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Mark Considine, Jenny M. Lewis and Damon Alexander, *Networks, Innovation and Public Policy: Politicians, Bureaucrats and the Pathways to Change Inside Government* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

The idea that governance is increasingly networked is the leitmotif for a generation of leading scholars. At the same time, the continuing pre-eminence of New Public Management (NPM) philosophy in driving public sector reform has coincided with a wave of management studies (some critical of NPM) concerned with whether and how innovation occurs in the public sector. Considine, Lewis and Alexander bring the two themes together. Starting from the premise that there has been very little research examining the role of networks in innovation, they ask to what extent municipal innovators occupy a strategic position within networks and have communicative ties to other network actors. The central problematic of the study reported in this book, then, is the extent to which network positions and connections align with innovator status.

The study, conducted over a five year period in Australia, is impressive in scale and quality. The research occurred in two stages: first, a survey of all politicians and bureaucrats from the top four management tiers in each of eleven municipalities in the state of Victoria; and second, case studies in four of the eleven municipalities entailing interviews with key players about innovation. In addition to politicians and bureaucrats, the authors undertook interviews with a sample of community leaders from each of the four case study municipalities to determine whether they conceived of innovation in similar ways to their municipal counter-parts and whether they identified the same cases as innovations. The authors analyze the survey and interview data using a range of quantitative methods and network modelling techniques. Their large-N quantitative approach, they argue, is rigorous

and allows them to draw generalizable lessons that are not possible from the typical single location qualitative case study.

The authors draw several important conclusions from their research. They find that there are distinct innovation cultures in the municipalities, proving the adage that 'locality matters'. It turns out that while politicians, bureaucrats and community leaders tend to share similar views about the nature of innovation, community leaders often diverge from their municipal counterparts when it comes to identifying examples of it. In some cases, politicians are marginal from innovation networks, while in others they are central. As one would expect, senior managers are key players in most innovation networks and yet in others, managers further down the hierarchy appear to be crucial. The ability to work across boundaries is a key indicator of innovator status.

Interestingly, the authors chose not to impose a definition of innovation on the study; rather, respondents were asked to nominate both kinds and cases of innovation. The advantage of this approach is that it allowed them to detect distinct local innovation cultures. However, taken together, the definitions and examples of innovation given by the respondents suggest that the term is not typically, as one might expect, associated with novelty or invention. Innovation was associated by some respondents with major change, but the kinds of projects considered innovative are common in municipalities across much of the world (e.g. strategic visioning, neighbourhood renewal, drug and crime initiatives and sustainability projects). The reader wonders, therefore, whether change in the public sector is not more about policy diffusion and convergence than it is about innovation in the ordinary understanding of the term. This points to the possibility that if a slightly more demanding definition of innovation was used, the innovation networks in this study would

look very different. The authors do not dwell on the challenges of definition at length, but recognize the need to distinguish the authors of innovation from those who distribute it (p. 48). The distinction between innovator and agent of diffusion poses the question of whether some cases described by the respondents as innovations are merely off-the-shelf copies or hybrids of initiatives proliferating everywhere. One problem with the nomination method, therefore, is that it allows respondents to set the analytic agenda in a manner that obscures important questions.

However, the most significant finding in terms of the initial questions driving the study is that their place in networks matters more than organizational position in determining actors' innovator status, as indicated by peer nominations. Innovators are the 'go to' people in these municipal governments (p. 202). This is a significant conclusion, both for theorists who see networks as central to contemporary governance and for those wanting to know how innovation occurs in the public sector. Yet, this reader was left wondering if the authors have sufficient evidence for such a pivotal conclusion. On page 197, for example, they say that in relation to what they see as the most important kind of innovation network in their study, 'strategic information networks', the findings were inconclusive. Network centrality was found to be the most important factor in predicting who was regarded as an innovator in one municipality, whereas hierarchical position was the most important factor in two of the three others. In the remaining municipality, both organizational and network positions were significant. The authors conclude that 'both formal position and informal network relationships are important, and while there must be some overlap between these, given that it is impossible to separate a person's interpersonal connections from their hierarchical position, they are not exactly the same' (pp 197-8). In

'advice networks' (the other network type studied), they found that institutional position was a significant predictor of innovator status and that network centrality was not significant in any of the four individual cases, although it was significant across the sample as a whole (p. 198). Based on these findings, the authors conclude that 'networks matter' and 'explain more than can be discovered by a focus on position alone' (p. 198). This first set of conclusions seems reasonable in light of the preceding evidence. Life is not entirely about hierarchies.

However, from this initially cautious conclusion, Considine, Lewis and Alexander move on to claim that their research 'validated the proposition that networks are crucial to innovation and more important than other variables that could be expected to impact substantially' (p. 202). Moreover, they claim that their methods show 'conclusively that, net of all other factors, networks explain more about innovation than everything else' (*ibid*). These latter claims are unconvincing because Considine, Lewis and Alexander do not justify the jump from their considered position a few pages earlier to the radical claim that networks matter most. If anything, the first position contradicts the second. Part of the problem may be that in the concluding chapter, they cover a great deal of difficult and important ground in a few pages. Whereas throughout the rest of the book each point is explained clearly step-by-step, the conclusion is very dense and the material could usefully have been explored in greater depth. Nevertheless, one is left with the sense that networks are being over-hyped, as they have been in parts of the governance literature.

This important issue aside, the book is clearly the result of a very substantial research endeavour. Political scientists will learn much about how to study governing networks and management theorists about the sources of innovation. Local politicians and

bureaucrats in Australia, and well beyond, will learn lessons about the kinds of organizational culture and governance systems likely to encourage innovative policy and practice. The book will also adorn the shelves of graduate students on a variety of governance, public policy and public management courses and, with its controversial conclusions, will be the source of vibrant debate.
