

**The role of the Minister in driving innovation: some post-Ministerial perspectives on creating public value**

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## Abstract

Political leadership in public service innovation, including Ministerial leadership, has arguably been given less attention in academic literature than managerial leadership. To analyse the role of a Government Minister in driving innovation, it is necessary to consider the specific job of the minister as a leader of a public service system - for example, in education, in health, or in local government. While this role will always be bounded by situation or context - temporal and systemic conditions, including the minister's responsibilities to a party, its manifesto or programme for government, by their collective responsibility as a member of a Cabinet, by financial considerations, and by the structural and legal limitations of the role - Ministers have operational space within their specific portfolios to consider how to develop innovative approaches. Their role as political leaders can be a factor in driving or motivating innovative approaches across a system. Moving beyond political biography, but drawing on direct ministerial experience within the Welsh Government between 2007 and 2016, and the emerging literature on political leadership and public service innovation, this paper will explore what can be learned by considering the leadership role of a minister in the context of a professional system. Paradoxically, public service innovation is not novel: the paper will also make suggestions on how analysing the history of public service developments can provide insights into the role of Ministers who were innovators when old institutions were new. Public value has historically been created by governments that were open to innovation and prepared to allow their ministers to innovate, to encourage others who could, or to adapt ideas from those who had.

## *Introduction - Political Leadership and Innovation*

What do we know of the role of ministers or political leaders in driving innovation? And does it matter? Mulgan (2015, p.xvii) says 'parties and governments often struggle to hear what is happening on the ground, and those on the ground often struggle to understand how the world looks to a minister or a global agency'. Meanwhile, political leadership has been 'under-theorised and under-researched' (Hartley, 2010, p146); political innovations have been under-researched (Sorensen, 2017); and the contribution of innovation to the creation of public value has arguably been under-theorised (Hartley, 2011). It is perhaps therefore not surprising that the role of political leaders in driving innovation has itself both been under-theorised and under-researched. The well-known UK Cabinet Office Strategy Unit paper *Innovation in the Public Sector* (Mulgan and Albury, 2003) suggests 7 specific roles 'for ministers and political leaders in fostering innovation'. These involve:

- Setting and relentlessly communicating clear and aspirational outcomes for the organisations and areas for which they are responsible
- Creating and exemplifying a culture which encourages new ideas wherever they may come from
- Creating the legislative and policy framework to promote experimentation and piloting
- Supporting and defending experiments and high risk pilots
- Viewing national, regional and organisational devolution as 'laboratories of innovation'
- Galvanising others, championing and chivvying promising innovations
- Developing visionary goals and driving them through (e.g. John F. Kennedy's 'Man on the Moon in a decade')

The focus is on a variety of roles: setting stretch targets, developing an open culture, creating the institutional base, advocacy, accepting diversity and experimentation, motivational leadership, and providing vision. Despite this, the engagement of ministers in fostering innovation has been little studied. Borins (2014) identifies a higher level of engagement in innovations by politicians in the 2010 Harvard Innovation awards, both in terms of legislative and executive innovation (pp65-6). His analysis suggests politicians are involved when there is a crisis, but not when there is a problem to be solved. He also identifies the role of political leaders in innovations (p.76). He identifies politicians as acknowledging the role of political leaders in supporting their innovations, and identifies public support as important (p.78-9). He speculates that in a period of crisis, political capital might be seen to be gained by being a source of new ideas.

Sorensen (2017) calls for study of the political context of innovation, including politicians' support for bottom-up innovations initiated by employees, and also for study of political innovations themselves. She stresses the need for both theory building and empirical research. In the context of recent new thinking about political leadership, this paper seeks to identify some of the issues involved in theorising the role of ministers in innovation. One of the co-authors of the UK Cabinet Paper, Geoff Mulgan, has himself subsequently said that he was 'disappointed that no ministers or senior officials showed much interest in this agenda' in the UK, pointing to more positive reception in northern Europe, Asia and North America. (Mulgan, 2007; see also Ball and Exley, 2010).

Sorensen (2017) identifies three forms of innovation: innovations in polity; innovations in politics, and innovations in policy. In this paper I will reflect on my own ministerial experience in the Welsh Government in the context of the political leadership roles suggested in the UK Cabinet paper. The Welsh Government, along with the National Assembly for Wales, is an innovation in polity: the

National Assembly, endorsed by a referendum in 1997 (and reinforced in a further referendum in 2011), it is the only political institution for which the people of Wales have ever voted. It has been responsible for innovations in politics and policy, but it has also been prepared to learn from elsewhere (Andrews, 2015). However, it is also under-researched and under-theorised. Indeed, so far, only two first-hand accounts by former ministers have been published, one of them posthumously (Andrews, 2014; Morgan, 2017), leading researchers to complain (see Lynch, 2006) about the paucity of material available. In respect of innovation in Wales, Boyne et al's 2005 study of innovation in Welsh Local Government looks at processes in local government which were largely undertaken *before* devolution. Gatehouse and Price's 2013 assessment for Nesta is a useful overview but inevitably subjective in its selection.

Hartley (2010) has identified as one of the challenges of looking at political leadership is the disconnect between leadership theory and political science theory: Sorensen (2017) says that political innovations remain 'a relatively unexplored research area' because of disciplinary boundaries between public administration and political science and says research on political innovation needs a multi-disciplinary approach. Both observations are of course directly relevant to consideration of the role of political leaders in innovation. First, I will look at some of the conceptual issues involved, drawing on existing literature in respect of Innovation, public value, ministerial roles, system leadership; then I will take examples from the Welsh experience; finally, I will set this against the specific roles identified in the 2003 Cabinet Office paper, assessing points of confirmation or irrelevance, and also looking at whether the evidence reveals omissions. I conclude with suggestions for further research.

