Federal public administration reform in Belgium: new public management under deconstruction

G. Joris [1]

C. De Visscher [2]

C. Montuelle [3]

Introduction

Since the 1980s we assist at a co-evolutionary redefinition of social structures that its permanence contributes to legitimate it. In this perspective, the particularities of each modernities are put in an explicit perspective and raise question because they have lost their own evidence.[4] While industrial modernity is characterized by a discourse on stability, radical modernity is characterized by an information overload, an hyper-complexity, the emergence of a multidimensional uncertainty reinforced by the mergence of a multidimensional value configuration and social mobility.[5] In the field of public administration, all these elements converge towards the need to construct some form of post-bureaucratic or reflexive public civil service structured through flexible and open management instruments.[6]

Opening the decision making process and leaving room for negotiation during the implementation of rules, is quite a deep change in the administrative paradigm. The "New Public Management" (NPM) is presented to be part of this in-depth redefinition of public action, which tries to put administrative action in a systemic approach. This systemic vision induced a permanent move from the internal towards the external, and vice-versa, through negotiations, which contribute to open a performative space in which public action's instruments are built. These transformations impose a global shift in the cognitive, normative and instrumental frames as well as a power structure reconfiguration. At the same time, they also impose structural modifications, as well as practices and management tools (eg. agency theories).

Belgian administrations have not been excluded from this global redefinition movement. Through the Copernicus reform in 2000, federal public administrations have been shaped in order to implement NPM referential in structures as well as in practices. Furthermore, the Walloon region has also tried, through the emergence of agencies, to shape its civil service taking account of NPM theories. After investigating the NPM referential, we would like to highlight through empirical data, how the federal administrative reforms named "Copernicus", mainly influenced by the NPM philosophy, have been implemented in Belgium and how they have been structured in a pragmatic perspective. It was hypothesized that the introduction of performance oriented instruments should have impacted civil servants' identity, institutional relations between administration top-civil servants and politicians and the performance management system structuration. To assess these hypotheses, a survey has been performed among all the highest civil servants in the federal civil

[1] Aspirant FNRS – Drs. University of Liège, Belgium, Political Sciences Department, Scientific and Public Involvement in Risk Allocations Laboratory – SPIRAL, Boulevard du Rectorat, 7, Sart Tilman, B31, Bte 29, 4000 Liege, Belgium. Joris.geoffrey@ulg.ac.be
[2] Professor in Government and Public Management, Unité de science politique et de relations internationales –SPRI, Université Catholique de Louvain-la-neuve, Place Montesquieu, 1-7 B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. christian.devisscher@uclouvain.be
[3] Assistante de recherche, Unité de science politique et de relations internationales –SPRI, Université Catholique de Louvain-la-neuve, Place Montesquieu, 1-7 B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. caroline.montuelle@uclouvain.be
[4] Lee R., In search of second modernity: reinterpreting reflexive modernization in the context of multiple modernities, *Theory and Methods*, London, Vol. 47, n°1, 2008, p. 56 et suiv.
[5] Giddens A., *The consequence of modernity*, Polity, Cambridge, 1990.
[6] Beck U., Giddens A., Lash S., *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (Calf.), 1994.

service, though desk research and a survey of open and closed questions, and in-depth interviews with 10 presidents[7]. In the second part of the presentation, we propose a confrontation of the results of this reform assessment to the four criteria of reflexive administration which have been pointed out in a previous study dealing with regional public administration reforms in the specific environmental field.[8] These dimensions (relation to politics/politicians, communication, institutional device and management tools) appeared to be efficient tools to draw a comprehensive understanding of the reform processes operating at the regional level, particularly for challenging the NPM referential. [9] What is questioned is the NPM's idea that rational public instruments inspired from the private sector are an efficient answer to the modifications of social and cultural environment in which public action is supposed to be designed and implemented through some forms of re-modernization.[10]

1. The new public management theories: from heterogeneous origins to homogeneous instruments

New Public Management instruments and discourse were originally empirically developed. It all started about twenty years ago from the experiment in Great Britain under the Thatcher years, New Zealand and in the United States.[11] Since then they have been implemented by the majority of the OECD countries while reforming public administrations.[12] It was only in a second period, in the 90s, that these experiments were analyzed and theorized to form a new doctrine.[13] This new paradigm aimed to highlight and to understand in a comprehensive perspective and with hindsight, the rhetoric, the instruments and the practices induced and underlying public administrations reforms.[14]

Inspired by a market driven orientation, the NPM tends to transpose a liberal approach into public action.[15] The idea is that competitive dynamics and a search for responsibilities in structures as in organizational processes, are supposed to put an end to internal dysfunctions.[16] The idea is also to grant more weight to the "customers" and their satisfaction than to political requirements and requests.[17] Following these orientations, many instruments have been developed in order to

---

[7] The following results come from a larger project entitled " Assessing the Belgian mandate system from an international comparative perspective" directed by the following research team: Prof. Dr. Christian De Visscher, Prof. Dr. Annie Hondeghem, Karolien Van Dorpe and Caroline Montuelle. It is financed by the Federal public Service Science Policy (2008-2011).

[8] Fallon C., Joris G., L'administration dans un contexte de monderníté radicale: quand les instruments de gestion doivent devenir source de réflexivité, *Pyramides*, Septembre/2009, 2009, p. 1-17.

[9] Fallon C., Joris G. Zwetkoff C., Using stakeholders' expertise in EMF and soil contamination to improve the management of public policies dealing with modern risk: when uncertainty is on the agenda, *in* Safety, Reliability and Risk Analaysis, 2009/2, p. 1609-1617.

