Public Sector Management in Singapore: Examining the Public Service for the 21st Century Reform

Pedro A. Villezca Becerra

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the design, motivation, and goals of Public Service for the 21st Century (PS21), in contrast to traditional New Public Management (NPM) in Singapore. The paper is based on examining the orientation, philosophy and underlying theory of PS21 in order to contrast it with NPM. The paper argues that, even though PS21 has the trademarks of NPM practices in developed countries, the characteristics of PS21 and NPM are not congruent. The case study of PS21 demonstrates a diverse response to the NPM discourse in light of the effects of cultural environment of the public sector on the adaptation of NPM. The article concludes that Singapore has successfully mixed techniques and processes in its public sector to suit the local context, where leadership and leading are employed to inculcate the idea of a pro-active public service rather than a reactive one. Since its orientation conforms to the contemporary idea of an adaptive and responsive public service, the reform is continually monitored at a micro level. Future work should address the lack of research on assessing results of the macro or overall status of PS21.

Key words: Performance management, public sector reform, Public Service for the 21st Century, New Public Management, Developmental state.

Gestión del sector público en Singapur: El examen de la Función Pública para la Reforma del siglo 21

Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es estudiar el diseño, la motivación y los objetivos de la Administración Pública para el Siglo 21 (PS21), en contraste con el tradicional de Nueva Gestión Pública (NGP) en Singapur. El documento se basa en el examen de la orientación, la filosofía y la teoría subyacente de la PS21, para contrastarlo con la NGP. El documento sostiene que, a pesar de PS21 tiene las marcas comerciales de las prácticas de la NGP en los países desarrollados, las características de la PS21 y la NGP no son congruentes. El estudio de caso de la PS21 demuestra una respuesta diversa al discurso MNP a la luz de los efectos del ambiente cultural del sector público en la adaptación de la NGP. El artículo concluye que Singapur se ha mezclado con éxito las técnicas y procesos en su sector público para adaptarse al contexto local,

donde se emplean liderazgo y de liderazgo para inculcar la idea de un servicio público proactivo en lugar de uno reactivo. Desde su orientación se ajusta a la idea contemporánea de un servicio público de adaptación y de respuesta, la reforma se supervisa continuamente a un nivel micro. El trabajo futuro debe abordar la falta de investigación sobre la evaluación de los resultados de la situación macro o global de la PS21.

Palabras clave: *gestión del rendimiento, la reforma del sector público, la Administración Pública para el Siglo 21, la Nueva Gestión Pública, Estado del Desarrollo.*

Introduction

Despite its geographic limitation, heterogeneous population, lack of natural resources, and other constraints, Singapore has become one of the most developed city-states. Within a period of four decades, its per capita GDP, measured at purchasing power parity (PPP) reached US$60,900 (6th in the world) and the value of its foreign reserve and gold increased to US$253 billion (11th in the world) (World Factbook, 2012 est.), and these economic achievements have been based on the initiatives and efforts pursued largely by the state.

The process of Westernization appears contradictory in Singapore. On the one hand, it embraces notions such as market rationality and use of English as a medium of instruction but on the other hand, Singapore disapproves of Western social liberal values. Being highly driven by worldwide competition, the Singaporean government is continually seeking to reinvent itself in light of reforms brought about by globalization. Singapore has avoided an inward-looking government by opening up the country to foreign investment trade and multinationals with attractive fiscal incentives (Islam and Chowdhury, 1997). Singapore has acknowledged that in order to stay competitive in the global arena it needs to adopt contemporary and global public sector management practices (Quah, 1984).

This viewpoint was especially important when the South East Asian region was hit by an economic crisis in the early 1990s. Singapore's leaders were alerted to the need for a pro-active agenda toward reforms rather than the traditional reactive one. As a result, Singapore has left a long trail of public administration reforms that address internal public sector management as well as the external sector operations. The most prominent of the internal public sector management reforms is Public Service for the 21st Century (PS21) which even boasted a marketable corporate identity.

There is limited research and associated publications on the nature of public administration in Singapore. The existing literature is especially less focused on the newly emerging framework of public governance and administration guided by recent market-driven principles, structures, and strategies. Particularly, there have been significant changes or reforms in the nature of public sector management (OECD, 1995; Brinkerhoff, 2008). In studying these contemporary developments, Southeast Asian countries represent one of the most relevant and appropriate regions.

