

A key battleground of our times

This month the latest book from best-selling author, journalist and academic Max Rashbrooke and Bridget Williams Books hits the bookshops. Here are some insights from Max about 'Government for the Public Good':

How would you describe the process of writing this book?

In brief it's been a fascinating – and sometimes surprising – process of digging into the evidence about when the tasks performed by governments succeed, when they fail, and how well the various market-based reforms of recent decades have fared.

Why this topic, and why now?

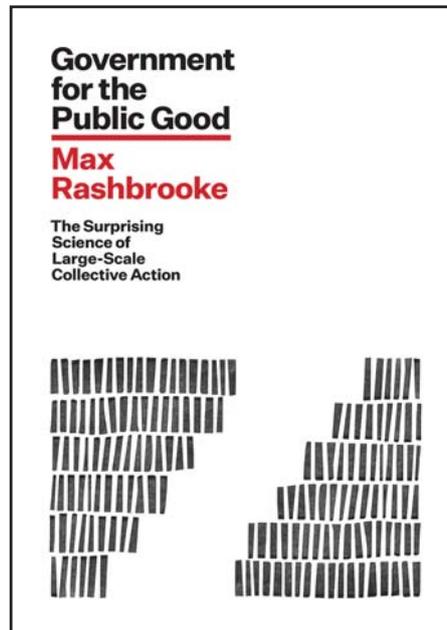
One of the things that has long troubled me is the assumption that market-based government reforms of recent decades have succeeded - whereas it can be argued they have largely failed.

I've also found a widespread inability to defend the idea that government works troubling. While ideas about 'what works' can sound dull, they are in fact crucial to public debate in New Zealand.

Of course people still want government to do a wide range of things, and yet they also have a real difficulty explaining why government might make good use of our money and achieve our goals in a reasonably efficient way.

What evidence did you find?

There is very strong international evidence that if people don't think governments are good at delivering desired services, they simply don't



trust them and will refuse to provide them with the tax revenue they need to achieve our collective goals.

The questions about government's effectiveness form one of the key political battlegrounds of modern times.

How does this contrast with people's ideas about markets?

The contrast is striking. Most people have no great ideological love for 'the market', but they can very readily recite a story – a condensed model, if you like – about how markets get things done efficiently, through competition allowing firms to offer consumers a wide array of choice and competitive pressure weeding out the worst performers.

Often, the response to these points is to attack the market, but in its place it is quite a useful tool. And such arguments have limited persuasive power because they are largely negative.

What are you suggesting we need?

At this moment of ideological ferment, when questions about states and markets are once again up for grabs, what we need instead, I believe, is a powerful but grounded defence of the government sector based on the evidence about the forces that actually make it work well. For me this has been a journey that has taken me away from a sole focus on New Zealand and into a much wider story about how government has changed across the Anglosphere since the 1980s. This includes how it could be reformed, along genuinely 'public' lines, to make it fit for the 21st century.

What can people who spend their working lives providing public services take from this book?

I think the book will provide a refreshing change from the normal narrative, presenting evidence that the jobs to which they devote their lives are actually a pretty good way of getting things done, on the whole. My aim has also been to give those readers hope: hope that government can be made even better than it is now, and hope that doing so can help get us through this very challenging century in reasonable shape. ☺