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***Futures for the Public Sector***

Geert Bouckaert, Annie Hondeghem, Trui Steen, Steven Van de Walle (eds) (Leuven University Press, 2025; ISBN: 978-94-6720-450-3 (paperback), 978-94-6166-624-6 (ePDF), 978-94-6166-672-7 (ePub); 398 pp.)

Geert Bouckaert is one of the most distinguished European public administration scholars of recent times. His pioneering work on public administration research, including his collaborations with his friend the late Christopher Pollitt, has done much to reinvigorate a European research perspective on the development of the public sector. It is therefore fitting that to mark his retirement, the book *Futures for the Public Sector*, edited by Geert Bouckaert, Annie Hondeghem, Trui Steen, Steven Van de Walle and Tobias Bach, was published in 2025 by Leuven University Press.

The book, which is an open-access volume, is intended to honour Bouckaert's contributions to public administration research. Fittingly, given Bouckaert's focus on research as a means of improving public services, while the book draws on solid historical research, contributions are strongly future-focused. There is an investigation of trends and their implications by international public administration scholars, drawing on themes like democratic resilience, crisis management, technological change and citizen-state relations. Implications for future directions in public administration research are set out at the end of each chapter of the book.

The preface by Hondeghem and Steen documents and celebrates Bouckaert's legacy, including his work on public management reforms, trust in government, performance measurement, and the Neo-Weberian State model. An introduction by Bouckaert himself sets out the original impetus for the book and positions the book as an examination of how the discipline of public administration can be

strengthened in the future. The book is structured into six parts, each exploring potential trajectories for the public sector.

Part 1 – Futures of the Politico-Administrative System – focuses on systemic threats and adaptations. Michael Bauer discusses strategies for democratic public administration at a time of rising illiberal populism. Alasdair Roberts examines increasing state fragility in both Global North and South contexts, advocating for governance adaptability through anticipating dangers, inventing strategies to deal with them, legitimating the strategies and execution. Donald Moynihan analyses the undermining of the administrative state in the United States of America urging public administration to defend institutional capacity and suggesting how public administration should respond. Norma Riccucci explores the rollback of diversity, equity and inclusion policies in the United States through Supreme Court decisions, highlighting implications for social equity.

Part 2 – Futures of Containing Crises and Disruption – addresses crises and technological shifts. Brian Head argues that poly-crises such as pandemics and climate events may become the norm, proposing adaptive governance models through stakeholder inclusion and transparency. Tiina Randma-Liiv and Steven Nõmmik advocate hybrid governance forms (blending hierarchy, markets and networks) in times of crisis, calling for greater cooperation across academic disciplines. Greta Nasi looks at the future role of government in cybersecurity, advocating a value-informed approach. M. Jae Moon et al. examine disruptive technology-driven future government, based on South Korean data, exploring human-artificial intelligence (AI) collaborative governance. Albert Meijer frames digital transformation as a double governance challenge – internal (process efficiency) and external (societal governance) – requiring multidisciplinary public administration studies.

Part 3 – Futures of Citizen-State Interactions – examines issues such as trust and communication. María José Canel addresses rising citizen scepticism in a post-truth era, emphasizing the importance of feedback and evaluation to counter populism. Gabriela Lotta examines how politicisation and populism affects street-level bureaucrats (based on Brazil under Bolsonaro).

Part 4 – Futures of Administering the State – looks at organisational and workforce evolutions. Martin Lodge reflects on the transformation of the regulatory state, and asks is this the end of the regulatory state era, positing a number of alternative scenarios. Sandra Van Thiel argues that we need more use of public value as a

design principle to balance specialisation and coordination in post-neoliberal reforms. Adina Dudau introduces ecosystem models for public service delivery, emphasizing co-creation, public engagement and active citizenship.