[10] Beck U., Bonss W., Lau C., 2003, "The theory of reflexive modernisation: problematic, hypotheses and research programme", Theory, Culture and Society, 20(2):1-33

[11] Aucoin P., Administrative reform in public management: paradigms, paradoxes and pendulums, *Governance*, n°3, 1990, p. 115-137.

[12] Politt C,. Bouckaert, *Public management reforms: a comparative analysis*, Oxford University press, Oxford, 2000.

[13] Merrien F.-X, La nouvelle gestion publique: un concept mythique, *Lien social et politiques*, n°41, 1999, p. 95-103.; Politt, *Managerialism and the public service. TheAnglo-American experience*, Blackxell, Oford, 1990.; Hood C., Contemporary public management: a new global paradigm?, *Public policy and administration*, Vol.10, n°2, 1995, p. 104-117.

[14] Pollitt C., Bouckaert G., *Public management reform - A comparative analysis*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

[15] Monks J., La nouvelle gestion publique: boîte à outils ou changement de paradigme?, in Hufty M., *La pensée comptable , Etat, Néolibéralisme, nouvelle gestion publique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1998, p. 77-89.

[16] De Visscher C. & Varone F., La Nouvelle Gestion Publique « en action », *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 2004, n° 2, pp. 177-185., De Visscher C., Stassart M., Fondements théoriques de l'introduction des contrats d'administration dans l'IPSS, *Revue belge de sécurité sociale*, 3/2005, 2005, p. 388.; OCDE, *Public management developments: survey 1993*, PUMA/OCDE, Paris, 1994.

[17] The administrative reforms seem currently to be granted in their own cultural, economical and political regime that interferes and shapes the reform's outcomes. It is well established and recognized that even if public administration reforms can be reduced to some shared variables, this does not exempt the researchers from highlighting the

translate into operational reforms the principles affirmed by the NPM, and to materialize the shift from the traditional Weberian understanding of public administration to what some does not hesitate to call a "post-bureaucratic" paradigm.[18]

Bureaucratic referential	NPM referential	NPM's instruments
To respect the primacy of politics/politicians within the democratic and administrative system.	To separate strategic decision making, which concerns the political power, from operational management, which is the administration's responsibility. To identify precisely the tasks from money providers, purchasers and public service providers.	Contracts Indicators of performance Time scale approach
The legal-rational principle, with primacy of politicians over administrative action, is suitable to respond in a transparent and equitable way to social demands.	To direct the administrative activities according to the products required (rather than procedural rules to follow as regards resource allocation for example).	Budget autonomy Analytical accountancy
Hierarchy is the most effective means to maintain a political control on public administrations and public organizations.	To reduce hierarchy, to reduce bureaucracy, to decentralize specific administrative tasks and to delegate management to the appropriate decision level (application of the principle of subsidiary).	Institutional innovations based on a strong understanding of autonomy, flexibility and responsibility (agency, mandates, contracts)
Hierarchy is the most effective means to guarantee a result driven management.	To introduce market driven mechanisms into the production processes of public goods and service.	Market driven restructuration of public monopolies
Efficiency, efficacy and transparency may be achieved by following unnegociable and predefined procedures.	Building instruments aiming to efficiency, efficacy and transparency.	Benchmarking on costs and productivity facilitated by an analytical accountancy
Predefined procedures are designed in order to guarantee equal access to public service as well as to encounter social demands.	To direct administrative services in a user driven orientation. Allowing social actors to take part in public action definition and assessment.	Quality driven management

Even if the NPM is mentioned in many disciplines (sociology, psychology, law…), it is mainly through economic theories that it finds its intellectual roots.[19] First of all, the NPM is influenced by "public choice" theories. This school emerged in the eighties, and has contributed to the restoration of liberal doctrines by the creation of a new approach to economics: the "neo-liberalism" school. The main idea of the new paradigm is, at a macro level, to recenter the market as a grounded theoretical and comprehensive approach of public behaviour, and to challenge Keynesian

specificities of his own case study. See for more details on this controversy Giauque D., *La bureaucratie libérale: nouvelle gestion publique et régulation organisationnelle*, l'Harmattan, Paris, 2003.

[18] Osborne A., Gaebler T., *Reinventing governement: how entrepreunarial spirit is transforming the public sector*, Reading, Addison-Wesley, M.A., 1992.

[19] Hood C., A public management for all seasons?, *Public administration*, Vol. 69, n°1, 1991, p. 3-19.

perspectives.[20] In the context of the welfare state, the idea was then to change the critics' focal point from the market (market failures) to the public sector (public failures). In a more micro analytical perspective, public choice theories have also drawn attention to the actors' strategies influenced by management instruments. In that perspective, according to public choice theory authors, public management instruments seem to support a "rise for expensiveness" due to the connection between political and administrative objectives. The final ambition of all these critics is then to create an "opportunity window" in order to legitimate public administrative reforms through the integration of new public instruments driven by a market approach.

