democratization and transformed public spaces by providing social movements and civil society organizations with a platform.

Bushfire reconstruction in Australia

The Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority was established after the most devastating bushfires in Australia's history. By placing local communities at the centre of the recovery efforts, the organization's objective was to ensure better decision-making and stronger community recovery. The large-scale effort crossed jurisdictional, portfolio, sectoral and geographical boundaries, benefiting from a clear sense of purpose and enormous goodwill. What is interesting about this case study, is that it demonstrates how a strong emphasis on capacity building, engagement and decision-making at the local level can substantially contribute to resilience in local communities.

Prisoner rehabilitation in Singapore

The case study of the Singapore Prison Service shows how an organization can step beyond its traditional role of a guardian to that of a facilitator and enabler of social change through leadership and culture programmes (values, staff empowerment), dramatically improving societal outcomes such as recidivism and public perception in the process. The initiative is interesting because it demonstrates the possibilities that open up when a government agency begins not only to frame desired outcomes beyond the organizational level, but also to help other members of society to do likewise.

Public Safety Centres in The Netherlands

Public Safety Centres (PSC) are networks of public and private organizations that share an office space, formed "to stimulate cooperative approaches in dealing with crime and public nuisance". The central principles of PSC are close-knit communication, a common language, integrated approaches, cooperation, effectiveness and efficiency, and balancing punitive measures with prevention. The case of PSC is interesting because it can be viewed as a relatively successful new form of governance network emerging from interactions around concrete problems at the local level.

4. Lessons learned and challenges for the future

Many policy options have been considered in the New Synthesis network so far. Numerous viable courses of action have been discussed, in conceptual as well as in more practical and empirical form. The toolbox the New Synthesis-project offers to the practitioner is by no means empty. In this section, we summarize the most promising and practical policy options developed so far by the New Synthesis network in our opinion, and describe the challenges they pose for governments willing to embrace them. These options are based on the reports of the cycle of international roundtable conferences about the New Synthesis¹, and mainly on the reports of the twelve case studies (cf. the preceding section).

Building bridges

For practitioners who are in a position to contribute to organizational and behavioural change in public administration, the New Synthesis offers a number of relevant suggestions. First, they can

¹ These roundtable conferences have taken place in The Hague, Ottawa, Singapore, Rio de Janeiro and London during the course of 2010. At the roundtables, high level practitioners and academics from the six participating countries explored and discussed a large number of issues and dilemmas related to public administration in the 21st century. The roundtable reports can be found on the project website, <http://www.ns6newsynthesis.com>.

actively contribute to good and innovative governance by building bridges or by (to use a term coined at the Brazilian round table) “*inter-stitching*” agencies, sectors, systems and disciplines. Public administration needs to be held accountable for its capability to manage the complex system that government has become over the years. This is particularly relevant in the context of public administration regimes that, like the Dutch one, consist of a complex structure of interrelated local and regional governments, agencies, sectors and public-private partnerships. National government should act as the network manager of this fragmented system, by actively pursuing the integration of different resources and interests in order to create societal results. A fine example of how this process can work in practice was presented at the The Hague round table in the case study of Dutch *Public Safety Houses*. In the setting of these new network organizations, created by the last Dutch government, practitioners from different layers of government and those agencies dealing with safety-related issues, discuss all the weekend’s safety related issues every Monday morning, and consequently make coherent plans of action on a case-by-case basis.

No major changes are required for government to play this leading role as a *primus inter pares* in a network with other actors from the public domain successfully. More has to be done to connect with citizens. One practical way of dealing with this requirement could be to create a cluster of facilitators within government. Professionals who specialize in collective framing and policy making can work within such a versatile government intermediary organization. They can be assigned to tackling those processes that require working across boundaries on a flexible basis. Over the last four years, Dutch national government has experimented with this method, be it with mixed results. Working across organizational boundaries is often still a struggle but there is at least a shared opinion now on the necessities of breaking through the silos that have developed due to vertical specialization. It remains difficult though to find ways of serving the public in a new, innovative manner while operating in contexts where more traditional values are still dominant, for example when it comes to public accountability and budgeting. One of the questions that arise here is whether or not working across boundaries should be a general or a specific competency, which is only required for a small number of boundary-spanning employees. There is something to be said for both options, and New Synthesis could provide a shared base of ideas and practices with various models.

The participants of the New Synthesis network have also put forward interesting proposals concerning performance management. It is seen as a crucial element in transformation and change because it strongly influences how organizations and professionals behave in daily practice: can we adjust indicators so that they actually start measuring public results, instead of focusing on policy results, and often only on input-indicators. This is important since evidence suggests that performance indicators, as limited as they are, are powerful indicators of what public organizations and civil servants actually do and achieve in practice. The New Synthesis network claims that we have to develop a new way in which to look at public results, for example by decoupling management and control systems and by calculating the transactions costs connected to extensive control. At the Ottawa round table, it was argued that indications, targets and aspirations too often mix and that they are replaced by hard measurements. In Singapore, this argument was further documented, and it affirmed the need to act upon this issue. There seems to be real ground to cover here; performance management, with all of its current flaws, matters in public administration. If we can transform the indicators and the systems of measurement into more public result oriented ones, there is reason to believe that organizational behaviour will transform more or less accordingly.

