



PERGAMON

Scand. J. Mgmt. 16 (2000) 357–373

Scandinavian Journal of
Management

www.elsevier.com/locate/scajman

Management by decree. Paradoxes in the reform of the Italian public sector

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Abstract

A call for “better” governance of the public sphere informed by reliance on management and accounting expertise has recently arisen in connection with a variety of legislative initiatives enacted in Italy. This paper looks at the nature and role of this “reform”, and in particular the call for the introduction of managerial accounting. It is argued that far from facilitating a comprehensive introduction of managerial vocabulary and knowledge into the public domain, the Italian legislative mechanism tends to hamper the expression of management and accounting as technically autonomous and coherent systems, while at the same time allowing more established audiences to deliberate on their nature and role. Although the reform was devised in terms of introducing the economic and the measurable into the domains of bureaucracy and formal compliance, its legal articulation seems to be informed by the very logic and ethos it is called upon to change. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Management reforms; Governance; Management by decree; Accountability; Contollo di gestione

Across industrialized countries the last decade has been characterized — albeit with varying degrees of intensity — by proposals for major reforms in the management of public administrations and, in general, for a change in the role of governments in society. A number of forces have been indicated as the impetus behind this movement. Expectations aroused by governments have often not been met and discontent has grown in step with perceived governmental “failures”. Moreover, periods of dissatisfaction over financial restraint have coincided with diminishing means for meeting public expectations. In another perspective, explanations of a less “technical” kind have been suggested, and reform projects have been seen as part of a “neoliberal”

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PII: S0956-5221(00)00012-9

political agenda aimed at reducing the relevance of the welfare state through the introduction of a more market-orientated vision of government and society as a whole (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992).

These pressures for change have generally involved a move away from traditional bureaucratic and professionally centred models of “administration” and towards more flexible and customer-orientated “management” of public service planning and delivery (Flynn, 1990; Keen & Murphy, 1996). In line with this, the values, language and techniques of the business world have been increasingly promoted in various government initiatives as the way to reform the functioning and the ethos of public bodies. What seems to be emerging is a newly regulated public sphere in which attempts to operationalize values of efficiency and effectiveness are crucial. Within this programme, the call for a “managerialization” of the public sector has been ubiquitous and has played a central role in framing the concept of reform itself and of its derivatives, such as the rationalization, corporatization and privatization of public agencies.

This trend has become particularly strong in several countries, especially in the English-speaking world, where large-scale initiatives have frequently been undertaken with the deliberated and explicit intention to reform the public sector along managerial lines. The diffusion of reform projects bearing an apparent resemblance to one another has recently led to the search for a “global” model of public sector change that is said to parallel the globalization of the business firm. Closer analysis of the patterns followed by different countries has revealed considerable diversity in the rationale and outcome of reform projects, as well as the presence of “champions” and “laggards” in the introduction of managerial instruments into the public sector (Hood, 1995). The analysis of reform projects as they have been devised in Italy, for example, seems to support this idea (Marcon & Panozzo, 1998).

By examining the way in which major managerial instruments have been introduced into the Italian public sector this paper seeks to extend such preliminary insights arguing that the way in which reforms are undertaken and the kind of resources and consensus they are able to mobilize are dependent on the institutional context in which the reforms are devised, on the constraint that this imposes and on the instruments that it allows to be used. In particular, the very drafting of reform projects that take management as their model and the market as providing the ideal institutional arrangements, may be hard to realize, since managerial knowledge is bound to be subordinate to more established frameworks such as the juridical-legal one. The main focus here is thus on the relevance of the rational-legal institutional structure as a “condition of possibility” that powerfully affects the articulation and early implementation phase of such projects. The choice of a focus on the conditions of possibility for reform, rather than evaluation “outcomes” and actual impacts, requires that attention be devoted to the way in which reform projects can be — and actually are — articulated, the kind of awareness that precedes them and the types of investigations conducted to allow this awareness to develop, the sort of exchange they foster between the private and the public sector in terms of ethos and organizational culture, and finally to the “linguistic” framework used to introduce management into the public sector.

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