INNOVATION AND LIPSE: AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT OF AN INNOVATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

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'The Stone Age didn't end because they ran out of stones' (Anonymous)

Preamble

As a member of the LIPSE Advisory Board my job is to be a friendly critic – to offer advice and support, standing somewhat at a distance from the day-to-day labours which the researchers themselves are engaged with. It is in that spirit that I gratefully accept this opportunity to make an address to your first conference.

Innovation: a dangerous concept

Innovation is a dangerous concept for social scientists who study government and governance. That is because it is both conceptually unstable and normatively loaded.

In terms of its meanings, it is one of those 'magic concepts' that has been defined and operationalised in many different ways (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011). 'Innovation' may include different stages and different degrees and scales of change – different authors have used and continue to use the term with significantly different meanings (Godin, 2015; Pollitt, 2011, pp35-36). And the 45-word LIPSE definition of social innovation is itself, to be frank, a bit of a mouthful, with many sub-clauses and dimensions, and posing huge problems for operationalisation (Voorberg et al, 2014). I do hope that one of LIPSE's achievements will be the formulation and use of a straightforward and operationalisable definition of innovation which can be used repeatedly in comparative research in different sectors and countries. A project with the size and scope of LIPSE has the opportunity to influence the debate in the direction of some standardization of terminology that will allow greater replication in research.

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Furthermore innovation is normative in that it is almost always 'a good thing'- impossible to oppose, always to be encouraged (Barry, 2001). This has long been the case, but its apparent desirability has risen still further with the advent of fiscal austerity in most European public sectors. Many politicians and some senior officials have tried to use 'innovation' rhetorically, as a saving grace whereby the pain and unpopularity of public spending cuts can be alleviated by the prospect of semi-miraculous innovations within and beyond public sector organizations. One sign of this, internationally, has been the minor epidemic of new government units and agencies devoted to promoting innovation (see, e.g. Ministry of Finance, 2013; Mulgan, 2009, pp57-58).

A further danger factor is the way in which the concept emerged from the private sector western business literature (where, back in the 1980s, 'innovation' was proposed as yet another western antidote to the increasing competitiveness of other regions of the world). It then crossed over into the public sector, and subsequently became an object of political fashion. This was the same route followed by other business ideas, including Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) and Lean. Some of the lessons from the trajectories of these other (temporarily) magic ideas would be that there are no general panaceas, that context matters very much and that public sector contexts are frequently significantly different from those in the private sector - especially from private sector manufacturing - but also from each other (Pollitt, 2003; 2013; Radnor and Osborne, 2013). So it would be extremely risky simply to look at some examples of private sector innovation and draw a series of best practice bullet points that were supposed to apply right across public sectors - although that is what some writers nevertheless try to do.

Finally as one leading historian of science and technology vividly reminds us, we all need to remain aware of the dangers of an 'innovation-centric' perspective (Edgerton, 2007). It is seductively easy to allow all sorts of misleading assumptions to creep in. Among these are those that economic growth has been correlated with national or corporate investment in invention and research and development (it hasn't); or that it is the original 'invention' phase that is commonly most important in the eventual success or failure of an innovation (often much later stages are crucial); or that the really big breakthroughs usually come from complex, high-tech innovations (whereas from an innovations-in-use perspective many of the crucial advances have been low or medium-tech, and local). Last but not least, Edgerton shows how innovation is far from always being positive: the twentieth and twenty first centuries have seen many innovations in technologies for controlling, repressing, imprisoning, torturing and killing our fellow human beings. Innovation definitely has its dark side.

LIPSE and innovation: the promise

In many ways LIPSE has made a strong start (see especially the compendius first Working Paper - Bekkers et al, 2013). In its early texts it recognises the normative charge in the concept of innovation, and seems to be on its guard in that respect. It is also breaking fairly new ground in its determination to focus on outcomes. In a sophisticated turn it

conceptualises outcomes not only in terms of the logic of consequences but also in terms of the logic of appropriateness.

More broadly, the LIPSE team is already displaying admirable sensitivity to contextual differences. It recognises the ways in which both innovation generation and innovation adoption are embedded in specific environments, and I think I can see the beginnings of a very useful classification of contexts emerging from the early publications. Possibly this treatment of context could be theorised a little more explicitly, but the project is already heading strongly in the right direction (Pollitt, 2013a).

Last but by no means least there is LIPSE's consistent commitment to a comparative approach, both between states and between sectors. This, combined with the attention to contexts already mentioned, should ensure a nuanced and sophisticated set of interpretations and findings, free from the simplistic 'best practice' homilies which have blighted too much public management writing.

LIPSE and innovation: the anxieties

Of course, by mentioning 'anxieties' I do not mean to imply that the LIPSE team are deliberately doing *bad* things! How could I possibly suspect these innocent, smiling faces of anything but good intentions? But what I do mean is that, first, it will be disappointing if certain neglected aspects of the topic are not addressed, and that, second, the anxiety is that I have yet to see much evidence that LIPSE is going to tackle these particular aspects in any systematic way. There is a difference between mentioning or recognising something in the early framework documents and following through in terms of focused empirical research. There is always the possibility of a kind of academic implementation gap, which I am sure we all recognize.

