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# The Unintended Consequences of Structural Change: When Formal and Informal Institutions Collide in Efforts to Address Wicked Problems

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## ABSTRACT

Significant restructuring of bureaucracies has occurred to facilitate joined-up working. This article draws on new institutionalism to explore the rationale behind the use of structural change for the promotion of joined-up working. It argues that a strong institutionalized myth has emerged which has created isomorphic pressures in the public sector to instigate structural changes in the name of vertical integration. These combine with informal institutions in ways that can be both productive and unproductive, highlighting the need to find a balance between formal institutional change and informal institutionalized practices, which often go unacknowledged as a powerful influence on policy.

## KEYWORDS

New Institutionalism;  
structural change;  
boundaries

## Introduction

Early management research sought to “scientifically” determine the best way to structure organizations (Fayol, 1930). Similarly, Weber sought to understand the ideal-type bureaucracy (Weber, 1967). While our understanding of organizational performance has expanded to include “informal” elements such as culture, norms, values, and context (Crozier, 1964; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Smircich, 1983) these early management beliefs can still be found in practice. We still frequently see formal organization change and restructuring used as a mechanism to achieve better organizational outcomes. In government, since the mid-1990s these have often been driven by the desire to create “whole-of-government” and “joined-up” approaches (Pollitt, 2003)

From 1990s onward “joined-up government”, “whole-of-government,” and “horizontal governance” approaches have emerged in many OECD countries as an attempt to grapple with the “wicked” public and social policy issues which implicate multiple government departments (Pollitt, 2003). This can be linked back to the nature of wicked problems. Wicked problems are unstructured and fluid, have multiple and interconnected parts (i.e. are cross cutting), and can appear relentless – requiring novel approaches to problem solving and cross-governmental integration (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Weber & Khademian, 2008). As a result, there have been a vast array of efforts across governments in various jurisdictions to create

integration, between service entities at the local level, and to create policy coherence within government (6, 1997; Carey & Crammond, 2015; Egeberg, Peters, & Pierre, 2007; Keast, 2011; Pollitt, 2003). As Kelman (2007, p. 45) has argued, “topics of collaboration across government agencies and between government, private and non-government organisations are the most discussed questions” in public management (see also O’Flynn, 2014). Many pressures have led to the urge to join up, including the emergence of wicked problems, the rise of new public governance, and the spread of ideas about how government should function (Béland, 2005). It has been argued that since the Blair government in the 1990s joined-up governance has become synonymous with modernization, future-proofing, and proactive government (Carey, 2016; Hood, 2005). “Siloed” working is seen to be out-dated, while “joined-up” and “whole-of-government” working is the mark of governments who are ready to meet the challenges of the future (Carey, 2016). In many OECD countries, particularly those with Westminster systems, significant formal institutional re-structuring of departments has taken place in the name of breaking down silos and promoting whole-of government and/or joined-up practice (6, 1997; Carey, 2016; Carey & Crammond, 2015). Joined-up working can be created either horizontally or vertically across different policy actors inside and outside of government (Egeberg et al., 2007; Gulick, 1937; Keast, 2011). Horizontal integration tends to be a feature of “bottom-

up” approaches to joined-up government – the ideal end state for service delivery (Keast, 2011). Vertical integration, which is argued to be the most common, brings a range of activities under the purview of a single department. In his seminal work on vertical integration Chandler (1993) argues that firms use vertical integration as a way to decrease costs and expand productivity through administrative coordination of a range of operating units. While Chandler argued that vertical integration was more profitable for firms, in the public sector Keast (2011) has argued that any attempts to create joined-up working for solving wicked policy problems should use both vertical and horizontal mechanisms.

Central agencies have been seen as critical to vertical integration efforts (Keast & Brown, 2002, p. 441). This is done on the belief that they are “empowered to impose discipline upon line agencies to better align their work with government’s priorities” (Keast, 2011, p. 221; Ling, 2002; Matheson, 2000). More broadly, new public governance has seen the concentration of power in central offices in Westminster systems (Aucoin, 2012; Boston & Halligan, 2012). This role has emerged because of “their position at the hub of decision making around key areas such as policy, finance, administration and legislation” (Keast & Brown, 2002, p. 6). Typically this has involved central agencies using their authority to coerce organizations to align their activities with one another (Bouckaert, Peters, & Verhoest, 2010). Recently in Australia, there have been attempts to achieve vertical integration through restructuring central agencies to combine both policy development and service delivery functions, as is the case explored in this article.