The NPM also finds its origins in a set of innovative theories about companies and firms which emerged through criticisms of the classical theories of "companies", understood as a social organization, with authors like as Baumol, Simon, Leibenstein, Cybert or March. These authors try, by deconstructing organizations, to explain in a market-driven context the social mechanisms shaping social behaviours. They attempt to escape from conventional approaches that perceive companies as a "black box".[21] Baumol built his approaches from the separation between shareholders and managers, and tended to highlight the possible divergences of interests between these two actors who are, however, bound to interact through the organization's control. He identifies that the managers' incomes and prestige depend more on total sales turnover than on profit. In doing so, he tried to draw the managers' strategies for maximizing the total sales turnover and consecutively shaping managerial instruments. However, if this strategy seems to be appropriate to managers, it also contributes to the creation of a gap between managers and shareholders, who are driven more by profits than by the total sales turnover. This gap contributes to the structuration of a conflict that theories of "governance" were supposed to regulate.[22] Simon, meanwhile, has pointed out the mechanisms according to which entrepreneurs act not in terms of absolute but rather of relative rationality ("limited rationality"). The decisions taken are then judged as satisfactory rather than optimal. Simon thus substituted the concept of maximization with the concept of satisfaction.[23] The latter will then become the foundation of neo-classical theories. Leibenstein highlights that organizations with similar resources and constraints can deliver of relatively different results. Without clearly being able to highlight the variables generating this phenomenon, he allots to the quality of the internal organization (factor X) the differences in terms of effectiveness.[24] Studying this "internal organization", Cyert and March develop a behavioural approach aiming at presenting companies as social coalitions whose logics of stabilization are built around imposed objectives from managers. According to them, individuals seek to carry out objectives in association with other individuals. Individuals tend then to act as organized groups in competition with each other in order to maximize organizational resources.[25] Finally according to Chandler, the company is above all an economic organization and has to be understood from that viewpoint. From this position companies' strategies appears different from market logics. Indeed, firms are opposed to the market in substituting administrative coordination with commercial coordination, and in instituting a hierarchical and centralized system.[26]

Finally, but more fundamentally, the NPM finds its origins into managerialism theories built by Taylor, Follet or Drucker. This theory tries to explain how structures and practices of management, by the deconstruction of bureaucratisation, are likely to induce the improvement of a goal-oriented

[20] Hufty M., Aux racines de la pensée comptable, in Hufty M., *La pensée comptable, Etat, néolibéralisme, nouvelle gestion publique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1998, p. 23 et suivantes.

[21] Cabin P., *Les nouvelles théories économiques de l'entreprise*, in Cabin P. (Ed.), Les organisations. Etat des savoirs, Sciences Humaines Editions, Paris, 1999, P; 107 et suivantes.

[22] Baumol W., *The Free-Market Innovation Machine*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002.

[23] Simon H., *Models of bounded rationality: Behavioral economics and business organization*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1982.

[24] Leibenstein H., *Inside The Firm: The Inefficiencies Of Hierarchy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987.

[25] Cyert R., March J., *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, Wiley-Blackwell, New-York, 1992.

[26] Chandler A., *Stratégies et structures de L'entreprise*, Organsiation, Paris, 1989.

management.[27] Moreover, these authors show that, as for all organizations, there is a set of activities that can be understood as purely instrumental and appear to be usable by the public as well as the private sector.[28] Indeed, for these authors, as far as management is concerned, the differences between public sector and private sector are insignificant.

All these approaches have been translated into management instruments while stressing explicitly product, result and performative rates realized through preshaped programs facilitating a rationalization of human resources management and a permanent monitoring. The NPM is then built against bureaucratic logics and tries to distinguish itself from a public administration based on standard/norms, procedures and regulation.[29]

2. The Copernicus reform: from NPM reforms to impact assessment

2.1. Copernic reform: aims and tools

In 2000, the Belgian Federal Government launched the Copernicus reform. The reform's objectives were to redefine the Belgian administrative system in terms of organizational structures[30] as well as in term of human resources management. In order to do so, the minister in charge preferred to mobilize external expertise (consultants) rather than internal expertise (Bureau ABC). The idea was to take advantage of an external perspective as well as to "ventilate" public administration's expertise that was perceived as subjective and reluctant to change.

The reform's output aimed to relinquish top-civil servants' life tenure mandate in favour of fixed term contracts (6 years renewable). The designations in "management functions" became temporary and renewable at the condition of the total achievement of contract's obligations. In return, the latter is supposed to get more autonomy to manage the services he/she is in charge of.

Administrative structure of Belgian federal administration [31]
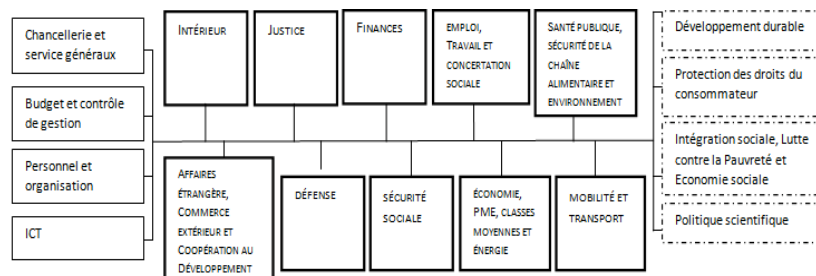
The working relationship between the Minister and the top civil servant holding a management function is organized on the basis of "management plans" [32]. These plans are used as reference

---

[27] Aucoin P., Administrative reform in public management: paradigms, principles, paradoxes and pendulum, *Governance*, Vol. 3, n°2, 1999, p. 117-118.

[28] Coriat B., Weinstein O., *Les nouvelles théories de l'entreprise*, Librairie Générale Française, Paris, 1995, p. 79.

[29] Hall P.A. (Dir.), *The political power of economic ideas. Keynesianism across nations*, Princeton University press, Princeton, 1989., Foucarde_Gourinchas M., Les économistes et leurs discours. Traditions nationales et science universelle, *Science de la société*, n°55, 2002, p.22-39.

[30] Following the Copernicus reform (1999-2003), the ministries have given way to "Federal Public Services" (FPS), ten vertical and four horizontal. The first are responsible for the operational competences in different areas of the public action of the State (Justice, Social Affairs ...), the horizontal FPS have a mission of strategic thinking, and a support and coordinating activity, vis-à-vis vertical FPS in the following areas: budget development and management, human resources, use of new information technologies and communications, and the overall coordination of services. The term « department » will also refer to Federal Public Service in this document.