### *The language of innovation*

Innovation has become one of the buzz-words of public administration over the last twenty years. Though some (e.g. Bevir and Rhodes, 2010:128) identify it with the New Labour period of government (1997-2007), barely had Tony Blair been elected Labour Leader of the Opposition when, in a review of New Public Management (NPM), Dunleavy and Hood (1994) were already identifying 'NPM innovations'. Osborne and Brown (2011) trace 'innovation' back to the New Right think-tanks of the 1980s. Pollitt and Hupe (2011) call it one of the 'magic concepts' of public administration that is adopted because it conveys 'a vague, fuzzy meaning and positive connotations' (Sorensen, 2017). Innovation suffuses the bible of the Clinton-Gore era, *Reinventing Government*, which is best developed, it is said, by decentralised government. (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). Borins (2014, pp2-3) firmly identifies the origins of Innovation commentary in public service with the NPM tradition in the UK and New Zealand in the 1980s and the 'Reinventing Government' movement in the United States. So do Sorensen and Torfing (2015, p148).

Tony Blair (Dudman, 2017) has complained that the 'Reinventing Government' movement has died away recently, though I would argue that its influence can be seen in some of the UK coalition government's initiatives (Andrews, 2017), including the launch of the Behavioural Insights Team and the development of the Government Digital Service (GDS), both of which have been copied elsewhere around the world. Finlayson (2000) locates the cultural thinking behind New Labour in 'a set of arguments concerning 'post-Fordism, some of which were initiated under the banner of 'New Times' as waved by the Communist Party in the 1980s and disseminated through *Marxism Today*.' He terms it 'the Demos tendency', after a prominent new Labour think-tank whose origins can be linked to *Marxism Today* and 'New Times'. It is certainly possible to argue that the confusion of 'novelty' and 'innovation' derives from this period. New Labour's focus on 'Modernising Government' (White Paper, 1999) can be read in this context of what Finlayson calls 'permanent innovation' (p191). Social entrepreneurs have complained 'what is meant by new and innovative –

why do funders require this constant focus on new and innovative – what about tried and tested’ (Jervis, 2008). As former Labour minister Chris Mullin (2011, p404) has observed:

The New Labour obsession with innovation afflicts much of the voluntary sector. Tried and tested, well-established projects are dying on their feet while endless sums are lavished on bright new wheezes that flash across the firmament and disappear quicker than you can say ‘tick that box’.

There is certainly a danger of what I would call ‘innovation fatigue’. Borins (2006,p7) recognises ‘in all likelihood, we as a society do not want a public sector that is as unrelentingly innovative as the private sector, nor one that displays the volatility of an Internet start-up.’

For all that it is a buzzword in modern public administration, the word ‘Innovation’ was never one of those words which Welsh cultural critic Raymond Williams (1976, 1979) identified as the ‘Keywords’ – words ‘which involve ideas and values’. But Williams does discuss Innovation in the context of his discussion of ‘creative’:

The word puts a necessary stress on originality and innovation, and when we remember the history we can see that these are not trivial claims. Indeed, we try to clarify this by distinguishing between *innovation* and *novelty*, though novelty has both serious and trivial senses.

Borins’ study of the 2010 Harvard innovation awards notes that novelty is important to this specific innovation awards programme, (2014, p62) – that novelty may be the implementation of an innovation that exists in another public service institution, but is novel to the specific organisation submitting it for an award. He recognises that novelty alone could simply mean the development of vanity projects (109).

Schlesinger (2007) identified how creativity ‘established itself as a hegemonic term in an increasingly elaborated framework of policy ideas.’ He noted ‘a concerted effort is underway to shape a wide range of working practices by invoking creativity and innovation’. Schlesinger identified the 2005 Cox Review as a key source of definitions for ‘creativity’, ‘innovation’ and ‘design’. In that report, ‘creativity’ was defined as ‘the generation of new ideas’: ‘innovation’ was defined as a process which meant ‘the successful exploitation of new ideas’ and ‘design’ was ‘what links creativity and innovation’. Design shaped ideas ‘to become practical and attractive propositions for users and customers’. Schlesinger noted that ‘the slogan about innovation as ‘the successful exploitation of ideas’ has become the mantra of the Office of Science and Innovation in the DTI’. Oakley et al (2014), quoting Schlesinger, suggest that innovation replaced creativity as having unquestioned ‘generalised value’ (Schlesinger, 2009). For Mulgan and Albury, creativity becomes innovation when a new idea is implemented.

In that article Schlesinger mapped the intellectual export of ideas of creativity and innovation via a small but interconnected range of New Labour politicians and advisers: focussing on the IPPR and Demos, he has written ‘a New Labour policy generation emerged strongly shaped by their origins in think tanks’ (2009). Two of the figures he mentioned, Geoff Mulgan and Matthew Taylor, of course remain prominent in the field of public service innovation as respectively chief executives of Nesta and the RSA. Nesta itself has been analysed as an example of a successful innovation organisation (Oakley et al, 2014). These links are comprehensively mapped in Ball and Exley (2010), who identify that ‘innovation, ‘next thinking’, experimentation and speculation are defining characteristics of the modes of practice within the networks’. They identify the emphasis within these networks on innovation infrastructures, intermediaries, brokers, incubators or accelerators, saying of within this

network ‘innovation becomes a valued and valuable commodity’. Here we see how think-tanks and policy intellectuals have convening power in respect of the mobilisation, organisation and transference of innovative ideas. Power as a concept in diffusing management ideas has been analysed by O’Mahoney and Sturdy (2016), who examine the consultancy McKinsey, an adviser to governments around the world as well as private sector organisations. More worryingly, some now use ‘innovation’ as an ideological weapon: the ban on Uber announced by Transport for London and endorsed by London Mayor Sadiq Khan showed that London was closed to ‘business and innovation’ said the Conservative Minister for Innovation, Greg Hands (Schomberg, 2017). O’Reilly et al (2010) warn of the danger of the emphasis of leadership becoming an industry of its own – or ‘leaderism’, as they call it. We also need to avoid ‘innovationism’.

