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***The persistence of innovation in government***

Sandford Borins (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press; 2014; ISBN: 978-0-8157-2560-2; 224 pp; \$32)

In his latest book, *The Persistence of Innovation in Government*, Professor Sandford Borins continues twenty-five years of research analysing winners of, and applicants to, the *Innovations in American Government Awards* program run by the Ash Centre for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS). ‘Within the public sector, innovation awards programmes, most notably, the HKS Awards, are still in operation and continue to receive hundreds of applications, providing scholars with an ongoing source of qualitative and quantitative information’ (p. 5). This book provides a comparison between the applications received in the 1990s (from 1990 to 1994) and those received in 2010. Borins acknowledges that this book is a return to a subject, to a methodology and to data contained in his 1998 book *Innovating with Integrity: How Local Heroes are Transforming American Government*, but he underlines that it is not a simple replication of that book.

*The Persistence of Innovation in Government* is written for two types of readership: both academic and practitioner audiences. Borins outlines that ‘the intended academic audience is particularly scholars exploring public sector innovation. The practitioner audience is more diverse, including would-be innovators at the political and civil service level in any government, public servants with a mandate for innovation (for example, those involved in the growing number of innovation units or labs, particularly, in local government in the United States), and public servants who are involved with innovation awards, either as applicants, judges, or managers’ (p. 7). The book ‘employs rigorous statistical analysis, aggregating data to identify trends and anomalies and using regression analysis to test hypotheses about the relationships among characteristics of public sector innovations’. Borins also emphasises that, underpinning this statistical analysis, ‘the book conveys, using secondary, disaggregated, qualitative observation, to identify something of the character and specificity of individual innovations, innovators, and their processes’ (p. 2). To ensure the book satisfies both types of readership, Borins has included, either in

the text or as footnotes, less technical, more intuitive accounts of statistical methodology and results.

The author initially sets out a scholarly context, and adopts a thematic approach to the burgeoning academic literature. The first chapter provides a useful account of the history of public sector innovation as a practice and as an object of study. Chapter Two offers a selective survey of studies based on applications to innovation awards: studies about whether innovations are launched on the basis of Robert Behn's (1988; 2008; 2014) formulation of 'management by deliberate planning' or through a process of 'management by incremental groping', and includes studies of policy entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship (pp. 73–5). Borins also notes some studies were inspired by the diffusion of innovation model set out in Everett Rogers' 2003 seminal work on *Diffusion of Innovations* and by the determinants of innovation in public sector organisations. Chapter Three sets out the discussion of the applications to the 2010 innovation awards, contrasting them with previous applications, especially those studied in *Innovating with Integrity*. Borins outlines that the aim is to present a portrait of these innovative programmes, detailing their characteristics, age, size, sources of funding, organisational structure and accountability relationships. Borins describes these characteristics as the 'building blocks' of an innovation and compares the building blocks for the entire sample with those observed for each of the six policy areas that make it up, and discusses in detail the statistical methodology employed for comparing the characteristics of the different innovation data sets.

In Chapter Four the focus shifts to the actual process of innovating and commences with the applicant innovators' self-reporting on whether they thought they were doing something entirely new, as opposed to adding features to previous innovations, either their own or those launched elsewhere. Borins considers the profile of the innovations' initiators, differentiated both by rank and gender, and then assesses the factors leading to the innovation. He discusses the analytical process involved and whether that process employed Robert Behn's (1988; 2008; 2014) formulation of deliberate planning or incremental groping. The chapter concludes with secondary analysis of the relationships among the characteristics presented, including addressing some pertinent questions: 'Did some initiators tend to work together? Were there certain external circumstances that brought particular initiators to the fore? What were the determinants of planning and incremental groping, the two alternative approaches

to initiating an innovation? Were certain initiators more likely to plan and others more likely to employ incrementalism? Were certain contexts more likely to lead to incrementalism and others to planning?' (p. 9).

