

## **A Tribute to Christopher Pollitt**

**By Don Kettl**

Few scholars of the last century brought such breadth and insight to the world of public administration than Christopher Pollitt, who left us in July after a prolonged illness. He worked simultaneously in theory of the field, in its grandest sense, but his feet were always firmly on the ground, in a search for insights to guide the world of practice. He worried a lot about the big questions, especially how the modern nation-state can best meet the growing demands of its citizens, but he never approached these questions in a worrisome way. Great good humor and a generous spirit always guided his work.

He was remarkably prolific: Christopher was responsible, as author, co-author, or editor, for nearly 30 books, as well as a big collection of articles. His *Public Management Reform*, with Geert Bouckaert, is a sweeping exploration of the field's comparative foundations. Subtitles for the recent editions—"new public management, governance, and the neo-Weberian state," then "into the age of austerity"—map the advances and struggles, the promise and performance of public administration over the last generation. Anyone searching for a handle on how public administration and public management are advancing across national borders can find this a one-stop shop.

His was a search for Continuity and Change in Public Management, as his 2009 book explored. He used an original approach to cases and sources for his 2003 book, *The Essential Public Manager*, and argued in 2008 that managers too often ignore the importance of time in *Time, Policy, Management: Governing with the Past*. Christopher's 2016 *Advanced Introduction to Public Management* playfully toys with the paradox of the title with a careful, insightful, and lively examination of the field's building blocks. It's an introduction that, at the same time, advances to new ground. Throughout his prodigious body of work, it's hard to find researchers who have had more impact on the field—his *Public Management Reform* has more than 10,000 citations from other scholars. It's hard to find researchers who have understood their subject better—his work shows a truly uncommon mastery of the details of public management across time and boundaries. And it's hard to find researchers who have tackled a broader range of issues—his work ranges from decentralization and performance to convergence budgets, always with a twinkle in his eye. Who could resist reading his analyses of "magic concepts," public management understood as "justification by works or by faith," or the "emperor in his underwear"?

For Christopher, the ultimate question was not theoretical peregrinations but whether the field had things to say to help public managers make management better. He drew his big questions not by driving down the road looking in the rearview mirror but by talking with—and often debating—the government officials who struggled with the field's big issues. His own

background was as a civil servant, and the instinct for speaking truth to power was deeply rooted in his core. So too was his essence as an internationalist. At an earlier point in his career, he worked for the BBC. He was a Brit who became a scholar, married his wonderful wife Hilikka, who worked for the European Commission in Brussels, and then went on to hold a distinguished university post in Leuven, Belgium. He was a citizen of the world in the roots of his life—and a citizen of the worlds of theory and practice in the work he did.

That meant his radar was always tuned to how the field of public administration and public management connected with the imperatives for improving government. And that, in turn, makes one of his last contributions, a 2017 article entitled “Public Administration Research Since 1980: Slipping Away from the Real World?”, all the more important. He worries about what he calls a significant problem for academic public administration: that much of the research published in the leading journals has become further and further removed from the actual problems practicing administrators and managers are obliged to deal with every day. The practitioners deal with the external world, the authors of academic articles increasingly slip away from that world to busy themselves with other concerns.

Christopher would not have been Christopher without then diving in with a plan of action to help solve the problem. But it’s a sign of his signal contributions to the field that his concluding contribution to us is a reminder that the fundamental test of theory is how well it helps the world of practice—along with his certainty that the world of practice can provide a powerful help to those working in the world of theory.

He was a man of genuine warmth and wry humor. There never was a dinner without great stories and lively laughs. Christopher had an unfailing sense of generosity, always accessible to his colleagues and encouraging to younger scholars. And he brought with everything he did an unflinching certainty that we can always do better—and that doing better meant honing in on the big questions and bridging the worlds of theory and practice. Few—if any—have done that better.