All of this points to the need for some refining of the notion of innovation as ‘the successful exploitation of new ideas’ where we have to have some sense of what constitutes success in time: that could be the durability or transferability of ideas, though this lies largely outside the focus of this paper. Roberts and King (1991, p150) identified four stages of innovation in the public sector: creation; design; implementation and institutionalisation – the last being the stage where the innovation has become established practice and so is no longer considered an innovative idea. Of course, innovations may be jettisoned, so the fourth stage should probably be refined as institutionalisation or abandonment: and others would add feedback loops and evaluation processes into the mix; meanwhile design thinking would suggest early-stage prototypes or beta versions, or the use of randomised control trials. But for evaluating the simpler question of whether an innovation is now established thinking, Roberts and King’s model, slightly modified, will probably do. Mulgan, in writing about strategy in government suggests that effective strategy means making decisions that would be seen as ‘passing the test of history: the best possible decisions in the light of what was known at the time’ (Mulgan 2004). Pollitt (2008, p174) stresses for a historic dimension to innovation: ‘innovation hunters need to learn from what has gone before as well as what is promised by the innovators of the day.’

*Innovation and Public Value*

Sorensen (2017) says that political innovations ‘constitute new perceptions of what counts as public value’. How should we consider Innovation and its contribution to the creation of public value within the public sector? Hartley (2005) offered an initial typology which I have expressed as a table below:

Type	Example
Product	New instruments in hospital
Service	On-line tax forms
Process	Process mapping for new approaches
Position	New contexts or users – eg Connexions service
Strategic	New goals eg community policing
Governance	Devolved institutions
Rhetorical	Eg ‘Congestion charging’

Gatehouse and Price (2013) note how the Australian Public Service Network have envisaged a similar typology. Again, I express this as a table:

Type	Example
Policy	A change to policy thinking or behavioural

	intentions.
Service	A new or improved service.
Service delivery	A new or different way of providing a service.
Administrative or organisational	A new process
Conceptual	A new way of looking at problems, challenging current assumptions, or both.
Systemic	A new or improved way for parts of the public sector to operate and interact with stakeholders.

Clearly these innovations could be introduced at different levels within a service. From extensive Canadian research Borins has emphasized the significance of innovations originating from within a system. His work found that 50% of innovations originated from middle managers or front-line workers, 25% from agency heads, 20% from politicians, 15% from interest groups and 10 per cent from individuals outside government (individuals gave multiple answers, which explains the figure adding up to more than 100%). Borins notes that this is consistent with research in the private sector (Borins, 2000, 2001). This is not to say, however, that system-wide leadership is unnecessary. In his report for the IBM Center for The Business of Government, Borins identified the need for a systems approach based on a holistic analysis of challenges, rather than a silo-based one. (Borins, 2006, p9). He also stresses, and illustrates, the need for supportive leadership from the top.

What are the requirements for ensuring that Innovation contributes to the creation of public value (Moore, 1995)? Moore outlined a 'strategic triangle' essential for determining successful public value strategy for public service organisations:

- Clear objective that is 'substantively valuable'
- That is 'legitimate and politically sustainable'
- And 'operationally and administratively feasible'

These themes, particularly the second, speak to the importance of political leadership and public leadership more widely. Borins (2014) notes Moore's subsequent concept of a public value account and looks at whether the innovations from the Harvard awards scheme contribute to public value creation. In addition to the benefits of the innovations in themselves as judged by a variety of outcome measures, he also looks at external measures of value creation, including formal evaluations by government and academic organisations, transfer of the innovation, awards and media attention. Hartley and Downe (2007), Sorensen (2017) and other studies also accord 'diffusion' of innovation as a success factor.

Rhodes and Wanna (2007) rightly warn of the dangers of conflating unelected and elected leaders and of downgrading politics and the understanding of power. Andrews (2015a) points to the differences of role of politicians, public servants and executive board members. Danish local government chief executives (Forum Board, 2005) explicitly identified the necessity of clarifying their managerial space with the political leaders of their authorities as one of the nine elements of chief executive excellence. Hartley (2005) has pointed out that not all innovations generate public value. More recently (2011), she argues that interest from the top in how innovations are developed is important for public value creation. She points out that public service innovations can be 'risky, ambiguous, multifaceted, complex and contested', and says that 'a public value perspective on innovation' should research its potential for wider impact on economic, social and environmental well-being. This reinforces the need expressed by Borins for a system-wide perspective, but it is important to take on board Rhodes and Wanna's urging that broad goals should be set by political

leaders and public value should be 'best regarded as a tool used by public servants to identify and implement operational improvements at the workplace (2007, p418).

### *The role of Ministers in innovating across a system*

In their assessment of executive public service leaders in the United States and their contribution to Innovation, Doig and Hargrove (1987, p8) identify a number of roles against which their chosen leaders should be judged. Some of these, which relate to technologies of management control (for example, recruitment and key appointments), are only relevant to executive leaders who have organisational management responsibility, which political leaders in many systems, including the UK, do not have, or have in only very a constrained manner after a high degree civil service or officer filtering of job applications, with simply the option of a choice between two identified candidates, or an 'accept or reject' judgement on a single identified candidate. Ministers, in particular, operate in a form of power-dependency with officials (Richards, 2008; Smith, 1995), where their agency is bounded by expectations of external bodies (media, legislature, public) and by the 'rules of the game' (the structures of institutions, their accumulated histories, budgets, interests of other institutional actors) or by context (time/space/economic circumstances). However, some of the roles identified by Doig and Hargrove overlap with the cultural goals identified by Mulgan and Albury, including the setting of new missions and programmes for organisations, maintaining cultures open to new ideas, including new technologies and the requisite skills, and external promotion and validation of the organisation's innovation goals. Borins (2002) addresses how political leaders can

