

Book Review

Sandford Borins, 1998

Innovating with Integrity: How local heroes are transforming American government
Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Innovating with Integrity is, among volumes in political science and public administration, no small achievement. It merits acclaim for at least three reasons. First, its examination of more than 200 successful government innovations yields an ample inventory of practical suggestions that can be of use to those interested and involved in public policy. Second, its use of sophisticated statistical techniques to measure the success of actual public policy innovations is worthwhile in light of the fact that the bulk of public administration studies provide narrative accounts and document-based descriptions that are long on hypotheses and short on empirical results. Finally, although methodologically superior to most other works in the field, Borins does not shy away from the normative questions involved in governance. Indeed, the word "integrity" is prominently featured both in the title and in the substance of his book.

Sandford Borins' study is, of course, "located" in a specific political context. His data are derived from the 217 semi-finalists for awards handed out by the Ford Motor Company in association with the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. This observation ought not to prejudice an evaluation of his book, but it certainly puts the critical reader "on alert."

At first glance, the process seems reasonable enough. For example, the semi-finalists, Borins assures us, were selected according to four main criteria: the novelty of the innovation, its importance in addressing important problems of both local and national concern, the value it brings to its clients and other citizens, and its promise of successful replication.

Borins does, after all, give currently fashionable facets of formal innovation their chapter-by-chapter due. Information technology, organizational change, environmental and energy management, and community building are awarded space. Identified as the "toughest challenges," are however, social services and education. I'm not surprised.

It is in these areas that the ideological domain of public policy debate tends to be most acrimonious. In social services, victims are relentlessly victimized. Just as "squeegee kids" are made to seem a major threat to social stability so "special needs" children are deemed a drain on the educational system. Meanwhile, the allegedly more efficient processes of the "market" are held out as potential saviours of the schools, the hospitals and any number of "public" services and resources.

Although I have never met (nor might I reasonably expect to meet) Professor Borins, I suspect that he is a decent man of liberal opinions. I imagine that he wishes well for the world. Yet, I worry.

My worries can, on one level, easily be dismissed. I note, for example, that Henry Ford was (even for the corporate giants of his day) inordinately fond of Adolph Hitler. I note also that Robert MacNamara, before he engineered the monstrous war in Vietnam, was corporate head of Ford. So, should sensible people take seriously a project organized by Ford and a Harvard University department named for a man that Canadian conservative philosopher George Grant said was not the messiah but merely a charming American imperialist? Probably. Empirical research should, after all, be judged on its own merits and not dismissed out of hand on the basis of its funding sources.

At the same time, it is plain that the Ford-KSG project will appeal to innovators with a common mind-set. It includes the pragmatic virtues of rationality, efficiency and accountability that are reflected in the mantras of neo-conservatism that now regularly insinuate themselves into the discourse concerning governance. It also eschews socio-political orientations that take into account questions of class, "identity" politics, environmentalism and other issues commonly (if not always accurately) associated with the moderate political left. Successful Ford-KSG grant seekers are often supported by those in the United States who style themselves "new democrats" and by New Democrats and others in Canada who fumble toward a "third way" that would combine fiscal conservatism with social liberalism (with fiscal conservatism retaining the trump card in any serious debate).

Most of their "new democratic politics" or "new political culture" principles allow the utmost flexibility in deciding on specific policy alternatives. The upshot of this process was once jocularly expressed to me in the following formulation: "We have our principles! And, if you don't like them, we have other principles!"

What are the "other principles"?

Lacking the philosophical status of Platonic verities, they depend upon practical solutions to concrete problems. An especially important example is found in Borins' ninth chapter, suitably entitled "Dances with Business." Therein Borins concentrates upon policy questions in environmental and energy management. Seeking compromise among "narrow profit-maximizers" at one extreme, "environmental zealots" at the other, and sincere moderates of various sorts in the middle, Borins comes up with a list of effective innovations that make manifest the slogan, "think globally, act locally."

The inventory he presents includes examples of communities finding markets for waste products, employing appropriate technology to evaluate risk on flood plains, formulating effective partnerships between the public and private sectors, encouraging systems analysis to facilitate coordination among regulatory authorities, encouraging volunteerism and employing user fees.

Borins is quick to admit that such innovations must often overcome obstacles. The "most predictable obstacles to environmental and energy initiatives," he says, come from "environmental activists, who say that such programs don't go far enough, and from regulated entities, who say they go too far. When the fate of the planet is measured against billions of dollars of corporate profit are at stake, no small degree of polarization is to be expected.

Accordingly, stuck between a legendary rock and an allegorical hard place, Borins' book provides ample illustrations of organizations that seem to have created a measure of wiggle room. Especially useful examples can be found in his tenth chapter, "We Are Family: Community Building" and its discussion of successful community policing in a number of American cities from Madison, Wisconsin to Reno, Nevada, to St. Pete's, Florida and so on.

In some other areas, the strategies (at least for traditional Canadians) become more problematic. An enhanced role for the private sector, enthusiasm for "contracting out" public services, an eagerness to embrace information technology, and a bottom line acceptance of the legitimacy of the "market" combine to reveal Borins' book as a splendid contribution to one interpretation of innovation and one version of the goals of innovative practices.

Stakeholders whose jobs may be sacrificed to the private the sector and advocates of public versus private values may not find much to applaud in innovations applauded herein. That said, it is a useful compendium of one approach to innovation. It is to be recommended because it is well written, well researched and well presented. Given the ideological constraints that I attribute to it, it also demonstrates a commitment to "integrity." Quite apart from many tomes on the topic, it shows a willingness to address empirical and normative problems. If I find difficulty accepting some of these, I am grateful that they are not hidden but made available for future discussion.

About the Author

Howard A. Doughty teaches Political Science and Public Administration in the Faculty of Applied Arts and Health Sciences at Seneca College in King City, Ontario.