It can be seen as a positive development that policy makers increasingly use various innovative models for evaluating policy programmes. Such models are very useful instruments for performance measurement, because they not only focus on past but also on future performance. We argue that they should therefore be used on a much broader scale. Not only because they constitute a better way of performance measurement but also because they make new and innovative management techniques possible, such as the already described process of inter-stitching. Innovation in evaluation also has a strong multiplier effect. Such instruments not only work on the interdepartmental level and in discussions with different layers of government, but also help governments lead a more productive dialogue with society. The decoupling of control and management systems

makes it possible to take the problem at hand as the starting point in deciding what would be a fitting set of instruments to tackle it.

The New Synthesis project has also described several possible new courses of action which politicians and civil servants who want to contribute to innovation in public administration can employ. A *condition sine qua non* for this is, in our opinion, that professionals have to commit to the core values of good governance (such as integrity, transparency and consistency) and should also promote its principles among their staff. It is particularly relevant to keep this in mind because these principles are not usually the most influential in the process of experimentation and networking described above.

Learn to let go

Politicians and policy makers have to learn to let go by accepting that government is not the only or even the most important party anymore when it comes to addressing societal problems. The framework that the partners in the New Synthesis project have developed shows that government interventions can both stifle society's resilience as well as strengthen it. Government is not the only source of authority anymore. Nevertheless, letting go is easier said than done. It is also not very practical, as politicians and professionals are under severe societal pressure to be (or at least appear to be) in control. But letting go is essential to achieve the behavioural and cultural transformation process promoted by the New Synthesis project.

Professionals working in public administration have to act as strong leaders by giving a sense of direction and by defining the conditions a shared response to societal problems has to meet. This combination of roles (leader and facilitator) obviously leads to tensions. Granting authority to citizens and other societal parties also means that government's own influence and control will diminish. We discussed at the first round table in The Hague that professionals have to be aware of this and accept that they no longer have the same authority as before. It would be a good idea in this respect for government to critically assess which tasks and processes it still wants to influence. Do they form a logical task for government or can the activity also be organized or facilitated in another way? Or, to use the words of one of the participants of the round table in The Hague: "*Government should give back ownership of processes they shouldn't have claimed to begin with*".

Many new and superior solutions to the wicked issues of our times can be found, as we also alluded to in the introduction, in society itself. Government should not try to neglect them but persuade societal parties to play their part in tackling these issues. By doing so, society enhances its resilience to deal with future emerging issues. We should not wait for a time of crisis to increase society's capacity for resilience. This has to happen far in advance. Not by government directing this process in a top-down and bureaucratic manner, but by stimulating citizens, societal organizations and enterprises to take matters into their own hands.

There are already many initiatives in the countries participating in the New Synthesis initiative which aim at making citizens participate more actively in policymaking. However, it is striking that such initiatives often only concern the consultation of citizens at a point in time when all important decisions have already been made. The main challenge for professionals in public administration is to move from consultation and dialogue towards more active forms of citizens' participation. Government's role in this last phase is, as was discussed during the Ottawa meeting, to facilitate citizens in their judgement. Citizens should not be the last actor in the process of policymaking.

In the Netherlands, we already see numerous initiatives in which society takes matters into its own hands and produces civic results without governmental intervention. Increasingly, the main challenge for government these days is not to get citizens involved in addressing wicked issues, but to make the case for its own involvement, as citizens often do not see government as an ally but its interventions rather as an unwelcome burden. This development is not only limited to the Netherlands but can be witnessed in other countries as well. The case study presented at one of the round tables about the reconstruction of communities after the devastating Australian bush fires of 2008 is a striking illustration.

Government should use new technologies, such as *crowd sourcing* or *Web 2.0* in the future, much more intensively than it does now, to reconnect with society and the individual citizen. New media bring new possibilities for citizens to interact and be involved. They now have all the information necessary at hand to decide which issues they find important and how they could get involved. This is not only an opportunity but also a necessity. But this development also carries a threat for government. A crisis of legitimacy could develop should public professionals fail to connect to citizens in the same way as they now communicate with each other. Increasing its knowledge about and its visibility on new social networking media is not only an option but a necessity for the government of the future. New technologies provide us with an immense set of opportunities that we have to use.

In short, there are many opportunities when it comes to citizen participation. Technology makes it possible to bring a group of people together quickly that care deeply about a certain subject. The days have long gone in which society's big challenges could only be addressed by creating molocho-like public organizations. New technologies can be used to help citizens organize themselves but public organizations should also learn how to use new technologies themselves. Playing along with societal developments as opposed to steering or managing them becomes a crucial new expertise as citizens often do not need government anymore to get organized and to start caring about a certain issue. Government has to learn how to organize itself in such a way that it can support and absorb the energy created by citizens.