Ministers do have a degree of agency, however bounded, and it is important to consider the freedom of manoeuvre of ministers when evaluating their scope for introducing innovations in practice. Recent work by the Institute for Government (Hallsworth et al, 2011) suggested that 'ministers will usually tend to be the ones pushing for more innovative, risk taking options, with the civil service acting as a counter-balance.' Ministerial and civil service accounts tend to privilege agency and personality, write Smith et al (1995), so it is the job of researchers to bring structure and constraint back into view. This is no surprise: political life requires individual entrepreneurialism, from building individual skills and capacity to achieve selection in a seat, to mobilising people in teams to help you win an election, to gaining recognition within a legislature or the media in order to earn the eye of a Prime or First Minister or their aides or their whips who might recommend you for promotion. 'Political life' say Rhodes and Bevir (2010, p197) 'consists of meaningful activity'. The privileging of agency narratives is accentuated by media needs often to tell a complex story in simple terms, and by the desire of a political Opposition to interpret accountability in terms of personal agency (Dunleavy, 1995). In the Westminster Model (Richards, 2008; Norton, 1999) ministers have the constitutional responsibility for their departments, and for their policy decisions, and officials are responsible for the implementation of policy – a narrative which it is in both their interests to maintain (Smith et al, 1995), though that narrative of ministerial responsibility had been modified by heads of the civil service over time (Theakston, 1995; Gray, 1985). It is widely accepted that, while structural constraints exist on ministers, they do have agency: as Smith (2008) says, they are 'individuals within an institutional setting who can exercise choice'. In the words of Bevir and Rhodes (2006), ministers have 'situated agency'. They are situated within a context defined by a party programme, a history of prior policies, a balance of power within a Cabinet, particularly in a coalition context, and a budgetary framework (Laver and Schepsle, 1994).

James (1992) says that ministers have been 'more assertive in their departments' since the 1970s. King (1994) says that to exercise the possibility of agency, ministers need both distinct policy ideas and a distinct 'personal will to autonomy'. Headey (1974) argued that specialists in different policy areas had found evidence of 'lack of innovation' on the part of post-war governments, which he in part attributed to ministers lacking policy objectives. For Headey, certain kinds of ministers were however 'policy initiators'. Marsh et al (2000) redefine that definition, identifying certain ministers who were clear 'agenda setters', who sought to change the broad agenda or policy line of their



departments'. They argue that ministers have 'a greater policy role now than previously'. It is precisely the growth of 'activist ministers' which is of concern to King and Crewe in their book on the blunders of British governments (King and Crewe, 2013). Many commentators have suggested that such activism has had an impact on the traditional 'snag-hunting' role of the civil service (eg Theakston, 1991, Smith et al, 1999). Du Gay (1996) has long warned of the dangers of the dangers of the entrepreneurial drive in government reform undermining the civic and ethical role of disinterested public service. One former head of the Prime Minister's policy unit under Tony Blair, Matthew Taylor, wrote in a blog recently:

If I was assessing departments today I'd start by asking every permanent secretary to give me examples of occasions on which, on the basis of their authority and expertise as independent advisers, officials persuaded a minister not to do or say something which the politician really wanted to do or say. To be fair, the whole point about such occasions is that we wouldn't have heard about them. But perhaps in the context of so many examples of terrible ideas going unchallenged, the civil service should occasionally circulate a samizdat document entitled *Stupid Stuff Whitehall Stopped* (Taylor, 2015).

A recent UK National Audit Office Report has suggested that 'Permanent secretaries "lack confidence" and do not have the right incentives to challenge ministers when they are concerned about the value for money of government schemes, suggesting that there may be a conflict in their 'dual accountabilities' as Accounting Officers for their departments but with accountability for delivery also to their Secretaries of State. (NAO, 2017) In recent years, there have been complaints about the quality of Government Department's corporate memory (Andrews, 2014; Hillman, 2016, Willetts, 2017), which may itself be a factor in a decline in the snag-hunting role. Ministers are sometimes perceived to be too ready to re-organise or re-structure, for example (see Hallsworth et al, 2011) and officials are there to assess the risk of particular innovations for ministers.

### *Ministers as system leaders*

In his defining study of leadership, James MacGregor Burns asks us to 'consider the classic case of the young zealot, a rising leader of a new reform or left-wing cabinet, who is appointed head of a ministry of education' (1978:p377). Such an executive leader, he suggests, is going to face challenges from within the department they head as well as from 'unit leaders' linked to interest groups – in this case professional organizations and unions – outside. I was an education minister (Andrews, 2014) – perhaps not as young as Burns' zealot - and I faced those challenges. I am still to find much written that is useful in respect of the role of a minister in respect of a department, or indeed the wider system to which a department relates. Bevir and Rhodes (2010, p134) maintain that 'little of note' has been written about ministers and their government departments. While the literature on policy networks (see Rhodes, 1999, for a review of the literature) might be thought to be valuable, in practice this is directed at examining how networks contribute to policy-making, assessing questions of power and relationships between policy actors. Rhodes (2011, p235-6) briefly examines how ministers seek to engage with or mobilise their departments' 'client groups', as they are termed, but this is a rare and fleeting example. Discussions of the NHS and of the Police as systems in Bevir and Rhodes (2006) leave ministers largely out of the picture. Ministers are 'missing links' in academic research (Pollitt, 2006).

Yet in identifiable areas – education and health certainly, ministers are leaders not of policy networks but of whole systems. In seeking school reform, for example, they need to engage widely beyond their department with a whole system to project their objectives and seek buy-in for these. As the emphasis has shifted increasingly from policy to delivery in politics, it is this role of system leadership which we must consider, and it is system leadership which is key to understanding the role of ministers in innovation. I borrow the language of system leadership from education, and particularly from the writings of Michael Fullan about school reform (Andrews, 2014, p38; and Hopkins, 2007). Fullan has been an advocate of 'tri-level reform' – the three levels being the school, local government and central government. His interest is in building the 'collective capacity' of a system (2010, p 3). It is an approach that recognises the role of leadership throughout the system – 'distributed leadership' (see Harris, 2013) .For Fullan:

For the entire system to be on the move, you need relentless, resolute leadership from the top – leadership that focuses on the right things and above all promotes collective capacity and ownership. (p13).