While restructuring bureaucracies has become a common practice in the quest for more effective processes and functioning to address wicked policy problems, this action is not based on solid evidence (Carey & Crammond, 2015; Keast, 2011; O’Flynn, 2014). At present, there is no substantive evidence that formal restructuring of institutions enables or enhances joined-up working or creates successful outcomes (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Carey & Crammond, 2015; Keating, 1993). Despite this, structural reorganization has taken on a mythological level of legitimacy that is not supported by either the experiences of those being restructured or the international literature.

This article draws on theories of new institutionalism to explore a case of vertical integration. This case examines the implications of normative and mimetic isomorphic pressures in the public sector, whereby structural change was undertaken to signal action on a wicked problem through increased vertical integration. It highlights how the formal institutional changes,

instigated in response to external pressure, interacted in unproductive ways with existing informal institutional practices. The interplay between formal institutional structures and informal practices has received little attention in the new institutionalism literature. This is despite the fact that, as Kay and Daugbjerg (2015, p. 357) note, there are significant shifts in the balance of formality and informality in institutions which has created an uneasy relationship between institutional inheritance and “purposeful design” in the governance change processes.

## New institutionalism and the public sector

New institutionalism in organizational analysis has made substantive contributions to knowledge of how organizations operate and why – moving the focus away from rationalist explanations toward analyses which focus on the broader cultural and political contexts in which organizations are located (Barzelay & Gallego, 2006; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2013). While there are a range of perspectives in new institutionalist theory, commonalities exist. These commonalities are: the positioning of collective behavior as patterned by informal institutional norms; the view that institutions constitute critical contextual variables that determine behavior and outcomes giving rise to a greater analytical focus on context; and greater attention is devoted to the constraints of rules and norms, as well as myths and symbols, that prescribe, pattern and legitimize social action (Béland, 2005; Ferris & Tang, 1993; Immergut, 1998; March & Olsen, 2004; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Schmidt, 2010; Scott, 2013).

Far less attention has been given to how new institutionalism can inform the study of policy (Béland, 2005; Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004). It has been argued that institutionalization occurs through the regulation, accountability, oversight, accreditation, and funding functions of the public sector – creating “professionalization” and “bureaucratization” within other sectors (Carey, Braunack-Mayer, & Barraket, 2009; Considine, 2003; Considine & Lewis, 2012; Fyfe, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Lovell, Kearns, & Prince, 2013; Scott, 1991). Yet, the public sector can be the object of institutionalized pressures itself rather than merely the source of institutionalized practices (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).

This article extends Powell and DiMaggio’s (1991) work, on how organizations are created, produced, and reproduced through social action, to the public sector. Powell and DiMaggio’s (1991) approach to new institutionalism examines and describes the processes by

which practices and organizations become institutionalized, characterized by routinized actions that give meaning to themselves and others (Giddens, 1984; Hatch, 1997; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). New institutionalists have provided considerable evidence that “informal” institutionalized social practices (comprised of norms, values, and other elements of “culture”) matter for how organizations function – producing particular patterns of behavior which diffuse across organizational boundaries through isomorphic pressures (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). This work argues that practices emerge from cultural expectations driven by inter- and intra-organizational factors.

An important contribution for the study of the public sector from new institutionalist theories is an understanding of processes of isomorphism within the public sector. Isomorphism is a constraining process that results in organizations becoming homogenous in reaction to the external environment (Scott, 1991). Powell and DiMaggio (1991) argue that three primary, but overlapping, pressures exist which create and diffuse institutionalized practices: (1) coercive isomorphism that stems from political influence and the need for legitimacy, (2) mimetic isomorphism resulting from standard responses to uncertainty, and (3) normative isomorphism associated with professionalization. The public sector is subjected to all three pressures, with coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism affecting its institutionalized practices. However, Frumkin and Galaskiewicz have argued that public sector organizations may be more susceptible to normative and mimetic pressures because they have no single stakeholder group to monitor and evaluate their efforts in terms of the “bottom line.” As a result, they may be swayed “by exposure to environmental pressures that promise ... greater legitimacy” (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004, p. 289). These pressures can take the form of “ideas,” as defined in Béland (2005), regarding how institutions *should* be formally structured to address policy problems. As argued by a range of scholars, ideas can become a powerful and material force for change in and of themselves, both within and across institutional contexts (Béland, 2009; Farazmand, 2012).