[31] Source : Service public fédéral Personnel et Organisation (2003)

[32] These plans include at least the description of the following (Article 11 of the Royal Decree of 29 October 2001): "1 ° the definition of general management tasks incumbent upon the holder of the office of management and its obligations;
2 ° the strategic objectives to be achieved by him and his obligations;

documents in the evaluation of top civil servants and in the possible renewal of their mandate. The mandate may indeed be terminated if the civil servant's performance is judged to be insufficient. A more complete assessment is made at the end of the mandate. The Minister takes part in the evaluation process for top civil servants in the two higher levels (CEO and DG).

The management plans now exist in all federal public services, but the content and accuracy of this document varies greatly from one department to the other. It nevertheless plays a fundamental role for the evaluation of civil servants.[33]

Finally, the reform intended to change the rules on administrative and budgetary control (accountability). The idea was to move towards an *ex post* focus on risks, based on internal control and audit, instead of *ex ante* controls perceived as too focused on inputs. As we will show, even though the reform was implemented, its results seem to be still unreached.[34]

2.2. Copernicus assessed: from compliance to the rules to the control of performance

The Copernicus reform was supposed to be more than a cosmetic reform. The main idea was to reshape the structures as well as the cultural divides of civil servants. Even though cultural shifts have to be assessed in a long term perspective, we tried to put into perspectives, nine years after the reform, what has already changed. In that perspective the idea is to highlight the trends that structure the shifts that occurred and to point out what has already taken place. More specifically, we will structure our analysis on three main dimensions that have appeared to be relevant while understanding the public administrative reform in Belgium: the construction of civil servants profile, the institutional relations between civil servant head officers and politicians, and finally the implementation of a goal-oriented management.

As far as personal top-civil servants' profiles are concerned, we have found that there has been a slight evolution of the diversity and composition of the population of top civil servant compared to 10 years ago. The number of female top civil servants has slightly increased and the average age of the senior civil servants has a bit fallen. This decrease was mainly at the DG-level. There is therefore a small evolution in that matter. Nevertheless, there are little changes regarding the educational background compared to past observations. At the level of the presidents, we can mostly find social sciences degrees in addition to the economic and law degrees. In 2009, two presidents come directly from the private sector. These observations may be considered as a progress as attracting actors from the private sector to the public sector was one of the main refom's objectives. Prior to the reform, hiring externals (from the wider public sector or private sector) was indeed impossible.

With the introduction of performance driven tools, we expected that an increasing concern about performance would induce a shift in civil servants' identity. We actually expected to find fewer bureaucrats, and more managers and/or leaders.[35] We have therefore created a meaningful scale to measure how much the presidents can be described regarding different roles. The roles which scale the highest are those of 'professional' and 'leader'. Just below we can find 'bureaucrat' and 'policy adviser'. Although this score is lower than the one of manager, the difference is smaller than expected. There is thus once again only a slight evolution in that matter.

When we asked the presidents to choose a role that best suits them; we obtain an almost equal distribution between managers and leaders, with a slight predominance for the managers. Therefore regarding their own interpretation of their functions we can identify a change. In the same perspective, as top-civil servants are now personally in charge of their department's performance

---

3 ° operational objectives to be achieved by him and his obligations;

4 ° the allocated budget. "

[33] Sys, J. P., Managementplannen in de federale overheid als instrument van strategisch management. Leuven. KULeuven – Instituut voor de Overheid, Leuven, 2007.

[34] Auwers, T., *Eppur si mouve.* Brussel: Federale Overheidsdienst Sociale Zekereid, Bruxelles, 2007.

[35] Rizzo, John R., House, Robert J, and Lirtzman, Sidney I., Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 15, 1970, 150-162.

and that the renewal of their mandate is directly linked to that performance, we hypothesized that top civil servants shifted their identification from the macro level (the federal government) to the meso level (their department). The empirical data seem to support this hypothesis. Just slightly more than half of the Presidents identify themselves with his/her own department. It is, however to be noted that most of their secondary identification remains the federal government.

The results seem to go in the same direction as far as the institutional relation is concerned. Actually, as the Copernicus reform allowed structurally more operational autonomy to managers, it was assumed that the top civil officers institutional relations (with the minister and his/her personal staff, with horizontal departments, with the parliament or with interest groups) should have been affected. If our research has shown a shift, this last one has to be put into perspective. Despite an improvement pointed by several presidents and confirmed by a comparison with the situation in 2002, the civil servant still generally works exclusively in coordination with the political personal staff and/or the minister.[36] The manager is though perceived as a support for the decision and is not recognized as a full governing body, including in the implementation phase. However, our observations show that most presidents have now frequent interactions with interest groups. They also consider that there is greater accessibility for civil society compared to ten years ago. However, contact with pressure groups is only restricted to politics for politically sensitive or media-related questions. This last result, even though it may appears to be quite insignificant, is in our perspective quite important. Actually, it shows a shift in the administrative communication regime. Top-civil servants are not anymore "forced" to communicate in an exclusive manner with the minister or his/her staff. Top-civil servants are now allowed to interact with social actors, stakeholders or civil society's representatives in order to construct public action schemes. In this perspective, an effort to open up the decision making process has been made and seems to contribute to a more reflexive public administration.

Regarding the relations with the horizontal departments, it was expected that the management plans would have allowed civil servants to gain in autonomy. The results here are also contrasted. Horizontal departments are often considered ambiguously as controlling bodies and as supporting bodies. We can though conclude to a stabilization rather that a shift with regards to the *a posteriori* controls on the global framing of resources. Many prior controls are still in use and *a posteriori* controls are very seldom used. For instance, the internal control system and internal audit have to be seen more as a phantasmagoric aim that a realistic and pragmatic result.

