
Preface

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1 Research context

This symposium builds on a ‘Symposium on public ownership and enterprise management’ which was published in *The Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration* (Wettenhall and Thynne, 2005). Both symposia are the results of research over a number of years. Most recently, the research discussions have involved panel presentations at annual conferences of the International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM). Previously, they were contributions to a Working Group of the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA) (e.g., Ghuman and Wettenhall, 2001; O Nuallain et al., 1996; Thynne, 1995, 1998; Thynne and Wettenhall, 2001; Wettenhall et al., 1997; Wettenhall and Thynne, 1999, 2002).

The IASIA Working Group initially focused on problems of managing public/state/government enterprises, with special attention to relations between owning governments and managing boards and corporations. When privatisation became widespread, the Group explored the myriad effects of privatisation on the public sectors of the world, and was soon recognising that so-called privatisation often resulted not in a complete and clear transfer of activity from the public to the private sector, but rather in the development of arrangements involving some sort of public-private mix (Thynne, 1995; Ghuman and Wettenhall, 2001). This inevitably led to our keen interest in the forms, problems and opportunities of such mixes, and in the need to examine the complex issues of ownership involved.

The articles included in the 2005 symposium addressed these matters with reference to relevant experience in China, Hong Kong (as a special administrative region of China), Taiwan, the Netherlands, Malta, Mexico and New Zealand. Our concluding article focused on the nature and significance of ownership and related developments over time in various circumstances, including the rights and interests involved and at stake. Our underlying belief was, and remains, that ownership is a key component of governance in the public sphere as much as it is in the private sphere and, accordingly, it ought to be the

subject of analyses that go well beyond the pros and cons of privatisation by way of divestment.

2 The public sphere: a contested field

The ‘public sphere’ (esp., Habermas, 1991) comprises a complex array of ownership arrangements attracting a variety of descriptive class names such as state, government, community and of course public itself. All of them are in one way or another contested concepts that need to be better understood in terms not only of their bases, but also of their connectedness or disconnectedness. Arguably, the more that is known about these matters, both theoretically and in practice, the more the nature and cause of good governance will be advanced, with a clearer appreciation of their ‘capital’ foundations and the significance of trust, goodwill and community spirit (e.g., Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995; Warren, 1999).

Public ownership can mean many things, as we appreciated in our 2005 conclusion. It can refer to ownership by the state as a territorial construct and collectivity, by government as something less than the state, and/or by the community at large or in localities. Community ownership may involve very different attributes from government ownership, just as government ownership may differ from state ownership. Is there a composite public – maybe a pure public – with universal, or near universal, application?

Ownership in a stakeholder sense can involve having an interest in ensuring the ongoing enhancement of the value of an entity or asset. More specifically, it is based on property rights which enable an owner or owners to control the accessibility, use, maintenance, disposal, and so on of an entity or asset.

These different (interrelated?) notions of ownership can underpin and have immediate significance for the design and construction of public management systems. An analysis of them is sure to identify various forms of ownership, including the possibility of distinguishing between owners and managers – and, concomitantly, between principals and agents – in the provision, regulation and facilitation of public services in the public interest.

3 The discussions ahead: selected issues

The articles in this symposium explore these ownership ideas, complexities and contentions. They do so by addressing selected issues in a variety of contexts – country, community and organisational. Together, the different perspectives and analyses provide valuable insights into the nature, opportunities and challenges of ownership, while also indicating that much remains to be known about ownership and its significance in the meeting of public expectations and needs.

An underlying issue of ownership, explored in our following article, concerns the state-community nexus and the ways in which different conceptions of ‘community’ find expression in the state and often serve both to define and to constrain the state. Questions arise about the ‘publicness’ of communities and of community contributions to the management of public affairs. Possible answers lie in the structure and operation not only of communities as a whole, but also of the organisations involved, including public

enterprises in state-community hands, public enterprises in mixed public-private form, NGOs generally, and a more specific assortment of community enterprises, social enterprises and the like.

A critical issue of ownership in states and communities is considered in the article on Hong Kong's experience. The central question, as in the title of the article, is: 'Who owns culture and heritage?' Clearly, the enduring public value of culture and heritage needs to be recognised in all responses to their preservation and protection. The responses themselves frequently have to balance public and private rights and responsibilities through subtle and sustainable state-market alliances, with active community involvement being essential in the various deliberative processes involved. These are matters which the Hong Kong Government is yet to fully comprehend and ensure.

Another issue of state-community ownership is canvassed in the article on relevant experience in Italy and Sweden. Recent developments in both countries have targeted the territorial – place – basis of communities in the ownership and delivery of local public services. Many local services have been 'externalised' in the sense that traditional forms of direct management by elected local authorities have been replaced by a host of semi-independent management entities, thus raising important questions about public-community control and accountability. The structure and operation of the entities comprise both intra- and inter-community collaborative ventures, public-private partnerships, and public-private contracting schemes.

The transformation of the state and the significant implications for state-community ownership of public assets are key issues examined in the article on experience in Mexico since the early 1980s. State-community alignments and consequent organisational configurations have been affected considerably by changes in land ownership and the ownership of state enterprises. The results have been alarming in terms of slower economic growth, private monopoly activity, political instability, and social unrest and inequality.

The issue of public assets and changes in ownership structures and operational modes is also the focus of the article on Ireland's experience from 1925. The establishment and control of state-owned enterprises have raised questions about the openness of the processes involved and the efficacy of the tactics employed. Questions have also applied to the poorly planned nature of privatisation initiatives. They suggest that Irish Governments in recent times have not readily appreciated the value of public ownership in areas of strategic importance to the community.

The performance of a state-owned enterprise that is crucial to India's economic and community well-being is the issue addressed in the last article in the symposium. The enterprise is the Indian Railways. Of particular interest are the factors that led to its turnaround from a low performing entity to a high performing one while remaining in full public-government ownership. The analysis highlights the importance of leadership and good luck in the management of organisational performance. An implication of the analysis is that governments ought to pay increased attention to the means by which the performance of enterprises in public hands can be enhanced other than possibly by way of privatisation.

We conclude this preface by again stressing the need for ownership in the public sphere to be the subject of further detailed analyses. This accords with the research challenge posed at the end of our following article.

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