In this paper the aim is to uncover the effects of international trends of public sector management in Singapore by examining PS21's orientation and philosophy. Being a macro reform, the examination of PS21 is viewed from the sector or macro level. First a detailed analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of PS21 brings to light the learning organization theory as the model of change anticipation, adoption and implementation. Second, the contrasts between New Public Management (NPM) and PS21are reviewed. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the role that strong bureaucratic leadership plays in Singapore's pro-active approach to public sector management.

I. Background

Singapore differs considerably from other East Asian countries in a number of aspects including its political system, the cultural diversity of its population, its size and its natural resources. The public sector in Singapore comprises of the Singapore Civil Service (SCS) plus state agencies such as statutory boards and over five hundred government-linked companies (GLCs), the Armed Forces, the Legal Service and the Police Force (SMC, 1997). Singapore's description as a 'corporate state' is mainly derived from the extensive and interventionist role of the statutory boards and GLCs (Common, 2001). The Singaporean public sector is an example of a 'state guided development effort under an able political leadership and bureaucracy' (Clarke and Chan, 1995). Singapore is also described as an 'administrative state' (Chan, 1975, 1993; Jones, 1997), as a result of politics being kept independent of bureaucracy in economic decision making (Root, 1996).

Throughout recent history, a dichotomous relationship has existed between Western and Asian public sector reforms namely: the professional (West) vs. the 'social' managers (East Asian), decentralization vs. centralization, diversity vs. unity, explicit controls (performance controls) vs. implicit controls (social regulation) and many others. The notion of strong hierarchy in East Asia is considered as an imposition or imitation of Weberian bureaucracies (Waters, 1991). New Public Management (NPM) has been the dominant paradigm in

public administration theory and practice and a significant driver in public management policy around the world, from the early 1980s to at least the early 2000s (Dunleavy et al, 2006); however, the contrast between other management styles shows that NPM is unsustainable in South East Asia (Common, 2001).

The current period of reforming public administration systems in developed and developing countries, has emerged -within varying contexts and thus vary in and of them-selves. The main characteristics and underlying ideas of New Public Management were summarized in Denhart (2004, p. 136) under ten principles: government under NPM should by catalytic (steering rather than rowing), community-owned (empowering rather than serving); competitive by injecting competition into service delivery, mission-driven instead of rule-driven, results-oriented, customer-driven, enterprising, anticipatory, decentralized and market-oriented. From this view the public sector will inevitably perform worse than the market sector (Dunleavy et al, 2006; Levy, 2010).

The neo-liberal roots of NPM indicate that society would be better off if the public sector as such would be downsized and the number of public officials could be decreased by privatization and economic liberalization (Gore, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2008). It can be argued that national public sector reforms are in a period of transition in which promoting efficiency and minimizing government have been the formula for re-addressing all problems in the public sector towards a period in which governments in different parts of the world seek their own way out of this ideological based performance in public sector management. There have also been paradigm shifts – such as from emphasizing short term goal achievement to stressing the need to address long term effectiveness; from an emphasis on efficiency to stressing effectiveness; from emphasizing outputs to outcomes; from input (what is put in) to process (how to do it) thinking.

II. Public Service for the 21st Century (PS21)

In May 1995, the Permanent Secretaries of the Singapore Government launched a public service reform program known as 'Public Service for the 21st Century', or PS21 in short (Lim, 1997). PS21 consolidates or extends a number of existing schemes, including work improvement teams and service improvement. The high public profile of PS21 is explained by the emphasis in official documentation that it is an initiative that involves the entire public service in efforts to increase efficiency and provide better services. This major reform hoped to accomplish two basic objectives:

   a) "to nurture an attitude of service excellence in meeting the needs of the public with high standards of quality, courtesy and responsiveness"

b) "to foster an environment which induces and welcomes continuous change for greater efficiency and effectiveness by employing modern management tools and techniques while paying attention to the morale and welfare of public officers"
(Cheung, 2003)

These objectives are to be achieved by focusing on four areas of public service: staff well-being (staff welfare, recognition, appreciation, and challenge); ExCEL or excellence through continuous enterprise and learning (continuous improvement and teamwork to be realized through measures like the work improvement teams); organizational review (i.e., organizational innovation, use of Information Technology, connecting with citizens, and cutting red tape); and quality service (to satisfy customers through courtesy, accessibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness). The PS21 initiative is led by the Prime Minister's Office and the Central Steering Committee (members include the Permanent Secretaries of various ministries), and four functional committees corresponding to the above four areas.