With the introduction of contractualisation, it was assumed to transform the political and administrative responsibility regime by creating a shift from the minister to top-civil servants. But such a shift has not occurred and top-civil servants do not consider themselves as in charge of any responsibilities while conducting their actions. We therefore remain in a purely Weberian conception of ministerial responsibility. In that perspective, this is though not surprising that, despite a relative increase in the autonomy given to presidents in the management of their department, senior civil servants assume that there is still a space for improvement. However, besides the Copernicus reform it appears that some improvements have been made in order to guarantee more autonomy to top-civil servants. Actually, since 1996 social security administrations are managed through managerial contracts rather than a "management plan" (that cannot be understood as a juridical instrument).

With regards to management instruments, our results seem also to be contrasted. There is some significant shift to performance but the shift to monitoring instruments underlying such a managerial approach seems to be almost absent. To analyse this shift, we assessed the four phases of the performance management cycle applied to the management plans. For the first phase of the performance cycle, the planning phase, we can conclude that there is a shift from a control on the rules towards control on performance. There are management plans drawn up. They typically have the approval of the minister and they include specific objectives, with or without linked measurable

---

[36] De Visscher, C., Le Bussy, G., & Eymeri, J.-M., *La relation entre l'autorité politique et la haute administration,* Academia Press, Gent, 2004.

indicators. In the second phase, the follow-up phase, we found that the management plan has been a useful instrument. These results are discussed in the Executive committee and published in the form of an annual report. In the third phase, if the evaluation takes place, its practical effect is strongly dependent on the goodwill of the minister who is supposed to evaluate the top civil servant. We have also seen that performance indicators play an important role in the evaluation, although not in all cases. Finally, we are concerned about the very high percentage of «very good» evaluations received in the first round of final evaluations. That predominance of very positive evaluations raises indeed some questions regarding the effective use of the evaluation as way to control the real performance of the top civil servant. Finally, as far as the fourth phase is concerned, the impact of evaluation is ambiguous: there is no form of performance related pay, but there are other consequences to the evaluation. Indeed, the result of the evaluation's outcome plays a determinant role in the president's renewal.

From this assessment exercise, we can draw the following conclusion: if the Copernicus reform has been aimed to introduce a shift in the way public administration was perceived, built and lived, our research tends to put into perspective the success of such a reform. Even though some trends of change can be point out, it seems that the reforms' objectives still remain to be encountered.

3. Discussion: Designing a comprehensive understanding of federal administrative reform in Belgium

NPM referential and instruments have been implemented with limited success at the federal level. If the previous results allow us to draw some meaningful analysis of the federal public reforms by highlighting the outcomes of such a reform, it does not illustrate why such outcomes may have occurred. In order to do so, we would like to mobilize four variables that have been identified and mobilized in a previous research dealing with the construction of a comprehensive approach of regional public administration reform in Belgium.[37] These last ones were: to organize the relation of the administration to politics, to carry out a reflexion in term of management tools, to put the communication policy as a focal point in the reform process and finally to carry out a reflexion on the institutional frames and conditions while carrying a reform process. These variables, far from being elements isolated from/to each other, have to be combined in order to contribute to a comprehensive approach of what we could named as a "managerial synergy" operating and structuring public administrative reforms.

3.1. Organizing the relation of the administration to politics

The study of the regional administrative reforms seems to us to plead for a relative autonomy of public agencies to politics/politicians. This autonomy seems to ensure the effectiveness and the efficiency of public organisations management.[38] However, that does not mean that no control over these structures can/should be organized. Indeed, autonomy has to be understood as an advantage, which politicians cannot grant without any compensations.[39] This "conditioned" independence is embedded at the regional level by the introduction of a "contract" between one minister and a specific agency in charge of a specific policy. This contract has to be seen first of all as an act of recognition of the autonomy of the agency but also as an instrument as well as constraint and defence.

---

[37] Fallon C., Joris G., L'administration dans un contexte de modernité radicale: quand les instruments de gestion doivent devenir source de réflexivité, *Pyramides*, Septembre/2009, 2009, p. 1-17.

[38] Aberbach J. A., Putnam R.D., Rockman B.A., *Bureaucrats and politicians in western democracies*, Harvard University press, Cambridge, 1981.; Peters B.G., Pierre J., *Politicians, bureaucrats and administrative reform*, Routledge, New-York, 2001., Hood C., Lodge M., *The politics of public service bargains: reward, competency, loyality and blame*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

[39] Christensen T., Laegreid P., *New public management. The transformation of ideas and practices*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002.

However, while identifying the roles, the contract makes possible to negotiate the actors' spheres of activity and to legitimate them. In this perspective the management plan becomes not only a moment but also a space to interest and enrol actors in a co-constructed realty. The contract is then the opportunity to identify and to distribute between the actors the tasks. It makes possible to clearly determine in a co-constructive and deliberative process who is in charge of the strategic decisions (political role) and those who are in charge of executive decision (administrative role). In practice the negotiation allows to define and design a responsibility regime and to limit the possible interferences that generate effectiveness and efficiency costs. In this perspective, the contract intends to offer a structural answer to the "resources dependence paradigm" that usually public agencies have to face while dealing with the political sphere.[40] Indeed, the environment in which public agencies have to interact constitutes a constraint on the organisational action design. The contract makes possible to negotiate these constraints and offers to the organization a sphere of autonomy that allows the institutions (understood as a social organization) to structure their action and to ensure the quality of it.[41] In this context, the contract's negotiation ensures the redefinition of public action frames by taking into account the contingencies or the political constrains. By doing so, it contributes to ensure an adequacy between a search to rationalize resources and to achieve strategic objectives.