Fullan says the role of government ‘is to set the direction, even in an assertive way’ (p100) and then engage in a dialogue with other actors within the system, and politicians have to be prepared themselves to learn along the way. Seddon (2014), indeed, says politicians should get out of management and focus mainly in the *purpose* of public service. Fullan has also spoken about the importance of learning from those who are resistant to change, first, because they may have new ideas that have not previously been considered; second, because they will have an impact on the politics of implementation (Fullan, 2001, p. 43-3). Examples of system reform programmes and the practical engagements of Ministers to undertake it can be found in Baker (1993) Blunkett (2006) Barber, (2007), Adonis, (2012) and Andrews, (2014). In the context of system leadership, looking at how different education ministers have seen their role in the context of a wider system, could be valuable. Ministers, then, don’t only exist as actors within a government, a department, a legislature, or a policy network: in certain roles, they are leaders of a system, and they are recognised in that role by other members of that system. Sectoral journals include them in their lists of the most powerful actors within the sector. Institutions within the sector accord them effective status through invitations to speak at annual conferences or launch events. Their speeches are analysed and used as the basis for policy or delivery engagement, or scoured for signals as to emerging agendas. It is interesting to note that the language of system leadership is now emerging into broader use (See Senge et al, 2015): in the UK, the RSA is urging public service reformers to ‘think like a system, act like an entrepreneur’ (Taylor, 2016; Burbridge, 2017). In summary, they say:

However we conceive of, manage and deliver public services, we need to understand and appreciate the wider systemic perspective in order to be responsive to local needs and context. We do not expect — nor advise — anyone to take on grand societal challenges in their entirety. Instead, we would rather see people, teams and organisations develop an ability to identify opportunities for change and a capacity to react nimbly to them, rapidly prototyping and deploying possible responses.

Barber and Fullan (2005) called for system leadership based on continuous reflective action:

We need in our view to engage systems leaders in systems thinking in action. In general terms this means that state level leaders—Presidents, Prime Ministers, Premiers, Ministers, Governors, State Superintendents, Director Generals, Deputy Ministers, and the like—must go beyond accountability to foster capacity-building.

They see the establishment of moral purpose as a key starting point for system leaders, and regular communication about goals and objectives. Their recommendations for reforming system leaders have much in common with the Mulgan/Albury goals for political leaders in respect of innovation. Sorensen and Torfing (2015, 156) argue that the need for ‘multi-actor collaboration’ in promoting innovation requires more distributive, horizontal, collaborative and integrative leadership. A system focus is also important as the nature of systems themselves may pose specific challenges to the adoption or non-adoption and transfer of innovations.

#### *The dimensions of ministerial time*

Temporal issues are a major factor in the freedom of ministers to innovate. Pierson (2004) warns ‘Political actors, facing the pressures of the immediate, or skeptical about their capacity to engineer long-term effects, may pay limited attention to the long-term’. The dimensions of ministerial time include:

- The day-to-day pressures of the job
- The knowledge of transience in any particular ministerial role
- Time as history (1): the accumulated responsibilities of the department over the ages
- Time as history (2): as an element in judging ministers' legacies

The former head of Tony Blair's strategic communications unit, Peter Hyman, once wrote: 'too often in government the urgent crowds out the important' (2005). It is a refrain which can be traced back to US President Eisenhower and the balancing of the urgent and important has become a standard text in business management (Eisenhower, 1961). Smith et al identify time as a resource for civil servants, but a constraint for ministers. (Smith, 1999). Rhodes identifies that at most 20% of a UK Minister's day can be spent on policy issues – and says that is probably an overestimate (2011:102). Ministers in the UK systems of government are of course also constituency or regional representatives, and in time terms there can certainly be a problem of role conflict, but it can mean that ministers get direct feedback on the operation of a public service from their constituents in a way that their officials will not. Wicks (2012) analysed his own experience as a minister and stressed the 'mundane' and the 'routine' as taking up a considerable amount of time – such as the signing of correspondence. He recorded 'one fundamental fact about ministerial life is that it is an exceedingly busy one', stress the short-cuts which ministers must effect to make judgements.

Ministers are transients in government departments, so their judgements of time are not only conditioned by the day-to-day. They are also conscious of the time they have to make an impact, before they may move portfolios, lose their jobs or face an election: they need to make early assessments of how best to use their time (Rose, 1975). In the UK government specifically, churn amongst ministers is frequent (Cleary and Reeves, 2009): for example, there were 13 housing ministers between 1995 and 2015 (Raynsford, 2016). These factors explain why politicians may operate, to borrow an expression from US presidential politics, as though they are in a permanent campaign (Kelly, 1993). Michael D.Higgins, now the President of Ireland, reflecting on his role as the Irish culture minister, said:

I've had to now develop an economy of what I am doing, and I am trying to pull back for more consideration of what I am doing and I have a very definite set of priorities. (Kelly, 1994)

Pierson (2004) has argued the case for developing a stronger theoretical framework for considering political decision-making in temporal terms, stating that 'history matters'. He demands

we turn to an examination of history because social life unfolds over time. Real social processes have distinctly temporal dimensions.

Pierson focuses on four main dimensions of time: path dependence; issues of timing and sequence; the significance of slow-moving processes; problems of institutional origins and change. These concepts could be helpful in considering two specific aspects of the ministerial dimension of time: the history of the accumulated legacy of departmental responsibilities and history as the identified eventual legacy of ministerial effort.

When ministers come into ministries, they are not generally able to declare 'Year Zero' and start everything from scratch, even after the election of a new government replacing one which has been in power for over a decade. Rose (1987) points to the importance of what he terms 'inertia' in government departments, saying 'a minister usually inherits a conglomerate set of responsibilities that have accumulated over decades, generations, or even centuries.' Wicks points out that decisions he was taking in respect of welfare were set within frameworks dating back to the early twentieth century reforms of Lloyd George (Wick, 2012). Inertia is important – it allows government to carry on, even in elections and between governments. It provides an institutional framework for

the practice of governing: 'a ministry institutionalizes standard operating procedures for carrying out a multitude of programmes'. That is not to say that ministries are good at preserving corporate memory, or as good as they should be (Andrews, 2014; Hillman, 2016).