PS21 seeks to reinforce the strong administrative state in Singapore by making it adept at keeping up with "the latest developments and future challenges" (Cheung, 2003, p. 155) and was essentially an indication of a paradigm shift from the traditional 'top down' approach of Singaporean policy making (Quah, 1984). The core emphasis of PS21 reform is about promoting innovation and creativity, rewarding potential, facilitating change, creating a vision and commitment (Cheung, 2003; Lim, 1997; Turner, 2002). With the implementation of PS21, the government envisioned change in the form of three pillars: welcome change, anticipate change and execute change (Lim, 1997). These were the basis to establish a logical framework to answer the calling of contemporary trends in New Public Management (NPM). Overall, PS21 initiatives sought to create a sense of awareness and reception to organizational change among public officers.

Tactical initiatives under PS21 include schemes to "motivate counter staff to give quality service; awards recognizing the efforts of individuals; publication of a directory of services to give the public better knowledge and access to them; the publication of performance standards; and the use of electronic networks" (Lim, 1997, p. 171). PS21 seeks to alter the mindset of the Singaporean state to act the part of facilitator and nurturer in contrast to its traditional role as regulator and controller (Lim, 1996, 1997). Essentially, PS21 has an internal focus where current public service practices are continuously 'upgraded' to include tactics such as public consultations as a shift to a pre-emptive and pro-active strong administrative state (Cheung, 2003).

III. Underlying Theory of PS21

From the philosophy of pro-actively approaching change, it is evident that Singapore has implemented the learning organization approach to the management of change and innovation (Pitts and Lei, 1999). Learning organizations are those where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (Senge, 1990; Argyris and Schön, 1996).

The second pillar of the PS21 initiatives, anticipate change, places stress on the readiness of public officers to engage in continuous change in an uncertain environment. Instead of assuming that the organization can plan change, the learning organization approach regards the environment as 'too complex' and 'too turbulent' for planned change (Osborne and Brown, 2005, p. 39). Given the complex and uncertain nature of the public sector, this approach allows for staff to see change on a continuous basis rather than a 'discrete managerial function' (Osborne and Brown, 2005, p. 42). Learning organization theory therefore advocates continuous reassessment of ability to respond to change (Argyris, 1991).

This is in accord with Singapore's approach to PS21 where part of the PS21 philosophy delineates the continuous learning from other nations (Huque and Lam, 1996). In the past three decades, these other nations include Japan, Switzerland and New Zealand. Part of the organizational learning agenda requirement for PS21 is to acclimatize public officers to continuous change by allocating at least 5 percent of their weekly work duration to training (Common, 2001; Lim, 1997). Evidently, this step reaffirms the government's expectation of a pro-active, instead of a reactive, approach to change. Pitts and Lei (1999) identify that a learning organization has the ability to positively respond to change as its staff are more likely to adapt and experiment as a result of continual training.

On a micro level, PS21 also indicates strong links to the continuous organization learning cycle (Kolb et al. 1979) in the form of feedback loops that both the public and public officers have easy access to (Lim, 1997). Osborne and Brown (2005) have argued that implementation of change is dependent on the type of change and the governance level at which change occurs. From the evidence, clearly PS21 is concerned with continuous change at all levels of the organization with particular emphasis on the front line staff or the micro organizational level.

IV. PS21: Beyond Efficiency

Over time It has been frequently argued that there is little possibility that a universal public sector model or solution will be applicable internationally (Caiden, 1991; Dahl, 1947). When viewed from an academic perspective, PS21 has the trademarks of NPM practices elsewhere, especially in developed countries. PS21 contains all the hallmarks of a reform that addresses private sector-type practices (Hood, 1991), organizational decentralization (Holmes, 1992) and performance measurement (Smith, 1993). However, upon further investigation, the characteristics of PS21 and NPM are not congruent.

Two key points have been identified by Cheung (2003) that contradict the present understanding of NPM in relation to the PS21 reform. First, PS21 is not about the public sector 'borrowing' strategic practices from the private sector. Instead, the orientation is to 'point to and lead the way and be the model for efficiency, innovation and service quality' (Lim, 1996). Therefore, within PS21, the private sector is not being regarded as the 'trend-setter' in management practices.

This is in contrast to the NPM thesis by Hood (1991), who has specifically identified private sector styles of management practice as part of the fundamental key characteristics of NPM. In addition, PS21 is not consistent with the OECD's managerialism rhetoric, which, like NPM, emphasizes the emulation of private sector management practices (OECD, 1995).

