

Book Review: Rethinking Public Service Delivery

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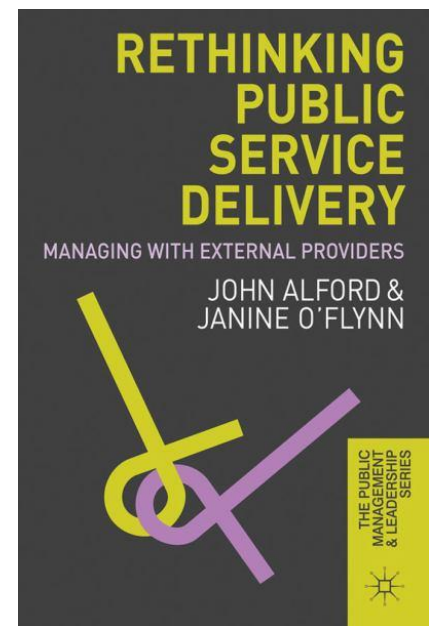
Many public services today are delivered by external service providers such as private firms and voluntary organizations. These new ways of working – including contracting, partnering, client co-production, inter-governmental collaboration and volunteering – pose challenges for public management. This book aims to assess the ways in which public sector organizations can improve their services and outcomes by making full use of the alternative ways of getting things done. **Alastair Hill** believes it is in many ways a milestone work, both in its mapping of the complex 21st Century landscape of public service delivery, but also in offering a clear framework for practitioners.



Rethinking Public Service Delivery. John Alford and Janine O’Flynn. Palgrave Macmillan. June 2012.

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The nature of public service delivery in the UK has been a preoccupation of policy-makers in recent years. Many on the left continue to view the idea of public services provided by the private sector with disdain. With recent fiascos such as G4S’s handling of the London Olympics (in which a private sector company failed in delivery), and the West Coast Mainline debacle (in which there was a problem in awarding private sector contracts), the signs are that a Labour Government under Ed Miliband may now look to reverse some of the wave of privatisations of the 1980s and 1990s, if elected. On the other hand there remain no shortage of proponents for outsourced delivery and increased private sector involvement aimed at driving competition and choice both on the right and centre-left. Debate across the UK political spectrum on how and who should deliver public services thus remains strong, and one need look no further than the current debate on the future of the National Health Service in the UK as an example.





The political responses to the phenomenon of what they term ‘externalisation’ are explored by John Alford and Janine O’Flynn in their excellent book, *Rethinking Public Service Delivery*. As they highlight, the phenomenon is a relatively new one. In the post-war era the Attlee Government began an era of consensus in the UK of vastly expanded public service delivery, particularly the provision of health and welfare. Actual delivery during this period was statist, with the idea that state provision was ‘one best way’ to deliver public services service. In the 1980’s however this vision was rapidly transformed. As Alford and O’Flynn highlight, the view quickly became that, “Better and cheaper government would come from handing public services over to private enterprise, in a new era of contractualism – separating purchasers from providers, and subjecting providers to classical contracting and competitive tendering”.



Nevertheless, at the turn of the 21st century, both the state-dominant and market-dominant approaches to public service delivery are now increasingly redundant. Mirroring developments in wider economics, the search is now on for some new approach between the two ideological poles. As with wider economics again, this model is still in flux, and not readily identifiable as different forms of public service delivery abound, and as new and more integrated networks rapidly evolve. As such, while the search for such a model forms part of the thesis of this book, also contained is a thorough mapping of the landscape of externalisation, and a mapping of the actors, organisations and processes now involved. Through such a mapping of both the recent history and current landscape of externalisation, Alford and O'Flynn seek broader perspective aimed at finding solutions to public service delivery in the 21st century.

In this vein Alford and O'Flynn initially explore the benefits and costs of outsourcing, as well as the motivations and mechanisms which can be used to resonate with these. Following this they explore different types of potential service providers, both organisations and individuals, before developing a contingency framework designed to help assess the best provider in different circumstances. Finally, their last chapter looks at how those involved in Government procurement can equip themselves adequately to manage this process.

Alford's and O'Flynn's book is refreshing in two main respects. The first – and as touched upon above – is that their analysis is staunchly apolitical. On both left and right, ideological conceptions remain that state or market knows best. In contrast, what Alford and O'Flynn seek throughout is a lucid understanding of how these two ideological dispositions informed the recent history of the public services landscape. This is not with a view to critique, but rather to ultimately establish a framework for public service delivery moving forward, informed by best practice and circumstances as opposed to ideology.

This analysis is in turn greatly enriched by the second refreshing aspect of their work, namely the excellent use of case studies and examples in setting up the issues discussed in each chapter. In addressing the failings of traditional 'private sector knows best' outsourcing for example, they use the case study of the ideologically driven military reforms of US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in the aftermath of 9/11. Driven by a belief that the private sector inherently knows best, Rumsfeld's reforms nevertheless led to huge problems in theatres, particularly through the use of private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan. While these forces were provided cheaply by the private sector, ultimately it led to the well-documented problems of 'friendly fire' as a result of lack of co-ordination between private contractors and state forces. Similarly, when turning to discuss the subsequent move to partnership and collaboration as public services practitioners turned their back on crude private sector outsourcing, they use the case of the 2009 botched terrorist attack from Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab. In this case they highlight that a number of collaborating organisations had failed to communicate vital intelligence, before exploring these issues in their fifth chapter.

Adopting this combined approach on apolitical analysis with use of informative case studies, they navigate through recent history to the current landscape, before arriving at a framework for making externalisation decisions. This framework seeks an approach to externalisation which chooses the best providers for the purposes and circumstances based on a thorough analysis of cost-benefits. This is in distinction to any basis of "ideology, fashion, political convenience, or transient budgetary circumstances".

In many ways their conclusion seems remarkably self-evident, and yet in bringing clarity of approach to an otherwise politicised issue, Alford and O'Flynn's achievements should not be understated. It is in many ways a milestone work, both in its mapping of the complex 21st Century landscape of public service delivery, but also in offering a clear framework for practitioners.

That said, given recent developments in the UK, it is Alford and O’Flynn’s final chapter that arguably warrants most attention. While debates continue about how and by whom public services are delivered, an often ignored question is whether central government and its agencies are equipped to both procure and manage these new and evolving arrangements effectively. In the UK the Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude MP continues work to improve civil service procurement, while recent reviews have also focussed on the botched contract award for the West Coast Mainline. Similarly, and as Alford and O’Flynn highlight in their fourth chapter, Public-Private Partnerships, or Private Finance Initiatives, have also come under recent criticism. A recent review has seen them replaced to give greater central oversight in order to try and improve infrastructure procurement.

As Alford and O’Flynn acknowledge these issues are crucial. Recent events in the UK illustrate the need to ensure public organisations continue to develop the requisite capabilities to oversee externalisation of public service, particularly as the landscape evolves and becomes increasingly complex.

Alastair Hill completed an MSc in Political Theory at the LSE in 2010, having graduated from the University of Sussex with a degree in history and politics in 2009. He now works as a political consultant for MHP Communications. Alastair tweets as [@alastair_hill](#). [Read more reviews by Alastair](#).