Innovation by experimentation

Professionals in the public sector should take the initiative to experiment and to facilitate platforms for experimentation. This is a crucial step in being able to better anticipate future developments and to promote innovation. Several concrete measures for achieving this have already been mentioned during the New Synthesis project, such as introducing the phenomenon of *prototyping* into the public sector and including funds for experimentation in organizational budgets. At the Ottawa round table, we discussed the need to move from a rule-based towards a principle-based approach, with enough room for creativity. Taking risks should also be possible in the public sector, as long as they have been considered most carefully. This seems to be a task for politicians and high level civil servants and it is yet not clear which concrete steps should be taken in this direction.

One specific form of experimentation is the introduction of innovative instruments for strategizing and policymaking. Examples of such instruments are the various forms of risk analyses, horizon scans, scenario planning and monitoring. These instruments substitute each other for the most part and can be used at different stages of the policy cycle. Several case studies conducted on behalf of the New Synthesis project, in particular interesting ones from Singapore, demonstrate that organizations can improve the quality of their policies by employing such instruments. And, more importantly, they can use them to improve their ability to anticipate future developments.

This is illustrated by the two case studies on how the recent SARS outbreak was dealt with in Singapore and how the obesity crisis is battled in Great Britain. Public organizations should develop the capacity to on the one hand grant enough breathing space to experiments and on the other hand upgrade promising initiatives. This means that variety in the system has to be accepted and that we have to get better at identifying promising courses of action and candidates for experimentation. Professionals on all levels should also try to better define the necessity of resilience as a societal goal and how experiments can play a role in increasing it.

Word of mouth

Far less tangible but no less important is that policy makers should try and further develop the narrative of the New Synthesis. We have discussed at several round table meetings that institutional change cannot be instructed from above but has to spread by word of mouth. Politicians, managers and professionals should be so excited about the narrative the New Synthesis project offers them, that they use it as a vantage point to re-evaluate their work and their perspective on the world around them. That is why we have to strive to develop the New Synthesis framework into a strong and gripping narrative. We see this as an essential feature for making its promise a resounding and lasting success. The New Synthesis project is in fact, as we already alluded to before, an endeavour in cultural change. It affects all structures and *modi operandi* of public administration from the

capillaries of the organization. Such an innovative way of management, based on creating new links between government and society, can only succeed if the professionals working in public organizations are driven by the urgency of this transformation and understand its advantages.

The New Synthesis network can support this long running cultural project by embedding it in the academic discussions on government reform as well as by collecting and disseminating a wide range of best practices, such as those presented at the Singapore round table. There are several ways to spread the narrative of New Synthesis and there is not one way which will work in all the different countries, sectors and levels of public administration. A professional communication strategy could play an important role in this process. The New Synthesis narrative should be custom made for the various practical contexts in which professionals work. It should also be internalized and disseminated so that it becomes more than only letters on paper. In the last section of this paper we will describe how this could be done.

5. Issues for discussion

There are many scientific models describing government and its organizations as well as voices that claim that what public administration really needs is a guiding theory or up-to-date framework. Because they lack a fitting frame of reference for their actions, civil servants have become risk averse at a time when innovation and creativity in government are badly needed. In our contribution we have critically discussed one of the 'new' guiding theories for the public administration of the 21st century, the New Synthesis framework spearheaded by Jocelyn Bourgon. This framework is based on an intensive dialogue between academics and practitioners. Its aim is to create coherence in the public sector reform initiatives needed in the context of our global economy, networked society and fragile biosphere, while also understanding and cherishing plurality. We have shown how the framework analyzes several of the challenges policy makers are faced with today. And as we have seen, the framework proposes several possible strategies for helping public managers to serve beyond the predictable and to succeed in creating not only political but civic results too.

Overall, we see two main strengths of the framework of the New Synthesis. First of all, the framework attempts to bridge an ever growing divide between public administration theory and the everyday practice of civil servants, public managers and other professionals within the public service. Parsimonious scientific models, clear-cut conceptual distinctions and quantitative cross-case comparisons tell a very limited tale of the complexity of governance. They are necessary means for theory building and theory testing, but they tend to isolate very specific variables that are part of a far more fuzzy whole. We do not argue that scientific theory about public administration is worthless or useless, but we do claim that many of it is not very helpful for civil servants like Françoise. And there are many Françaises. For instance, in The Netherlands this problem resonates in complaints by the Council of Secretary-Generals that scientific theory has lost contact with practice and that public administration theory is not helping anymore. The New Synthesis Framework may cross that divide: it is embedded in academic theory and is based on a deep understanding of the world of practice.

A second strength of the framework is that it attempts to think about public governance in terms of dilemmas. The crucial word in the framework is 'and'. It distinguishes four core values of public governance, that cannot be combined without tensions and, sometimes, plain confrontation. However, the framework indicates directions to combine these values nevertheless and calls upon practitioners and academics to put such combinations at the heart of their work. The framework attempts to grasp the complexity and the multi-dimensionality of public governance in its full, instead of reducing complexity and defining away the fuzziness that constitutes practice. We believe that although that complicates the task of doing parsimonious scientific research and eliminates the option of simple 'how to' schemes, it will eventually lead to more relevant – and rigorous – concepts. And that is, as we strongly believe, a cause that academics and practitioners will all benefit from.

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