Cheung's (2003) second point of difference encompasses the conceptualization of PS21 in terms of NPM hierarchal bureaucracy. PS21 advocates strong strategic leadership instead of NPM's orientation of managerialism (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). Lim (1997) argues that excellence in managerialism is not sufficient to achieve the outcomes of PS21 such as emphasis on processes rather than results. He continues to argue that leadership is the crux of the reform as PS21 is about co-ordinated vision rather than co-ordinated action (Lim, 1996, p. 128-131). In his NPM thesis, Hood (1991) delineates the importance of management tools and functions in managerialism such as parsimony in resource control. The PS21 philosophy has acknowledged that such strategies are necessary, but goes beyond to place bureaucratic leadership and direction as a driving force of the reform (Cheung, 2003).

V. Influence of Public Management Choice

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) have contested that claiming the existence of a universal public sector model is nonsense, elaborating on the absence of a 'one size fits all' public service model. In light of this, this case study of PS21

has clearly demonstrated a highly diverse response to the NPM discourse. To explain this phenomenon, academics and practitioners have examined drivers of change such as globalization or Westernization (Cheung, 2003; Common, 2001; Islam and Chowdhury, 1997), changing societal demands, public culture and economic competition (Goh, 1995). For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on effects of cultural environment of the public sector on the adaptation of NPM.

Singaporean respect for power, status, and order may affect Western-based organizational knowledge management implementation strategies. Divergence in adoption of NPM in Singapore is expected considering the cultural environment being based on predominantly on Asian ideology and colonial legacy (Turner, 2002). Singapore has seen a single party, the People's Action Party (PAP), rule since 1959. The management culture of the PAP is often described as 'authoritarian' (Paul, 1993) with strong tendencies towards social intervention (Common, 2001). Singaporean leaders have labeled this approach as 'Asian democracy' (Tamney, 1996, p. 58). PAP's monopoly in Singaporean government ensures that political culture remains relatively consistent either from one term to another or from one politician to another. The foundation of the Singapore political agenda explains the case of limited adoption of Western public sector management ideology.

Conclusion
Singapore's public service adopts and, at times, invents reforms in light of NPM but it has not embraced the entire philosophy of NPM (Turner, 2002). Instead, Singapore has successfully mixed techniques and processes in its public sector to suit the local context. These initiatives are derived from several international and national reforms such as public consultations from Western NPM model and the Work Improvements Teams (WITs) from the Japanese (Cheung, 2003; Common, 2001; Turner, 2002). However, PS21 is viewed as a 'bureaucratic agenda' to public management (Cheung, 2003, p. 153) where leadership and leading are the main points of emphasis. Visionary bureaucratic leadership is expected to position the public sector as a role model in adopting change and innovation. The same leadership is also employed to inculcate the idea of a pro-active public service rather than a reactive one.

The theoretical basis of public management discourse positions Singapore as a learning organization (Osborne and Brown, 2005). Considering the initiatives in PS21, the orientation of the reform conforms to the contemporary idea of an adaptive and responsive public service. As a result, the reform is continually monitored at a micro level. However, it can be argued that the results do not depict a complete picture of either the macro or overall status of PS21. Future

research should address the lack of research in this area while highlighting the existence of other public sector management models, such as the market model approach. This will assist in sewing together a better picture of the current Singaporean public sector.

References

Argyris, Chris (1991), Teaching smart people how to learn, in: *Harvard Business Review*, 69, 3, 99-109.

Argyris, Chris, and Donald Schön (1996), *Organisational learning II: Theory, Method and Practice*, Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley.

Brinkerhoff, Derick W. (2008), The state and international development management: Shifting tides, changing boundaries, and future directions, in: *Public Administration Review*, 68, 6, 985-1001.

Caiden, Gerald E. (1991), *Administrative reform comes of age*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Chan, Heng Chee (1975), Politics in an administrative state: Where has the politics gone?, in: S. C. Meow (Ed.), *Trends in Singapore* (pp. 51-68), Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Chan, Heng Chee (1993), Singapore: Coping with vulnerability, in: J. W. Morley (Ed.), *Driven by growth: Political change in the Asia-Pacific region* (pp. 219-241), Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.

Cheung, Anthony (2003), Public service reform in Singapore, in: B. L. A. Cheung and I. Scott (Eds.), *Governance and public sector reform in Asia* (pp. 138-162), London: Routledge Curzon.

