

## **Book Review**

David Osborne and Peter Plastrik

*Banishing Bureaucracy: The Five Strategies for Reinventing Government*  
Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1997. Pp. 397.

Reviewed by Kenneth Kernaghan

Osborne's previous book, entitled *Reinventing Government* and co-authored in 1992 with Ted Gaebler, helped to ignite a barrage of public sector reforms, especially in the United States. This best-selling book was a major influence on Vice-President Gore's National Performance Review for which Osborne was a leading advisor.

Unlike *Reinventing Government*, this new book, co-authored with Peter Plastrik, is prescriptive rather than descriptive. It provides advice on how to transform "bureaucratic" systems and organizations into "entrepreneurial" ones and, thereby, banishing bureaucracy. Many critics of *Reinventing Government* and, indeed, of any public sector reforms based on business practice or vocabulary, oppose the very use of the term entrepreneur. However, both books define the term broadly. Entrepreneurs are those persons who use resources in new ways to maximize efficiency and effectiveness; they are found in the private sector, the public sector and in the voluntary sector.

Osborne and Plastrik are careful to explain what they mean by "reinventing government" which is defined as "the fundamental transformation of public systems and organizations to create dramatic increases in their effectiveness, efficiency, adaptability, and capacity to innovate. This transformation is accomplished by changing their purpose, incentives, accountability, power structure, and culture" (pp. 13-14). The authors explain that reinvention is not about change in the political system (e.g., parliamentary reform) and that it is a broader concept than those of reorganization, efficiency reviews, downsizing government, privatization and total quality management. They also note that the kinds of reforms that can be carried out depend significantly on the type and function of the particular public organization under consideration.

*Reinventing Government* focused on case examples of public sector reform in the United States; *Banishing Bureaucracy*, however, includes lengthy commentary on reforms in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The authors note that while in recent years American progress in public sector reform has been remarkable, it pales in comparison to the changes in these three countries. The authors also note the significant differences between business and government and the importance in the public sector of political support for reform initiatives. In general, this book is more sensitive than the previous one to the political realities of public sector reform, but it still understates the dangers, especially in cabinet-parliamentary systems, of entrepreneurial, risk-taking behavior by public servants.

While there is little that is new in the book, many of the ideas and insights on public sector reform presented elsewhere are provided here in a well-organized package and in an easily readable style. Moreover, the book contains several lists of tools with such headings as "tools for performance management", "tools for customer quality assurance", and "tools for organizational empowerment". Altogether, the authors provide 90 tools that "reinventors" can use to implement the five strategies which form the core of the book. And the authors announce the preparation of still another book - "a full-scale handbook for reinventors".

These five strategies for reinventing public organizations are called the "Five Cs". The Core Strategy is concerned with establishing clarity of purpose, role and direction. The Consequences Strategy focuses on the creation of consequences (incentives) for performance; the Customer Strategy is concerned with making public organizations accountable to their "customers" (which are distinguished from "citizens"); the Control Strategy involving both employee and community empowerment; and the Culture Strategy that requires changing the "habits, hearts and minds" of public employees. The authors argue that there can be many isolated innovations without these five strategies but that "a continuously improving, self-renewing system" cannot be created without them. Moreover, the first four strategies will not stick over the long run unless they become part of the organizational culture.

Compared to the material on other countries, the half-dozen pages in this book on Canada appear to be based on very little research; the picture provided is partial, dated and misleading. Yet the rest of the book contains information and ideas that should be helpful to practitioners involved in, or contemplating, innovation and to academics interested in current public management thought and practice. This book will doubtless provoke the same range of positive and negative responses as *Reinventing Government* did. The criticisms may be somewhat muted, however, because this book considers developments at all levels of American government (rather than primarily at the local level) and contains cross-national analysis. Like virtually all books of this genre, *Banishing Bureaucracy* celebrates successes and pays relatively little attention to failed reform initiatives. It does, however, do a better job than its predecessor in outlining some of the obstacles to successful innovation.

**About the author:**

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