First among my anxieties is the issue of failed innovations. They are difficult to identify and to research, not least because most of the responsible organizations would prefer that they were forgotten about straight away. In many cases they were *intended* innovations which embarrassingly became *non*-innovations. As Kelman (2008) has pointed out, a great deal of innovation research focuses overwhelmingly or even exclusively on success stories, and there is a strong need for 'population' studies which include *all* innovation attempts, whatever happened to them (see a similar argument, from a much less nomothetic standpoint, in Edgerton, 2007, p.xiv). To concentrate on success stories is, in terms of orthodox social science, to commit the sin of selecting on the dependent variable. Even otherwise outstanding, prize-winning articles can suffer from this limitation (Walker, 2014). Although these problems are recognised in the LIPSE integrative framework (Bekkers et al, 2013), at the moment I cannot see a concerted attempt, within the LIPSE work programme, to identify, investigate and theorise innovation failures

A second (and related) anxiety is whether LIPSE will manage to transcend the case study in order to explore the issues of representativeness, prevalence and frequency. This is *not* to suggest that there is anything wrong with case studies, which can be valuable in a variety of ways (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2009, pp186-189). Nor - certainly - is it too suggest that only

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'hard' statistical studies can count as 'real science'. But it *is* to argue that one important aspect of context is how the case fits into the bigger picture - and that often involves asking whether the case is fairly normal, a bit unusual, or a complete outlier. It also involves trying to assess how many innovations succeed and how many fail, under different circumstances and in different contexts. Whilst we know that many innovations will fail, hardly any politician or public official is willing to answer in public the question of what failure rate should be regarded as normal and acceptable (Mulgan, 2007). To answer such questions requires some kind of more general study of an entire population or, at least a representative sample of it. Neither a literature review nor comparisons of a few cases in each of six or seven countries will deliver this.

Third, I come to the need for longitudinal as well as cross-sectional studies. It is widely accepted, by practitioners and academics alike, that many innovations fail. Many others are later transformed into something different from the way they started - whether for good or ill. In other words, we need to know much more about the whole life stories of innovations, from beginning to end, rather than over-concentrating on the early stages. This is true anyway, but particularly so for research projects - such as LIPSE - which say they are are concerned with sustainability. It is equally true for projects - like LIPSE again - which are concerned with outcomes. There is a considerable public policy evaluation literature showing how outcomes can change over time - either for the better or for the worse (Mulgan, 2009, pp166-167: Pawson, 2013, pp37-39). If one simply carries out a single evaluation, 12 or 18 months into a new policy or arrangement, there is a significant risk that one will record a balance sheet that is still changing, perhaps rather fast. Clearly the LIPSE team has given some thought to the temporal dimension. In the first working paper there is a useful discussion of innovation as a 'journey' and there are references to windows of opportunity (Bekkers et al, 2013, p9). And in Work Package 5 there is a focus on the temporal processes of adoption, diffusion and upscaling. However, WP5 is focused on just two types of ICTs, not on other kinds of social and organizational innovation. Furthermore, in most of the other Work Packages the emphasis seems to be strongly on surveys and other basically synchronic approaches, rather than developing any explicit treatment of diachronic trajectories. Yet innovation is an inherently temporal concept, and it deserves to be treated within the emerging body of scholarship that addresses issues of continuity, discontinuity, windows of opportunity and path dependency (see, e.g. Pollitt, 2008). Despite the encouraging noises in Working paper 1 I cannot yet see where there will be done.

Fourth - and again linked to the previous point - there is a need for better methods and approaches to the evaluation of innovatory activities. Some countries have lengthy histories of public sector organizational innovations which have been launched with little or no thought for evaluation, and which often appear to have achieved little beyond the ephemeral political kudos accruing from their original proclamation (Pollitt, 2013b). There are, as Mulgan said, 'good reasons to avoid bad innovation' (Mulgan, 2009, p158). Will LIPSE be of assistance here? Certainly there are elements within the project where the success of a wide range of innovations will be assessed. But will these elements be brought together to propose a toolkit or set of guidelines for distinguishing between good and bad circumstances

for innovation? I am not sure. My preliminary reading of the LIPSE documentation made me think that this was not yet entirely clear, although the possibility was definitely there. To produce indicators is one thing, and is important in itself, but this would be a step beyond that.

Conclusions

LIPSE is an exceptionally important programme of public management research. In public sector innovation it has chosen a topic which is "an idea whose time has come". The LIPSE network has what may well be a once-in-a-decade opportunity to shape the frameworks, the questions, the methods and the evidence within which debates about innovation take place.

It is already clear that the LIPSE team will produce a considerable cargo of valuable material. They - you - *will* advance the study of public sector innovation. So the anxieties I have just aired are, in effect, an urging to do even better - to move the project from the box marked 'useful and productive' to the one labelled 'memorable and outstanding'. I know what some of the objections will be: it is too late and the work of the remaining Work Packages is already specified in some details – it is set in stone. Whilst I would be the last person to underestimate the rococco planning that is usually involved in winning EU research money, I also know that some flexibility is possible. Research is a learning process, and reasoned adaptation as one goes along should be seen as a sign of learning and creativity, not failure.

I would go further. I believe that some of the possibilities I referred to earlier are already potentially present within the LIPSE. All that is required is some re-interpretation and re-combination of the elements set out in the original research application, plus, of course the determination and focus to do this. I close therefore with an observation Francis Bacon made almost 400 years ago. It applies equally to the public sector innovations which you are studying and to the LIPSE project itself:

> 'He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils, for time is the greatest innovator'(Bacon, 1625)

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