Béland (2005, 2009) has argued that “ideas” are an additional force acting on the public sector through politics and the demand for better policy. Here, “ideas” are part of the construction of social, economic, and environmental problems that governments must address; they form the basis of what direction institutional change takes (Béland, 2007). While sometimes this takes the form of generating particular policies (in response to ideology), it can also exert pressure on

government to undertake other types of reform, such as altering the formal structures of institutions, in an attempt to be better equip the organization to tackle emerging problems (Egeberg et al., 2007). Here it is important to note authors have drawn a distinction between formal institutional structures (how institutions are organized in a formal sense) and informal “institutionalized” practices (i.e., patterned behavior) (Kay & Daugbjerg, 2015). To study institutions, in both senses, Béland (2007) argues researchers and practitioners must take account of the beliefs and assumptions of actors.

Like their private and not-for-profit counterparts, public sector organizations also need to be seen to be participating in institutionalized ways of working, and structured along legitimized institutional lines. At the most basic level, this includes the creation of human resources departments or evaluation units, which have become expected, or rationalized/institutionalized, organizational components. However, the construction of policy problems can also exert pressures on government to undertake more radical reform. In recent years, ideas about wicked policy problems (combined with other institutional forces) have exerted pressure on governments to pursue integration. In turn, a wide range of different structural and cultural efforts have been undertaken by governments (Keast, 2011). The literature on new institutionalism in organizations has as demonstrated these “institutional myths” (about how organizations or governments should be constructed) can produce significant inefficiencies and potential dysfunction (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Here, “institutionalized myths” refer to rationalized organizational myths which form part of institutional contexts in which organizations operate, and to which they adapt in order to maintain their social legitimacy (Hatch, 1997). However, how institutional myths develop and exert isomorphic pressures across the public sector – and what this means for effective government – has not been explored.

Taking a new institutionalist perspective on organizations locates irrationality in the formal structure of organizations themselves; formal institutional structures can drive inefficient and ineffective behavior (Scott, 1991). In a similar vein, Giddens (1984) argues that the rationalized actions of individuals produce unintended consequences, both for immediate organizational contexts and broader social systems. Moreover, social actions become a further source of irrationality – potentially supporting and elaborating ineffective institutional myths (i.e., formal institutional structures) (Hatch, 1997). Hence, the literature on new institutionalism in organizations implies, but does not fully

investigate, that these inefficiencies emerge because of the intersection between formal institutional structures and informal “institutionalized” behaviors. Formal rules, which are divorced from organizational goals, lead to evermore elaborate social practices in an effort to support and compensate for ill-fitting structures (Hatch, 1997; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Béland (2005) argues that new institutionalists have given considerable analytical attention to the ways in which informal institutional practices constrain behavior, reinforcing path dependency, and too little on the ways in which agents can enact change in the context of policy design and implementation. Informal institutionalized practices may also work to correct the limitations of formal institutions (Stinchcombe, 2001). Hence, one way to reinsert agency back into institutional analysis is to examine the interplay between formal institutional structures and/or rules and informal practices.

Over the past 10–20 years, the importance of breaking down silos and working in a collaborative way have become a critical part of the public sector’s institutional context (Keast & Brown, 2002; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Rhodes, 1997, 2008). As stated at the opening of this article, it is often assumed that governments who are visibly breaking down silos are ready to tackle the complex and “wicked” public policy challenges, as well as the emergence of new public governance and notions of governments “steering not rowing”. Hence, there are strong normative isomorphic pressures at play from the international governance literature and practice that encourage action which promotes “joining-up”, either vertically or horizontally (6, 1997, 1997; Pollitt, 2003). It is often assumed that the quickest and most visible way to meet these demands, and maintain legitimacy, or validity of order (Weber, 1922), is to enact structural change. This article draws on a case study where these assumptions underpinned unprecedented structural change in the Australian Public Service to interrogate the question “how do formal institutional structures and existing informal practices interact with one another in the context of structural change aimed at addressing a wicked problem?”