If we turn to history as the identified eventual legacy of ministerial effort, we have to ask a key question about the durability of innovation. Over what time-scale does an innovation become embedded? Smith et al (1999) suggest that certain ministers can be thought of as 'agenda institutionalisers' if their innovations in departmental agendas last longer than one minister's term. When should we judge an innovation's success or failure? Does it require bi-partisan acceptance?. The Strategy Unit Cabinet Paper gives as historic examples the founding of the National Health Service and the creation of the Open University. Though both were innovations, it's not clear that the language of innovation was present at their birth- indeed, taking a historical perspective, as Pollitt suggests, may require us to think carefully about *when old innovations were new*.

In her analysis of the development of electricity and early electronic technologies, Marvin (1988) reminds us that the language adopted at the development of new technological innovations matters for the construction of debates around the innovation itself and who is recognised as having expertise over it. Similar things happen at the introduction of new institutional innovations. Lowndes and Roberts (2013) identify the power of narrative in setting terms for debate around institutions: 'Narratives embody values, ideas and power'. However, it is worth reflecting that in the Cabinet Paper with which Bevan persuaded Attlee's Cabinet finally to sign off his plans for an NHS Bill (National Archives, 1945) innovation is not one of the phrases Bevan uses. Instead, he speaks of 'reconstruction' 'new forms of executive machinery' and a 'coherent single new service': the moment of 1945, 'the new Jerusalem' comes to shape the narrative around the NHS for thirty years at least (Kynaston, 2008). While the language of political innovation may have come more to the fore in the last twenty years, there were political innovations – and political innovators - before the language of innovation was extensively deployed in political rhetoric and narrative.

However, ministers as political innovators have not been systematically analysed. There is nothing to set against the work by Doig and Hargrove on government entrepreneurs in the USA, for example, or even Donahue's review (2008) of the work of Robert Reich as Secretary of Labor in the Clinton Administration, though it would be relatively straightforward to construct a strong list of political innovators just in the UK. Borins (2001) notes the importance of political support from above for innovators throughout a system. Gatehouse and Price (2013) note that 'Wales has historically been a powerhouse of innovation'. As Wales's Public Service Minister, for example, I identified just from our own small country a series of strong public service entrepreneurs: Lloyd George as Chancellor; Viscount Rhondda as First World War Food Controller; Elizabeth Andrews as campaigner for pit-head baths and nursery schools; Jim Griffiths and Social Security; Aneurin Bevan and the NHS (Andrews, 2015). Burnham and Jones (2000) looked at innovators in Ten Downing Street, examining a selection of both Prime Ministers and civil servants, examining innovations which had a meaningful duration or as they call it 'continuity in innovation' – but this is a rare analysis of politicians as innovators.

#### *Revisiting the Mulgan-Albury ministerial role criteria*

Mulgan says that we need to consider 'which innovations are good and which are bad.' Hartley points out that not all innovations are valuable. Borins (2014) warns of the danger of vanity projects. In making a more forensic distinction between innovative and incremental service improvement, Osborne and Brown (2011) warn against the danger of seeing any 'innovation' as a good thing, correctly identifying that innovation has come to be seen as 'a normative good'. Sorensen urges us to avoid seeing 'innovation' as 'a goal in itself'. Instead, it should be seen as a means to an end 'which is to transform the content of what is considered as public value as well as the conditions

under which this content is formulated and authorized.’ She sees innovations as involving not only new ideas but also things which create a step-change (see also Sorensen and Torfing, date).

Stoker and John (2009) have questioned whether political science can design solutions. The emergence of randomised control trials and design thinking in government, assessing different models for public service reform (Halpern, 2015) with new innovations tested at beta-stage against user experience suggests a more experimental culture of innovation which is intended to avoid transformational innovations that are untested becoming too deep-rooted and too expensive to reverse if they fail or are less than optimal. Applying this to the original Mulgan/Albury role identification for ministers therefore suggests a further objective: critically assessing the public value of potential innovations.

Since the election of the 2010 Coalition Government, there have been different parties in power at Wales and Westminster. Early on in the life of the UK coalition government, I had my first meeting, as Wales’s education minister, with the new UK Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove. In that meeting, I told him that one of the advantages of devolution was that it allowed England to be a laboratory for experiments (Andrews, 2014). This examination of certain of the concepts identified with public service innovation leads me therefore to suggest one additional role for ministers and political leaders: a questioning role, testing innovations against their contribution to public value. That might in itself be a useful systemic role for ministers in any case.

#### *Devolution as a policy laboratory – the case of Wales*

According to Rose (1987), in the era of big government – i.e. following the major post-war expansion of the British state – there was less scope for ministers to build reputations by creating significant innovations than it was when Bevan drew up the plans for the National Health Service. Programmes of devolution to the nations of the UK and decentralisation to city mayors since then may contradict that view. Certainly, it was the view of the late Rhodri Morgan, former First Minister of Wales, that devolution offered the opportunity for four ‘living laboratories’ throughout the UK for policy development. (WASC, 2010). The extent to which this has happened has been examined in Keating et al (2012) and McCormick (2013).

Devolution in the UK will be twenty years old in 2019. It is now part of the UK’s contemporary history. The approaching twenty-year anniversary provides a valuable vantage-point from which to assess whether the hopes that devolution would provide us with ‘living laboratories’ have been fulfilled. Devolution, of course, in Sorensen’s terms (2017) is itself a policy innovation. UK-based organisations such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence (AUE) and the Institute for Government (IfG) have sought to assist the evidence transfer and policy learning around innovative policies and practices between governments across the UK. (AUE, 2015b; IfG, 2015; Paun et al, 2016). While there is a long way to go on this agenda, there are some recent signs that there have been attempts to widen Whitehall’s understanding of the devolved administrations, their role, and the necessary interaction between them and Whitehall. (Jones, 2016). This has particularly been the case at the level of the Policy Profession network within the UK and devolved governments (Pendlebury, 2016).