As governing public action through contracts is one of the main idea of NPM, it is not surprising to find such contracts at federal level. However, it takes more precisely the form of management plans that is conducted between the minister and the top-manager. If these management plans are negotiated, they cannot be understood as a "contract" in the juridical understanding of this concept. The idea of a "management plan" linked to an evaluative process and conditioning the renewal of the top-civil servant mandate can be understood as linked to the contractual referential. However, through our assessment, it appeared that theses objectives still remain. Even though, theses plans are concluded and seem to play an important role in the administrative cognitive day-to-day approaches, it appears quite obviously that they do not contribute to the top-civil servants' autonomy. Moreover, the plan, if it has allowed a focusing on results, has not induced a shift in the personality profile of civil servants nor has it contributed to the settlement of an autonomy sphere between the minister, his cabinet and the managers. Moreover, multiple versions of management plans were produced and have contributed to cause confusion among top-civil servants as well as civil servants at all the level of the organization).[42]

3.2. Carrying out a reflexion in term of management tools

Managing autonomous organisms cannot be drawn without set up instruments entitled to build, convey and monitor the direction taken by the organization. These instruments have as main task to avoid any "ambiguity of success"[43] or any "traps of competence[44]. By doing so these instruments aim not only at identifying the mobilized frames in the organization but also at supporting their diffusion, their comprehension and finally the actors' enrollment. Once again, managing by "contract" facilitates a more effective resources management and facilitates the constant search for quality.

In the same way, since the idea of contract makes sense only if it is embedded in an evaluative and comprehensive approach, the contract enables to generate a training in "double loops" allowing to control and monitor behaviours since what is accepted as a appropriated behaviour has been defined in the contract. Indeed, the double loop effect forces the system to question its own hypotheses and

[40] Pfeffer J., Salancik G.R., *The external control of organization: a ressource dependence perspective*, New-York., Harper & Row, 1978.
[41] Politt C., Talbot C., Caulfield J., *Agencies: how governments do things through semi-autonomous organizations*, Palgrave/MacMillan, London, 2004.
[42] Interview, P&O - Belgian federal administration - Human resource management – Former member ABC, Brussels 12 avril 2008.
[43] Hatch M. J., *Théories des organisations*, De Boeck Université, Coll. Management, Bruxelles 2007, p. 388.
[44] Hatch M. J., *Théories des organisations*, De Boeck Université, Coll. Management, Bruxelles 2007, p. 388-389.

the values underlining the actors' action. By doing so, what is at stake is actually the permanent redefinition of the organisation in itself. [45]

The Copernicus reform failed to integrate in its totality the NPM concept. Only, social security administrations, that have a contract supposed to give to managers autonomy, seem to have integrated this dimension. If this system is historically and politically constructed and have is own "raison d'être", its recent assessment seems to point out some difficulties to achieve such a partnership between a minister and managers even though they are seen and presented as "essential tools for public management".[46]

It is assumed that some changes are going to occur in a near future. In fact, even though the success of the "administration contracts" appears to be quite contrasted, the actual minister has officially made known that she had the intention to generalize the administration contract to all federal administration.[47] The idea is quite innovative. This initiative would deeply change the actual system that has been settled down so far by the Copernicus reform. It would also lead to a deep change in the way federal public administrations in Belgium are understood, since the latter would no longer be understood as central organizations but would rather be understood as agencies, quite innovative for traditional public services. We assume however that this system would be of some importance on our first variable: the relation between administration and minister. However, this relies on a strong politic motivation that still needs to be confirmed.

3.3. Putting the communication policy as a focal point in the reform process

Communication, external as internal, is a new function for public administrations that tends to take very important proportions (in regards of financial and temporal resources). However, it is often mobilized as a traditional tool without any reflexion on its use, its direction or on the context in which it takes place. It seems however essential to understand the stakes and the importance of such a policy for the organization. It is then advisable to determine a new paradigm for communication that would exceed functionalist and interpretativists approaches. Indeed, if the functionalist ones advance that the institutions may be understood as an "open systems" since they form a organized machinery oriented to specific and determined objectives, they are composed of multiple samples that are in the same time influenced and have influence on the environment in which the are implemented. The interpretativists propose the idea that the institutions can also be understood as an intellectual construction whose perception influence the motivation, the coherence and the actors' productivity who compose the organization. According to us, these two interpretations far from being opposite have to be seen and understood as complementary.[48] Actually, the combination of theses two interpretations is unavoidable and it forces the administrators to perceive more precisely what is at stake in the communication process. Such an understanding forces the administrator to design and implement the communication policies in order to reach it fundamentals objectives: to make known, to render comprehensive and promote adhesion to the agency's referential.

Once again, the Copernicus reform seems to have reached contrasted results with regards to this dimension. Concerning the internal communication, the results seem rather negative. Actually, in order to have a deep change in the public service referential, the minister preferred to mobilize external expertise (consultants) rather than mobilizing internal expertise (Bureau ABC). By doing so, the project of having a federal administration reform built in a bottom-up approach, while facilitating social acceptability and legitimacy of the reform, has been cut off form the beginning. This trend has been reinforced through an exponential multiplication of the number of management plans that resulted in an actors' demobilization from the redefinition of the administration's action.

---

[45] Hatch M. J., *Théorie des organisations*, De Boeck, Paris, Coll. Management, 2007, p. 390.

[46] Rapport de la Cour des comptes, Les contrats d'administration des institutions publiques de sécurité sociale, Bruxelles, Mars 2005.

[47] Accord de gouvernement du 18/3/2008, Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 21/42008, réf. Doc 52 0995/021.

[48] Fallon C., Joris G., Entre gestion de crise et vigilance : quand les médias et l'administration publique sont appelés à construire un référentiel partagé, *Communication et Organisation*, 2009, p. 1-10.