## Methods

The aim of the study was to investigate recent structural changes to the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). This included examining the implications of structural change for: cross-government working, service delivery, policy design, and implementation. Specifically, this study adopted a single, critical, case study design (Yin,

2014) focused on changes within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Critical cases are chosen for their unique nature and concomitant ability to drive theory (Yin, 2014). This was due to PM&C undergoing a large-scale change that brought together PM&C, Indigenous Affairs, the Office for Women, and Regulatory Reform and Finance. This represented an unprecedented change as it involved integrating a boutique central agency with responsibility for the coordination and provision of whole-of-government policy advice. As such, it provides a critical case for the development of theory (Yin, 2014). An interpretivist approach was adopted; seeking an understanding of the way structural changes were experienced in the context of large central agency mergers and acquisitions.

Interviews were conducted between December 2015 to February 2016 (2 years after the original structural change had been enacted) and then in April 2017 (over 3 years after the original structural change). However at the time of data collection, continued efforts to integrate the disparate groups were evident, thus the change process was ongoing. This meant that while some participants drew on memories of the initial change, many were still actively engaging in the change process. The study used the purposive sampling technique to identify key individuals within PM&C areas affected by the change. This sample comprised the senior, middle, and lower-level managers in affected areas. Individuals were sought who: (a) had been brought into PM&C under recent restructuring or (b) had worked in PM&C prior to (and were present for) recent structural changes. In total, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted across PM&C, including “legacy” (i.e., original PM&C employees), Indigenous Affairs (including 9 units brought together to create the Indigenous Affairs portfolio that was then placed in PM&C), the Office for Women and Regulatory Reform and Finance. Participants incorporated deputy departmental secretaries, senior managers, directors of sections, and team managers.

The interviews were recorded (with the exception of one participant, on request) and transcribed verbatim. Themes covered in the interviews included: the rationale for central agency changes, the experiences of implementing the change, organizational planning and change management, and implications for policy design, implementation, and outcomes. Data were analyzed by three of the authors using a thematic approach (Blaikie, 2010). “Like” data were grouped together to form categories and subcategories. These categories were developed into more substantive themes, by linking and drawing connections between initial categories



and hypothesizing about consequences and likely explanations for the appearance of certain phenomena (Strauss, 1987). This was done via discussions between the team members. In the refining themes for publication, selective coding was carried out, whereby transcripts were revisited with the explicit intent of finding further linkages and connections between the central issue being explored and other themes.

## Findings

In late 2013, the Australian Federal Government restructured, bringing a number of units (Office for Women, Regulatory Reform Division) and a major line function (Indigenous Affairs) into PM&C. This restructure was part of a political promise to address the wicked problem of Indigenous disadvantage and gender inequality (Commonwealth Government, 2016; Senate Estimates, 2013; Strakosch, 2013). Additionally, Indigenous Affairs staff were merged from eight different line agencies into a single group and placed into PM&C. This section outlines the implications of this change for both the original functions of PM&C and the functions brought into PM&C.

### *Implications for the primary functions of PM&C*

Ideas, Blyth and Béland argue, become powerful instruments by which institutional arrangements are shaped (Béland, 2009; Blyth, 2001). Constructions of policy problems as “wicked” and “dispersed” have led to the institutional logics that vertical integration is needed in order to coordinate and monitor progress. The role of PM&C is to coordinate whole-of-government policy and provide oversight functions for the Prime Minister (Buckley, 2006; Keating, 1995). This has made PM&C (and other central agencies) the focus of attempts to create vertical integration (Keast, 2011). To achieve vertical integration, significant restructuring has taken place in bureaucracies (Andrews & Boyne, 2012). In the case study discussed in this article, the shift of Indigenous Affairs and the Office for Women into PM&C symbolized that they were key priority areas for government: “Indigenous programs and policy will come within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet because Indigenous policy and programs should ... be at the heart of Australian government” (Strakosch, 2013). While this decision was clearly driven in part by national political pressure (the type of ideological ideation process emphasized by Béland (2007, 2009)), the idea that it could be resolved by vertical integration was likely influenced by international practices regarding coordination and central

agencies. Implementing this change required a disassembly of existing structures, breaking down silos produced either by individuals or groups working in diverse line agencies on Indigenous issues or by having areas of government priority sitting in other departments (e.g., the Office for Women).