Each of the devolved administrations has different powers and responsibilities, and each has developed in its own way. The original devolution settlements were different at the outset and have developed unevenly, with political circumstances, such as the Scottish independence referendum, changing governments at Westminster, and a culture of testing arrangements in the context of experience and review, provoking revision of the status quo. In the case of Wales, the original system, based on a transfer of the Secretary of State’s powers and control over quangoes, has been

significantly re-shaped following the 2006 Government of Wales Act, the subsequent 2011 referendum winning support for primary law-making powers, and the granting of powers over certain kinds of taxes in 2017.

Within the UK system there are formal and informal channels which allow for the exchange of information and innovative ideas. So, for example, the British-Irish Council has provided a series of formal opportunities for engagement between ministers across the devolved nations (and the governments of Ireland, the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey over a variety of functions and issues, from policy to services, from childcare to minority language policy (BIC, 2017). Ministers from different jurisdictions have also visited each other on a bilateral basis, or held telephone conferences, to discuss policy and services. (Andrews 2014). On occasion, policy innovations by the UK Government, which have taken England as the default for more wide-ranging reform, have provoked reactions from devolved administrations, for example on welfare reform, the Remploy factories or exam reform (Andrews, 2014), some of which have required discussion within the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC, 2012). Other informal channels for dialogue have been opened, for example through the auspices of the Alliance for Useful Evidence and the Institute for Government (Andrews, 2015; AUE, 2015; Paun et al, 2016).

However, despite these formal and informal links, there has been little examination of how innovations have travelled within the UK, let alone what has been the role of devolved or central government ministers in promoting innovation. There is almost a blank canvas for future researchers. As I suggest elsewhere (Andrews, 2017) further analysis of policy learning on innovative practice across the UK, on the lines of work on the smoking bans (Cairney, 2009), would be useful.

Gatehouse and Price (2013) mention a series of Welsh innovations post-devolution. I will briefly examine two which can most obviously be said to have travelled across the UK, have durability, and to have contributed to the creation of public value. These were the creation of the Children's Commissioner for Wales during the first Assembly (CWilliams, 2005) and the implementation of regulations permitting the 5p levy on plastic bags passed in the Third Assembly but coming into effect in the Fourth Assembly. While children's commissioners existed in several other jurisdictions around the world, this was the first such role in the UK. The former has been analysed by Hollingsworth and Douglas (2002). Their examination illustrates the difficulty of assessing the ministerial role: the proposal was first mentioned as a recommendation in the Waterhouse review of child abuse in north Wales children's homes and the proposal developed during the First Assembly, when the National Assembly was a corporate body with no formal legal distinction between legislature and executive (Hollingsworth and Douglas, p.73). Informal recognition of a separation between legislature and executive had been achieved following the succession of Rhodri Morgan to the post of First Minister and his announcement of the formation of a Welsh Assembly Government (Morgan, 2017). The proposal was discussed within the committee structure of the first Assembly, and the request then conveyed to the Secretary of State for Wales and UK parliamentary legislation brought forward and passed through an amendment to the Care Standards Bill and subsequently broadened with the passage of the Childrens Commissioner for Wales Act 2001 – the first parliamentary Act passed after the opening of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 (Hollingsworth and Douglas, 2002).

In the case of the 5p charge for plastic bags, this has been found to have been both a popular (Poortinga et al, 2013) and successful measure (Thomas et al, 2016; Welsh Government, 2016), leading to a reduction in plastic bag usage. It was adopted at a later stage of the devolution process, when there was clear separation between legislature and executive, making it easier to assess ministerial agency. Again, Wales was not the first country in the world to adopt such a charging

mechanism to reduce usage of plastic bags, but it was the first in the UK. This has been widely acknowledged (eg House of Commons, 2014; Rutter, 2016). Wales's First Minister from 2009, Carwyn Jones, a former Environment Minister, had included the idea in his manifesto for the leadership of Welsh Labour in November 2009, saying he wanted 'to send a clear message that my government will not tolerate a throw away society' (Jones, 2009). During the course of his election campaign for the Welsh Labour leadership he championed the proposal including in meetings with the CBI in Wales (private information). The adoption of the regulations in 2010 therefore had clear leadership support from the top, though curiously, the senior Welsh civil servant in charge of the environment department failed to mention that in his summary of the measure for civil servants across the UK (Quinn, 2014). Other nations in the UK subsequently followed Wales.

Here we have two examples, drawn from different time-periods in the life of the devolution in Wales, one of which demonstrates clearly a level of ministerial agency in the adoption of the innovation. The Welsh Government has regularly had to defend its own policies and approach, particularly since the advent of the Coalition Government in 2010, with its pro-austerity politics, and significant policy divergence. Sometimes this has meant a defence of Welsh innovations, such as the Welsh Bacalaureate – on other occasions, it has meant resistance to initiatives developed in England but not adopted in Wales, such as Academy Schools, or policies intended for UK-wide or Britain-wide implementation (Universal Credit, sanctioning of benefit claimants) without consideration of the different circumstances of and structures of the devolved nations. This means of course that issues of power are never far from the implementation and defence of innovation. Sometimes the Welsh Government's own initiatives have brought it under challenge from local government within Wales, such as on its Recycling targets, where Wales leads the UK (Messenger, 2017). The resistance to untested innovations from elsewhere, whether they are Universal Credit or Free Schools, may also confirm that there is an additional role required of ministers or political leaders in testing out innovative ideas for their contribution to public value.