Part 5 – Futures of Managing the Civil Service – looks at implications for how the civil service is managed and run. Rosie Collington critiques the growing role of non-state experts and private sector consultancies in policy advice. Adrian Ritz et al. analyse workforce flexibility trends, proposing human resource frameworks adapted to environmental threats. Marina Nistotskaya looks at bureaucratic merit and its critiques, stressing the need for more informed debate. Tobias Bach explores the functional politicisation of merit-based civil services, using European cases to warn of the danger of responsiveness turning into subservience. Steven Van de Walle warns of the disappearance of lower-grade bureaucratic roles due to automation and outsourcing, potentially delegitimising public services.

Part 6 – Futures of Studying Public Administration – explores how public administration research might evolve to address challenges identified in the book. Jeroen Maesschalck advocates using public administration research in futures thinking, outlining a three-step process for scenario-building. Asmus Leth Olsen examines challenges and opportunities in what he terms ‘the scattered nature’ of the field of public administration research. Mary K. Feeney looks at the implications of the rise of open science and public access for public administration research.

Finally, a concluding chapter by Bouckaert brings things together, proposing ten tentative and hypothetical conclusions: bolstering deliberative democracy; constantly assessing trust; stronger independence; a rule of law based foundation; reinforcing the Neo-Weberian State, preparing for simultaneous crisis and routine management; shifting to connected core data bases; prioritizing the Sustainable Development Goals; more comparative research and academic dialogue; and embracing a permanent dynamic approach to public administration research.

Looking at the book as a whole, given the moves to populism in the United States and Europe, it is inevitable that several of the chapters focus on the challenges these trends pose for public administration. Roberts’ analysis of state fragility and Moynihan’s on U.S. administrative capacity reductions highlight risks of system collapse under populism and illiberalism, where institutions become politicised and ineffective. Riccucci’s exploration of the diversity, equality and

inclusion rollback and Lotta's analysis of frontline bureaucrat challenges underscore deepening inequalities and conflicts, potentially exacerbating social divides. Van de Walle's prediction of vanishing lower-grade jobs via automation points to a hollowed-out public sector, risking legitimacy and service quality. Canel's warns of eroded citizen trust in a post-truth era. These views are supported by empirical evidence but could be critiqued for overemphasising a Global North perspective (something which the book as a whole does at the expense of the Global South, though to be fair to the editors and authors they recognised this limitation).

On a more positive note, several chapters explore potential advantageous developments and scenarios. The contributions on hybrid governance by Randma-Liiv and Nõmmik and ecosystem approaches by Dudau promote resilient, collaborative systems that leverage networks for value co-creation, potentially leading to more inclusive and efficient public services. The chapters by Moon et al. on AI integration, and by Meijer and Nasi on digital strategies suggest opportunities for enhanced decision-making and cybersecurity, while recognising the potential challenges and dangers. Van Thiel's promotion of public value and Maesschalck's emphasis on futures thinking methodologies offer potential pathways for more coordinated administration. These views are substantiated by real-world examples.

*Futures for the Public Sector* is a fitting tribute to Bouckaert, advancing public administration discourse. The six part structure works well, enabling readers to focus in on issues or themes that may be of particular interest to them. One distinct strength is in the diversity of contributors, covering both established scholars and newer voices. However, as with most multi-author volumes of this kind, the book's ambition sometimes leads to uneven depth, with some chapters offering fresh empirical insights, while others revisit familiar debates, offering limited new perspectives.

The open-access format is a major plus, promoting widespread availability. The book will appeal to both academics and practitioners looking for insights into possible future governance scenarios for the public sector. Given the academic background of the authors, several contributions are strong on diagnosis but stop short of prioritisation or trade-off for public servants looking for implementation insights, which may limit its appeal to some practitioners. For public administration scholars, however, the book is an essential one for the shelf (real or virtual). The section at the end of each chapter in the six parts dedicated to outlining possible future research agendas for

public administration is of particular benefit to scholars, suggesting a wealth of topics and themes worthy of examination.

Overall, a very fitting tribute to Bouckaeret's career and his contribution to public administration research and the improvement of the public sector.

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