



Public Service Futures



With Robin Hambleton

Welcome to my new column on 'public service futures'. In it I will seek to offer insights from abroad in the hope that these may prompt fresh thinking in the UK context.

Not long ago *The MJ's* readers could safely ignore what was happening in other countries. In the past hard pressed local government officers – and I was one for a decade in the 1970s – could be forgiven for regarding foreign experience as, at best, an entertaining diversion from the day-to-day pressures of planning and delivering high quality public services, at worst, totally irrelevant.

The forces of globalization have – for good or ill – rendered such insular attitudes as out of date as the typewriters and Roneo stencils we used when preparing committee reports. This new column, written from the vantage point of Chicago, Illinois, where I am dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, is a response to these changes.

As global forces shrink the planet, UK public service leaders and managers, as with their counterparts in the private sector, need to pay attention to developments taking place abroad – if only out of self interest – for two main reasons.

First, it is now the case that events



Postcards from the edge

Academic Robin Hambleton, now based in Chicago (above), launches his new series, which will examine what lessons for the future of public service in the UK can be gleaned from experiences abroad

in far off lands can have a significant impact on your locality. This is the 'whether we like it or not' argument for developing international awareness.

Some of these cross-national currents are bringing changes that are profoundly unwelcome. I am not just referring here to the way multinational companies impose social costs on local communities when they 'outsource' jobs and investment

to regions of the world with low labour costs – certainly blue collar jobs but also now certain kinds of service sector jobs.

An even more disturbing international shift is the way some terrorist organisations have now achieved 'global reach'. A consequence is that public safety and, in particular, counter-terrorism are now high priorities in public service management in most western

democracies in a way that was not the case a few years ago. Here in the USA the new Department of Homeland Security is requiring all kinds of changes at the local level that are having a significant impact on citizens.

Along with all other holders of a US visa I am now fingerprinted each time I re-enter the country. Less fortunate travellers are detained for extensive questioning and there can

be no denying that there has been a significant erosion of civil liberties for US citizens following the passing of the Patriot Act in 2001. Similar 'policing versus freedom' dilemmas now confront UK policy makers.

A second, and more uplifting argument, for widening our horizons is that good ideas and practices do not need a passport to bound across frontiers. This is the 'terrific source of ideas' argument for fostering a global outlook.

Many of the challenges facing local government managers in different countries are the same. How to achieve more with less, how to improve service responsiveness? How to make new technology the servant of public purpose? How to enhance the quality of discussion and debate about major choices facing the council? How to reach excluded groups? And finally, how to strengthen local accountability?

It follows that there are substantial opportunities for cross-national learning and exchange – always provided full account is taken of the local culture and context.

Take telephoning the council. In Bristol the council has a two page spread in the phone book. Listed here you will find more than 100 numbers – everything from adoption to youth service – and the text at the top advises 'it's quicker to dial direct if you can'. Your council probably has a similar display in your local telephone directory. This passes for moderately good practice in UK local government in 2004. But ask yourself 'Is this a top quality service?' The truthful answer is no. Management innovation and new technology can transform this poor level of service into something much more user friendly.

Next week I will outline how.

Robin Hambleton is dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Visiting Professor of City Management at the University of the West of England, Bristol. His latest book (edited with Hank Savitch and Murray Stewart) is Globalism and local democracy