With regard to external communication, the results are not more obvious. In 2000, in order to gain some public support towards the reforms of public administrations, a questionnaire was distributed on a national scale. The idea of this questionnaire was to launch a communicative and informative program. The document had been designed as an open questionnaire that let think that the options were still open and that citizens would be able to play an active role in the administrative reform. A low response rate to this questionnaire put to an end to the idea of a large social initiative.[49] By doing so, politicians and reformers have not only produced an ambiguity in the reform process but contributed to a unsettlement of public trust in public administration reforms with an incumbent weakening of public action.[50] Actually, the question of expertise, and their integration in public action, is quite an important one in terms of legitimation process.[51] Of course, using an open decision making process will inevitably affect the incumbent balance of powers between the stakeholders. The process is no more understood only as linear and sequential but as an iterative co-construction procedure based on a negotiation with different actors sharing different world-views. "Opening up" moments are necessary to consider the diversity of evaluative frameworks and document the governance process within a learning dynamics. These are moments of "informed dissensus". "Closing down" steps are thereafter legitimately subjects to contestation of the chosen scenario. If the procedure is designed to provide an adequate sequence of opening up's / closing down's, it should deliver substantially robust and socially tolerable outcomes.[52]

Concretely, the promotion of interdisciplinary knowledge and the implementation of deliberative governance principles mobilize new sets of tools. Shifting from a scientifically and politically legitimated discourse fitted into a bureaucratic procedure towards a more pragmatic management rationale and "opened up" interactions needs to address the questions about the feasibility (barriers, constraints) and the utility (costs and benefits) of the new approach. These points should be discussed and answered by all the parties – political actors, experts, public administrations, stakeholders and civil society representatives – in order to design new risk management practices.

Even though it appears quite clearly that Belgian federal administration is not (yet) able to deal efficiently with these questions, it however appears in our assessment some shift with top-civil servants' dealing with stakeholders, NGO or citizens. Actually, it appears that the top-civil servant not only have more contact with these actors but are also more open to integrated their expertise, view-points or demands in the decision making processes. This contributes unquestionably to build a reflexive public action referential.

3.4. Carrying out a reflexion on the institutional conditions of a reform process

While conducting an analysis of the Copernicus reform it appears quite clearly that this reform failed to perceive public institution as a social system differentiated with precise behaviours directed towards the processing of a social problem, characterized by standards, values, particular criteria organizing the access to the resources, as well as sets of sanctions which help ensure the permanence of the borders and the legitimacy of the differentiated system. In that perspective, a public institution can be maintained only if the social context supports it and allots resources to it. When the context changes, the institution must adapt itself. It has to transform its internal structure and renegotiate its identity as well as its boundaries by taking into account the appropriate regime of legitimation. Transforming administrative practices is not an easy matter to achieve because

---

[49] Pollitt C., Bouckaert G., Public management reform – A comparative analysis, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 217.
[50] Hondegehem A. & Depré R., *De Copernicushervorming in perspectief*, Vanden Broele, Brugge, 2005, p. 417-435.; Cooper C.A., Knotts H.G., Brennan K.M., The importance of trust in government for public administration: the case of Zoning, *Public Administration Review*, May/June 2008, p. 459-467.
[51] Warin P., Les services publics: modernisation, découverte de l'usager et conversion libérale, *in* Warin P. (Dir.), *Quelle modernisation des services publics? Les usagers au coeur des réformes*, La Découverte, Paris, 1997, p. 81-101.
[52] Stirling A., Opening up or closing down? Analysis, participation and power in the social appraisal of technology *in* Leach et al. (eds), *Science and Citizens: Globalization and the Challenge of Engagement*, Zed Books, London, 2005, p.218-231.

these institutions' "raisons d'être" are after all to reduce uncertainty. However any change creates uncertainty. Stability thus is more encouraged than change. However, preserving idiosyncratic practices can appear expensive at the cognitive level, (loss of the direction), in regards to material resources (access to the resources is more difficult) or may endanger the actors' trust. If the institutions change, it is because the actors favoured in the old configuration undergo a redefinition of their power within the organization, or because the institution undergoes an exogamic shock. To understand institutional change researchers are then forced to take into account the exogenous as well as the endogenous factors.

It is also advisable to apprehend the dynamics of the institutional change through its transfers and its crises, privileging an approach focused on the processes of construction and of rupture of compromise between the various actors, that have to be understood as essential "do-it-yourself" for the revision of formal rules and the adoption of new practices.

Di Maggio and Powell[53] identify three mechanisms of institutional transformation: by the constraint, by the circulation of new practices, or by the professional transformation of the actors. The last one has the advantage of resting on the reinforcement of capacity of the actors by dynamics of professionalization. It creates a professional *ethos* that is resulting from transmitted and imitated practices, formal rules, standards and from a conventional framework, which allow justification.[54] Such an optic requires also a major investment in the transformation of the administrative processes and a renegotiation of the distribution of competences and responsibilities. The role of actors is paramount to take into account because they are the change's carriers. It is then advisable to pay attention to the "appropriated" personality profiles in order to avoid all "superstitious training" generating a dephasing between leader actors, civil servants and structures. In this perspective, the Copernicus reform's assessment shows quite clearly that by artificially focusing on constrain mechanisms, the reform failed to set up a new professional *ethos* for top-civil servants. The latter is however inevitable in order to transform an bureaucratic organization in a flexible administration, contextualized and pluralist, and sufficiently coordinated to guarantee the continuation of the public service missions in a reinforced complexity.

