



Progressive Thinking:

Ten Possible Futures for Public & Community Services

Reimagining Government

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2020 has been a year of startling change. The COVID-19 crisis is redefining the relationship between citizens and the state and reshaping the workings of government at a breathtaking pace. The voices of people who have been victims of racism, and other forms of systematic injustice, have burst to global prominence. Change that would previously have taken years is happening in a matter of days as governments around the world scramble to respond to challenges unlike anything we've witnessed in our lifetimes.

While nobody can be sure how the pandemic will play out, it is clear that many of the changes taking place within government and wider society will be long-lasting. We are unlikely to return to our old ways of working. In fact, we have an historic opportunity to reimagine government for the better.

In some countries, such as New Zealand, the first acute phase of the crisis has passed. Consequently, people's attention is turning to the future we want to build together - including the role and nature of government. There are already a wide range of responses from governments in different countries so there is unlikely to be a single blueprint. However, the current crisis has highlighted three important themes that are likely to be of enduring importance.

1. Embracing real-world complexity

The challenges that government faces right now are highly complex. Almost all the major public policy challenges we face - such as tackling intergenerational inequality, navigating the future of work, or responding to the climate crisis - are complex in nature. Complexity is the norm, but we have built systems of government and governance that assume it is the exception, a delusion now cruelly exposed.

For example, the COVID crisis involves people at all levels of government, interacting with citizens and other organisations, in deeply interconnected ways. This means that decisions in one domain can have unpredictable effects elsewhere (for example, the way in which public health decisions have impacted on the airline industry). It is a problem that cannot be broken down into constituent parts and solved piece-by-piece. No single actor, including the government, is able to solve the problem alone. A more systemic approach is required.

Our current models of government are ill-suited to facing complex challenges. For example, traditional departmental silos make it difficult to take a holistic view. Information is often tightly held rather than being allowed to inform decisions throughout the system. The desire for senior figures to be seen as "in control", and the demand for clear lines of accountability, belies the reality that outcomes are rarely the result of simple cause-effect relationships.





COVID-19 presents an exceptional challenge, but complexity itself is not exceptional. In fact, it is everywhere we look.

How can we reorient government so that it is better able to respond to the complex challenges we face?

2. Nurturing our collective humanity and challenging injustice

The challenges of 2020 have both revealed our collective humanity, and identified ways in which [swathes of our citizens feel systematically excluded from that collective feeling](#). On one hand, we have seen countless inspiring examples of friendship and empathy that have become the norm between neighbours, colleagues and countries. The courage of many essential workers has been rightly recognised, as has their role providing human connection and compassion in the depths of the crisis.

On the other hand, the movement to challenge systematic injustice, inspired by Black Lives Matter, has revealed some of the most prominent obstacles that we face in building a sense of common humanity that is genuinely inclusive. For too long, too many voices have been excluded or devalued in the conversations about how we live together well.

These simple human aspects, now revealed as fundamental, have been disregarded in our public systems for too long. The pursuit of efficiency and value-for-money has driven a reductionist logic that quantifies success in terms of inputs, outputs and outcomes - with the value of the human relationships, trust and other more qualitative aspects downplayed. The public service ethos has dwindled as services have been disaggregated and outsourced.

We now have the opportunity to build on this insight and reshape our public systems so that they adopt a more human approach from the outset, valuing and celebrating those aspects as essential building blocks of better government. And we must rebuild these public systems based on a genuine commitment to equality - one which recognises that there are as many ways to be human as there are human beings. This focuses our minds on building public systems (ways for public services and citizens to collaborate effectively across boundaries) which recognise and respond to the variety of ways to be human, and forge a shared public purpose from this variety.

How can we build a more human approach to government and our public services?

3. Adopting a learning mindset

The challenges of 2020 have highlighted that the world is complex and uncertain. From the outset COVID-19 was an enigma. We had little certainty about how the virus was transmitted, how many people had been infected, and whether immunity would be acquired. And yet within this



uncertainty, governments still had to act. Through necessity they've adopted a learning mindset - a more agile, iterative approach, sharing information and learning along the way, in the knowledge that decisions taken today may well need to be adjusted tomorrow.

We need to adopt a learning mindset but often this runs counter to the understandable desire of politicians and policymakers to seek out big ideas that can provide long-term solutions. In reality, we often know less than we realise and are more confident in our ability to "solve" problems than our track record suggests. The desire to build solutions at scale means that too often we end up failing at scale.

Rather than optimising for control (much of which is an illusion) we should optimise our public systems for learning. [By celebrating the ability to fail fast and fail small](#), our health, education and welfare systems can rapidly learn - evolving and adapting over time as our collective understanding grows and as societal needs change.

How can we optimise for learning in our public systems?

Reimagining government: Politics and public management

Government includes both politics (who gets to decide) and public management (how we get things done). So when [we talk of reimagining government](#), which are we referring to?

The answer must be both.

For too long, these domains have been considered distinct when, in fact, they are inextricably linked. The challenges of 2020 - particularly addressing the challenges of systematic injustice - requires as much political imagination as public sector innovation.

Reimagining government so that it embraces complexity, nurtures humanity and adopts a learning mindset, will require both the political and public management aspects of government to work in tandem. For example, if we continue to expect our politicians and public servants to be accountable for outcomes they can't reasonably control, then we must not be surprised if we continue to create public management systems that provide the illusion of control.

We need a new alliance of politicians and public servants to reimagine government: new policies and new forms of implementation working hand in hand.