Common, Richard (2001), *Public Management and policy transfer in Southeast Asia*, Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Clarke, Cal, and Steve Chan (1995), MNCs and developmentalism: domestic structure as an explanation for East Asian dynamism, in: T. Risse-Kappen (Ed.), *Bringing transnational relations back in*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dahl, Robert A. (1947), The science of public administration: three problems, in: *Public Administration Review*, 7, 1, 1-11.

Denhart, Robert (2004), *Theories of Public Organization*, Thomson Wadsworth, Belmont.

Dunleavy Patrick, Helen Margetts, Simon Bastow, and Jane Tinkler (2006), New Public Management Is Dead—Long Live Digital-Era Governance, in: *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 16, 3, 467-494.

Goh, Keng Sue (1995), *The economics of modernization*, Singapore: Federal Publications.

Gore, Charles (2000), The rise and fall of the Washington Consensus as a paradigm for developing countries, in: *World Development*, 28, 5, 789-804.

Holmes, Malcom (1992), Public sector management reform: convergence or divergence in: *Governance*, 5, 4, 472-483.

Hood, Christopher (1991), A public management for all seasons? In: *Public Administration*, 69, 1, 3-19.

Huque, Ahmed Shaficul, and Jermain Lam (1996), Public administration in the NICs: Accomplishments and challenges, in: A. S. Huque, J. Lee and J. Lam (Eds.), *Public administration in the NICs:* Challenges and accomplishments, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Islam, Iyanatul, and Anis Chowdhury (1997), *Asia-Pacific Economies:* a survey, London: Routledge.

Jones, David Martin (1997), *Political development in Pacific Asia*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Kolb, David, Irwin Rubin, and James McIntyre (1979), *Organizational Psychology: An experiential approach*, Third edition, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Levy, Roger (2010), New Public Management end of an Era? in: *Public Policy and Administration*, 25, 2, 234-240.

Lim, Siong Guan (1996), The public service, in: L. H. Yeo (Ed.), *Singapore: The year in review*, Singapore: The Institute of Policy Studies.

Lim, Siong Guan (1997), Sustaining excellence in government: The Singapore experience, in: *Public Administration and Development*, 17, 1, 167-174.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1995), *Governance in transition: Public management reforms in OECD countries*, Paris.

Osborne, Stephen P., and Kerry Brown (2005), *Managing change and innovation in public service organizations*, London: Routledge.

Paul, Erick (1993), Prospects for liberalization in Singapore. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 23, 3, 291-305.

Pitts, Robert A. David Lei (1999), *Strategic management: building and sustaining competitive edge*, Cincinnati: South Western College Publishing.

Pollitt, Christopher, and Geert Bouckaert (2000), *Public management reform: A comparative analysis*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Quah, Jon (1984), The Public policy-making process in Singapore in: *Asian Journal of Public Administration*, 6, 2, 108-126.

Root, Hilton L. (1996), *Small countries, big lessons: Governance and the rise of East Asia*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press for the Asian Development Bank.

Senge, Peter M. (1990), *The Fifth Discipline. The art and practice of the learning organization*, London: Random House.

Smith, Peter (1993), Outcome-related Performance Indicators and Organizational Control in the Public Sector, in: *British Journal of Management*, 4, 3, 135.

Singapore Ministry of Culture (SMC) (1997), *Singapore facts and pictures*, Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

Tamney, Joseph B. (1996), *The struggle over Singapore's soul: western modernization and Asian culture*,. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Turner, Mark (2002), Choosing items from the menu: New public management in Southeast Asia, in: *International Journal of Public Administration*, 25, 12, 1493-1512.

Waters, David (1991), *21st Century Management: Keeping ahead of the Japanese and Chinese*, Singapore: Prentice Hall.

World Factbook: Singapore (2012). Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency. online at: [https://www.cia.gov/library/pu]

Pedro Antonio Villezca Becerra. Es Doctor en Economía Agrícola por la Universidad de Texas A&M. Actualmente es profesor de tiempo completo en la Facultad de Economía en la Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL). Su línea de investigación es: Estudios comparativos sobre economía y negocios en países de Asia. Entre sus publicaciones sobresalen: "Las Reformas en China y su Éxito Económico: Una Breve Descripción". *Observatorio de la Economía y la Sociedad China.* núm. 07, (2008); "Reformas en el Sector Educativo de China: La Educación Superior y sus Implicaciones en el Crecimiento Económico". *Ciencia UANL,* vol. XV, pp. 8-14, (2012); "Perspectiva Global de Asia". Ciencia UANL Vol. XVI, pp. 8-14, (2013). Correo electrónico: pedro. villezcabc@uanl.edu.mx