I have adopted a different typology from Hartley or the Australian Public Service Network to illustrate a range of innovations in Wales. It should be stressed that this is an illustrative, not a comprehensive list. From my own inside knowledge and understanding, I would argue that most of this list was minister-led. In the absence of significant extant data on innovation in Wales post-devolution, indeed in the absence of significant academic research overall, I offer this as a tentative starting point for further research. My assessment is based on published works (Andrews, 2014; 2017a; Gatehouse and Price, 2013; Morgan, 2017), presentations (Andrews 2017b and 2017c) and unpublished contemporaneous diaries and notes. In offering this initial taxonomy I am obviously aware of the pitfalls of personal reflection as a data source, which have been widely discussed (sources). However, I am equally conscious that without the availability of first-hand reflection in the form of memoirs, biographical material, interviews and diaries, it sometimes takes time for data to surface for analysis. The value of biographical material as data for analysis and theory is contested but comparative biography has been seen as a more purposeful route for theoretical development. (Theakston, 1999; 2000)). Bevir and Rhodes (2010, p134 n3) list first-hand sources which they found particularly valuable in gaining insight into governing practices. Borins (2011) urges the value of the study of narrative in public administration. I offer this *reflection* as a contribution to a growing body of research about political leadership, seeking to situate it in the context of wider research on ministers, on the post-1997 emphasis on innovation in the public sector, and on devolution (in Wales in particular). Others can interrogate my personal 'fieldwork' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010, p 209).

Type	Example
Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welsh Baccaulaureate</li> </ul>
Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online learning environment for schools (Hwb)</li> <li>• Free Breakfasts in primary schools in poorer areas</li> <li>• Free prescriptions</li> <li>• Tuition Fee Grants</li> </ul>
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organ Donation Act – opt-out, not opt-in ('deemed consent')</li> <li>• Randomised Control Trials</li> <li>• One Welsh Public Service values</li> </ul>
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-Act fund for companies forced into lay-offs</li> <li>• Pro-act fund for training subsidies</li> <li>• Jobs Growth Wales</li> <li>• Foundation Phase for 3-7 Year Olds</li> <li>• Flying Start Programme for earliest years</li> </ul>
Strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-being of Future Generations Act</li> <li>• Violence against Women Act</li> <li>• Recycling targets</li> </ul>
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's Commissioner</li> <li>• Community Mutuals in Housing</li> </ul>
Instrumental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Plastic bag tax'</li> <li>• Land Transaction Tax</li> </ul>
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Policy Institute for Wales</li> <li>• Natural Resources Wales</li> </ul>
Innovation Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital Innovation Fund</li> <li>• Innovate to Save Fund</li> <li>• Welsh Language Technology Fund</li> </ul>

These can be grouped against the original Cabinet Office suggested roles for ministers and political leaders. Again, this is illustrative, not exhaustive.

Role	Welsh Innovations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting and relentlessly communicating clear and aspirational outcomes for the organisations and areas for which they are responsible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-being of Future Generations Act</li> <li>• Violence against Women Act</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating and exemplifying a culture which encourages new ideas wherever they may come from</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation Funds</li> <li>• One Welsh Public Service Values</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating the legislative and policy framework to promote experimentation and piloting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Randomised Control Trials</li> <li>• One Welsh Public Service values</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation Funds</li> <li>• Well-being of Future Generations Act</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting and defending experiments and high risk pilots</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recycling Obligations</li> <li>• Organ Donation Act</li> <li>• Welsh Bacculaureate</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing national, regional and organisational devolution as 'laboratories of innovation'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tuition Fee Grants</li> <li>• Plastic Bag Tax</li> <li>• Public Policy Institute for Wales</li> <li>• Free Breakfasts in primary schools in poorer areas</li> <li>• Free prescriptions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Galvanising others, championing and chivvying promising innovations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovate to Save</li> <li>• Other Innovation Funds</li> <li>• Recycling targets</li> <li>• Community Mutuals in Housing</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing visionary goals and driving them through (e.g. John F. Kennedy's 'Man on the Moon in a decade')</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recycling targets</li> <li>• Plastic Bag Tax</li> <li>• Foundation Phase for 3-7 year-olds</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning innovations and assessing their public value contribution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dropping the One Laptop per school pupil after its pilot phase</li> </ul>

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I have sought to look critically at existing research on innovation and its relationship to political leadership, and to develop further the initial typology advanced by Mulgan and Albury in work on the development of thinking on innovation in the New Labour period in particular, academic work on innovation and public value, political science literature on the agency of ministers, work from within the education policy field on ministers as system leaders, analysis of the role of time and history in assessments of ministerial contributions, and research on innovations within Wales post-devolution. I conclude that while there is little direct available work on which to build a theory of political leadership for public value in innovation, the Mulgan/Albury work is a useful starting point but needs to be developed. I add one new dimension, which is about leadership judgement on the value of particular innovations.

None of this work is exhaustive or conclusive. This is an emergent field. There is a need for quantitative research into the ministerial role in innovation. Qualitative historical analysis of case studies and comparative biography of ministerial innovators would be valuable, including the analysis of first-person narratives to see how ministers themselves conceptualize their role in innovation development. It would be instructive to look at whether the timing of ministerial appointment (immediately post-election, or mid-term, or post a change of leader) affects a minister's approach to innovation, or whether specific departments lend themselves more easily to innovative practice or leadership. Are specific traits associated with ministerial propensity to innovate? Are specific kinds of innovations more likely to be associated with ministerial leadership? Innovations might be examined and compared within existing sectors such as education or health. The devolved nations of the UK may provide a useful context for the evaluation of innovations over (soon) a twenty-year period.

Borins (2014) writes about 'the persistence of innovation. Sorensen and Torfing (2015) point out that 'contrary to classical public administration theory', the public sector generates a lot of innovation. Wegrich and Lodge (2014, p108) argue that 'the public sector is more adaptable to change and innovation than it tends to be given credit'. They make the point that the governance administrative capabilities may be the missing link between the public administration and innovation literatures. If we are soon able to look back on twenty years of devolution, it may be that we will conclude that public innovation is ordinary: it has become a routine part of governmental practice. If we consider the history of public innovation before New Public Management, before Reinventing Government, before New Labour's Modernising Government programme, it may be that we will reflect that it always was. Public value has historically been created by governments that were open to innovation and prepared to allow their ministers to innovate, to encourage others who could, or to adapt ideas from those who had. Arguably, it may have been like that before either innovation or public value become 'buzz-words'.

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