Human Learning Systems: What might reimagined government look like?

Once we acknowledge that the world is complex, we recognise that there is no such thing as a pre-existing blueprint for reimagined government which we can pull off the shelf, or which can be created in one place, and copied in another. Rather than looking for blueprints, each government must learn for themselves how they respond to the realities and challenges of complexity, nurturing collective humanity and learning in their own contexts.

But this does not mean each government needs to start their learning from scratch. A range of [public service bodies, governments, foundations and not-for-profits](#) have helped to outline an emerging new approach, called [Human Learning Systems](#):

Making public service more Human. The purpose of public service is to enable each and every person to lead a thriving life. This means that the future of public service is bespoke - it will respond to the particular strengths and needs of each person and community. Articulating this purpose focuses the attention of public servants on building relationships with those they serve – as it is only through these relationships that people’s particular strengths and needs can be known and acted on. This means liberating citizens and public servants from attempts to control their work from above, and instead focuses on building trust at all levels.

Creating continuous Learning. In situations of uncertainty, we do not know what the ‘right’ thing to do is. There is no manual to operate from. So everyone must learn, as they go. It is the job of government and public servants of all types to create emergent learning environments and practices ([Finland’s experimental approach is an interesting example of this](#)).

Nurturing healthy Systems. Healthy systems produce good outcomes. So if we want good outcomes, it is the job of political and public service leaders to nurture systems in which all citizens are heard, and in which different actors are able to learn, coordinate and collaborate effectively.

This way of reimagining government is new, and yet it is also built on thinking and practice which has been emerging in different places for many years. We have attempted to bring together current knowledge about the Human Learning Systems approach in a [new website](#). It contains [case studies](#) of the approach in practice, identifies [methods](#) that have been helpful and provides access to other [research](#) and [resources](#) for people wanting to explore further.

Reimagining Government in New Zealand

New Zealand is an ideal place for this exploration because it is making significant strides in this direction. For example, the commitment to future generations made in the [Living Standards Framework](#) provides opportunities for rethinking approaches to wellbeing, and the proposed [Public Service Reform](#) programme is seeking to create more agile and adaptive public service. Is this an

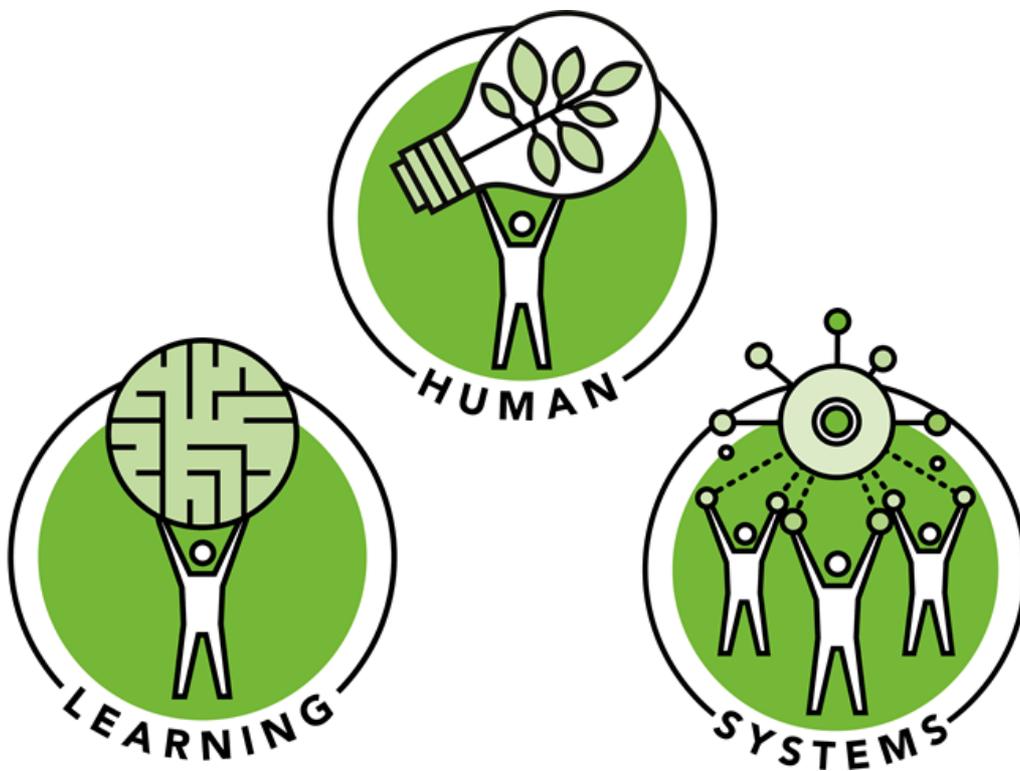




opportunity to develop an approach to public management implementation based on learning, rather than targets?

Recently we ran [a series of conversations](#) about reimagining government where we heard that while people are very excited about the ideas being discussed, there are many barriers (real and perceived) which make it difficult to translate ideas into action.

If those involved in governing New Zealand - in all its aspects, from community organisers to government ministers - are interested in taking this conversation further, we would love you to [join us on this exploration](#). We will be working with a range of government, public service, learning and community organisations in New Zealand and Australia to reflect on the opportunities and barriers that have emerged through our conversation series, to determine as a collective how to take the agenda of reimagining government forward through action, experimentation and learning.



Read more from the Progressive Thinking series at www.psa.org.nz/ProgressiveThinking

