Nearly a decade ago Christopher Pollitt (2000) wrote a memorable article on ‘institutional amnesia’, in which he argued that organisations either ignore or waste the opportunity to learn from the past, because of fast staff turnover or poor management of the record of past events. In this book, he develops the ideas further and calls for a more systematic approach to the past and the future, and for a better approach to the time dimension of policy and management in the public sector. He uses six methodologies for the treatment of time: traditional historical approaches; the path dependency framework; theories of cycles or alternations in administrative fashion; sociological studies of time and management; the organizational ecology/organizational evolution perspective; the analysis of cognitive processes and biases of decision makers. The author applies these approaches to a series of policy and management events or stories from a wide variety of times and places, including hospital management in Brighton and Leuven, the development of agency autonomy in the USA 1862-1928, performance management in Sweden, healthcare policies in Canada, the UK and the USA.

The form of the book consists of an examination of the cases using the six frameworks, then the addition of more empirical examples, before making generalisations and, finally offering advice for policy makers and managers in the public sector. Because Pollitt has been in the business for a long time, the scale and scope of his illustrations are impressively wide and deep, and he is not shy in offering personal insights and making pointed comments of policy errors as well as successes. His summary conclusion is: ‘...we can make things much easier for ourselves if we actively learn to live with the past, and with the way many of the important actions we take now may carry both consequences and requirements which stretch far into the future...we can recognize the reality of long linkages over time, and adapt our policies and institutions to allow for them, or we can blunder forwards without either rearview mirrors or forward vision much beyond the end of the ship’s prow.’ (p.181)

The book is very strong on the folly of policy and management approaches that are based only in the present and near future: innovations such as agency autonomy, or performance pay, or decentralisation all have long historical roots that could provide lessons for the future. It also emphasises the existence of cycles of policy prescription, as governments veer from one approach to its opposite and back again over cycles of varying length.

My first assignment outside the UK, in 1982, involved assisting the government of Tanzania with implementation of a policy of decentralisation by strengthening the fiscal autonomy of
local authorities. In 2008 I met, in Tanzania, a young consultant enthusiastically engaged on precisely the same mission. Little progress had been made in the intervening 26 years. Had the Tanzanian government and its donors and lenders read Pollitt’s book, things might have turned out differently: they could have interrogated previous efforts to understand what might work, they might have used institutional memory to understand the obstacles in the way of local fiscal autonomy and learned from the quarter-century of policy and implementation failure. But the continuation of the same, failed policy might be the result of something other than amnesia. Perhaps continuing optimism about future policy success is a necessary condition for the preservation of aid flows, and the provision of a stream of young, optimistic consultants has a part to play in legitimising governments and policies.

The search for innovations is a self-sustaining activity where bureaucracies are based on reward for performance. In practice the options are few and well understood: after all the debate on whether to run the public sector by hiring good people and trusting them or by creating incentives and punishments for performance dates from the debates between the Confucianists and the Legalists and continues, via the ‘scientific management’ versus the ‘human relations’ schools. I remember a seminar with UK civil servants at LSE. A senior Ministry of Defence officer said: “throughout my career, there has always been an older person at every meeting saying ‘we tried that before and it did not work’. I realise that I am now that person: it is time to go.” Pollitt’s conclusion is that the opposite is the case – those who can remember should stay and be respected: if they leave, the organisation will lose its memory and much of its wisdom. But if the rewards are all given for ‘managing change’ or ‘driving innovation’ then amnesia is a valuable asset. Re-packaging the choice between a market and a hierarchy as new dilemma with new solutions makes, for example, public-private partnerships look like an innovation, bringing great rewards to their implementers.

This is an extremely well crafted book, based on a clear and explicit framework and a convincing range of evidence. It deserves a wide readership, both among those academics who claim to have discovered innovations among rehashed formulas and among practitioners busily engaged in the re-invention of approaches and techniques with a long, if hidden, history. The advice to look a long way forward as well as back is also important: it is time to consider the financial, environmental and social consequences of today’s decisions for future generations, not just for the voters at the next election.

Reference