4. Conclusions: NPM as a myth

As Merrien had already pointed out,[55] from the success and failure of the Copernicus reform two elements may contribute to construct a critical understanding of the NPM instruments. First, the Copernicus reform assessment attracts the attention to the perverse effects that such reforms can generate. Second such an assessment intends to attract the attention to a more fundamental dimension since it invites the researcher to question the ambitions of the reforms designed under the NPM label. Actually, if the majority of administrative reforms undertaken in the OECD countries since 1990's sought to build public action on the basis, the assessments carried out on these reforms tend to question the capacity of NPM's tools to reach the objectives that they have contributed to set up.[56] It is then advisable to admit the low capacity of market driven instruments to seek effectiveness at least in the public sector. While some instruments (such as the contract) were assessed positively, their successes fall short to counterbalance the perverse effects generated by others.

From these two critics, we assume that the Copernicus reform weakens the administrative actors' capacity to see their responsibility engaged whether it is towards their minister, towards parliament or towards citizens. The incapacity of the latter to take part in the construction of the administrative reform appears to be a crucial point in the failure of the reform. In these circumstances the

---

[53] Di Maddio P. J., Powell W., « The Iron Case Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields », *American Sociological Review*, Columbus, vol.48, n°2, 1983, p. 147-160.
[54] Boltanski L., Thévenot L., *De la justification*, Gallimard, Coll. Essais, Paris, 1991.
[55] Merrien F.X., La nouvelle gestion publique: un concept mythique, *Lien social et Politiques*, n°41, 1999, p. 95-103.
[56] Bouckaert G., Techniques de modernisation et modernisation des techniques: évaluaer la modernisation de la gestion publique, *in* Rouban L., *Le service public en devenir*, L'Harmattan, Coll. Logiques Politiques, Paris, 2000, p. 107-127.

administrative authorities are in the incapacity to face the new plurality of the requests, that they must manage anyway. This situation creates then an ambiguous interaction between the public action planification and the necessity to adapt this last one to the specific circumstances.[57] From this point of view, the NPM's mistake is to set up instruments that force the top-civil servants to direct their action exclusively towards results. By doing this, top-civil servants do not anymore consider the new social requests (more transparency, plurality, demands for participation…) like fundamental questions for public action. We then attend a paradoxical situation in which, whereas the performance of public administrations improve (in quantititative term), the extent of the social question intensifies. The administrative reform, whereas its principal objective was to support public action legitimacy, tends to discredit and consequently to weaken the public action legitimacy. The Copernicus reform appears consequently as a good example of this paradox. Indeed, the Copernicus reform makes possible to highlight the differential which can exist between the importance of the objectives or the stakes underlying the administrative reforms and the weakness of the results that they induce. In this perspective, the NPM, by artificially focusing on instruments, tend to forget that the quality assessment of management processes should be investigated by the process itself rather than by its outcome, as in the long run, good decision-making processes are more likely to generate good outcomes.[58] Consecutively, we would agree, that the NPM can be understood as a myth, as Gusdorff has pointed out [59], since it maintains, independently of the obvious failures of its instruments, an anthropomorphic, cosmomorphic and theomorphic truth. [60] If the mythology of the NPM is still applied in the OECD countries it seems to us that can be explained by two reasons. The first would be that, as NPM cannot be understood as frontal neo-liberal revolution, it avoids strong social counter-mobilization.[61] But the tools of the NMP still find partisans because the managerial reforms are less visible than other types of reforms and have the advantage of reversing the responsibility's locus from the political actors to the top-civil servants or the administration perceived as a whole.[62] This is why the NPM techniques were and still are the main reference frames while reforming the Welfare state.[63] These techniques appear as the focal point of a coherent corpus of thought whose main goal is to present their solutions or their referential as naturally the most obvious compared to traditional solutions. The NPM's partisans techniques justify their position on the basis of a list of "good practices" resulting from case study in which their instruments are presented as making a difference between the success and the failure of a public administration reform. The prevalence of these instruments is then ensured by the construction of a set of concepts that are supposed to act as ideograms but whose senses remain obscure for the actors who mobilize them.[64] These ideograms, if their purpose is not to highlight what has to be understood as "true" or what has to be understood as "bad", are however thought as strategic tools to interest and enrol actors in a shared worldview. By doing so, NPM techniques and concepts try to offer to public actors the idea of a perfect unity between public and private sector. However, if public and private actors may have some constrains in common, they appear quite differentiated in reference to public responsibility toward social demands. The idea that rational public instruments, inspired from the private sector, are an efficient answer to the modifications of the social and cultural environment in which public action is supposed to be designed and

[57] Thévenot L., L'action en plan, *Sociologie du travail*, n°3/95, 1995, p.411-434.

[58] Keren G., Bruine de Bruin W., On the Assessment of Decision Quality:Considerations Regarding Utility, Conflict and Accountability, *in* Hardman et al. (eds) *Thinking: Psychological Perspectives on Reasoning, Judgment and Decision Making*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2003, p. 347-363.

[59] Gusdorf G., *La révolution galiléenne*, Payot, Paris, 1969.

[60] In this perspective, the NPM go beyond the concept of "paradigm" or "referential".

[61] Pierson P., *Dismantling the welfare state? Reagan, Tatcher and the politics of retrenchment*, Cambridge Universiy Press, Cambridge, 1994.

[62] Weaver K., Rockman B., *Do institutions matter? Government capacities in the US and abroad*, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1993.

[63] Gow J.I., Is the new public mangament a paradigme? Does it matter?, *International administrative sciences*, Vol. 66, 2000, p. 573-597.

[64] Aucoin P., Administrative reform in public management: paradigms, paradoxes and pendulums, *Governance*, n°3, 1993, p. 115-137.

implemented appears to be inadequate. The Copernicus reform seems, in this perspective, quite evident. It illustrates the possible tensions between the concomitant search for quality and search for efficiency in public action. It helps us to understand that by offering the same answer to different crises (public action legitimacy crises, trust in public action crises and institutionalized expertise crises), it leads to an artificial focusing on instruments. The latter contributes consecutively to a public action centralization that paradoxically contributes to public action weakening.