Chapter Five discusses the stories of innovations, in particular the implementation of change. It identifies the sources of resistance to innovation and the tactics innovators have employed to respond to them, including the frequency of success. The chapter discusses ongoing criticism of innovations and correlates criticism with the organisational viewpoint of the critic. It also reports on what the innovators themselves identified as shortcomings of their innovations, and concludes by outlining the archetypal innovation story that derives from the data. In comparison, Chapter Six presents the applicants' own assessments of their programs' impact, as well as of their most important achievement. The chapter examines the external evaluations of the innovations, including media attention, replication and awards received (other than the HKS awards). By creating indexes for evaluating media attention, replication and awards, Borins uses multiple regression analysis to identify factors explaining the semi-finalists' scores on each and then applies this same approach to the HKS awards itself. This allows Borins to determine statistically why initially certain applications were chosen as semi-finalists and then why twenty-five programs and six finalists were chosen from among them. The statistical analysis highlights the 'importance of awards programs such as the HKS in encouraging, recognising, and diffusing public sector innovation and enabling scholarly research about it' (p. 9).

Further detailed analysis in Chapter Seven considers the subsamples represented by the six policy areas defined by the HKS awards staff: governance and management; transportation, infrastructure and environment; education and training; community and economic development; health and social services; and criminal justice and public safety. The analysis demonstrates how innovations in the six policy areas in 2010 differed from one another, as well as from those in corresponding policy areas, in the early 1990s. This chapter highlights the significant changes within each policy area over two decades.

Borins underlines from the outset that innovation persists in public sector organisations: 'despite scepticism about whether large, hierarchical, monopolistic government agencies can initiate and embrace change, there is extensive evidence that they can, they do,

and they will. Because innovators persist' (p. 1). He acknowledges that 'today's much more challenging policy agenda has led governments to welcome public entrepreneurship and commentators to celebrate the achievements of innovative public servants, rather than impugn their motives. Governments look both within the public service and to civil society generally for innovative solutions to policy problems and for better ways of providing service, and they will likely continue to do so' (p. 5). He suggests that 'innovation awards persist, bringing wider recognition to these efforts among practitioners, scholars, and the general public and encouraging new generations of change agents, experimenters, and "local heroes"' (p. 1). One of the most significant findings is the increasing proportion of innovation initiatives involving collaboration externally or collaboration within government. In 2010, 65 per cent of the innovation applicants reported external collaboration as a project component, representing double the 28 per cent reported in the applications in 1990. Almost 60 per cent of applicants also signified collaboration within government (pp. 52–4, 181).

The concluding chapter maps out the landscape of contemporary public sector innovation, summarising both the shifts and continuities that were explored in detail in earlier chapters. The chapter looks forward, addressing its findings separately to both readership audiences – academics and practitioners. 'Distilling the previous chapters' findings into a set of precepts for would-be public sector innovators, Chapter 8 offers its own contribution to the persistence of innovation. Detailing the research possibilities offered by innovation awards programs such as the Harvard Kennedy School's, it also suggests new avenues for public sector innovation scholarship, in both methodology and focus' (p. 10). Borins concludes this book by emphasising the importance of partnerships among award programs, academics and practitioners as key to spurring future innovations. Furthermore, the book calls for continued research on innovation in government. Borins argues that it is crucial to understand trends in innovation more deeply and to identify jurisdictions or organisations that support and encourage multiple innovations over time. This book and the extensive bibliography provide a great resource for scholars in public sector innovation. As Borins outlines, he interviewed four innovators within the public sector – Larry Rosenstock (founder of High Tech High), Jory Wolf (Santa Monica's Chief Information Officer, the originator of local broadband fibre-optic network to local businesses at lease rates), Daniel Hadley (the director of SomerStat

and representative of Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone) and Allison Hamilton (the originator of Oregon's Solar Highway) – and by 'assembling, coding, and analysing these stories of innovation, he has generated a meta-story that carries an important moral. Public sector innovation is an enduring phenomenon that continually changes, a remarkably stable process whose content has shifted significantly over the course of two decades and will undoubtedly continue to do so' (p. 205). Borins hopes that his twenty-five years of research will enable scholars, in the future, to update his findings from the HKS awards programs and provide a useful basis to assess future innovators' efforts.

Orla O'Donnell  
Research Officer, Institute of Public Administration

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