The organizational restructure decoupled PM&C’s structure from its mission of whole-of-government policy co-ordination, creating very real implications for the efficiency and effectiveness of new and old parts of PM&C. For example, participants explained that bringing in Indigenous Affairs weakened PM&C’s ability to function as a coordination and oversight body:

The beauty of the central agencies are they are nimble... have oversight and can present alternatives. The merger has certainly compromised this in the Indigenous affairs space [P08]

Significant power is now concentrated in central agencies within Westminster systems, as a means to coordinate the activities of government departments with policy and political priorities (Boston & Halligan, 2012). In order to undertake this coordination and oversight role effectively, PM&C must retain some distance from other ministers and line agencies. This distance is important as one of PM&C’s functions is to ensure the quality and consistency of advice being provided to the Prime Minister. This requires PM&C staff to critique the advice provided by line agencies in light of the government’s agenda and priorities; they must adopt a whole-of-government perspective when assessing advice. The ability of PM&C staff to undertake this vertical integration was undermined through merging line agency functions with PM&C:

Anything that is a line delivery function doesn’t belong in a central agency because it’s a conflict of interest ... [PM&C should] present a free and independent view point ... PM&C capabilities are in high level strategic policy... to be able to rapidly pull things together and present fresh thinking, divorced from what the minister might be saying. [This is important because] it’s hard for a line agency to argue with a minister ... If [the minister] want[s] to do something stupid [a line agency is] out of options for how you influence him. PM&C was an influencer, they were a central body, but we’ve blunted that instrument ... If the minister was doing weird and wacky things we don’t have a mechanism to use now [P10]

Prior to the merger, a “shadow team” existed within PM&C who critiqued policy advice from the Prime Minister’s perspective. This team had established a range of informal practices to bridge the line agency-central agency divide. For example, they re-worked policy advice from line agencies in order to align with

the government's agenda and be considered appropriate from the Prime Minister's perspective. Following the merger, however, the shadow team was abolished, resulting in PM&C staff now being responsible for simultaneously providing and critiquing their own advice, resulting in: "There [being] no independent advice going to PM&C, no team of people whose job it is to interrogate what we do [from a central agency perspective]" [P10].

Another critical role of PM&C is high level policy development (6, 1997; Buckley, 2006; Commonwealth Government, 2016). Line agency functions were brought into PM&C as a means to ensure effective policy development and implementation. However, participants attested that the merger of line agency functions and PM&C compromised the Department's ability to develop effective policy for reasons similar to those outlined in statements by participants above:

I think in some ways the policy got designed worse. Because there was more fragmentation. There was more parallel but not perpendicular thinking ... The way in which you run particularly good Cabinet processes is all about anticipating what goes on in the room. Not just who's going to say what, but who's going to want what. And you enable that by having good communication at the bureaucratic level and good processes to anticipate the fact that in a Cabinet environment you'll see it in several different people. And you'll brief them differently. And from what I understand anecdotally, for example, Indigenous [Affairs staff] would send the exact same brief up to the P.M Abbott as they would to [the Indigenous Affairs Minister] [P01]

These issues meant that the structural solution of merging agencies to breakdown silos and ensure quality in policy advice and implementation appears to have achieved the opposite. The fundamental role of PM&C was compromised by having to manage new relationships at the ministerial level and housing staff from line agency areas who were focused on service delivery and program implementation. This meant that PM&C was no longer focused solely on whole-of-government policy coordination and advice, but instead undertook dual roles which were frequently incompatible. These issues were compounded by PM&C not configuring the department in a way that enabled them to continue to perform their central agency function effectively (i.e., by the adoption of new functional roles). As Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004) argue, issues emerge when structure becomes decoupled from function (and in turn, mission), as occurred in PM&C. Again, while past experiences of the shadow team indicate that informal practices can emerge to compensate for the limitations of formal institutional

structures, this was yet to emerge with regard to securing the primary goals of PM&C.

As Jun and Weare (2011) note, the rush to adopt "innovations" in the public sector to gain legitimacy has frequently led to weak and/or poor implementation. Isomorphic pressures, generated by ideas about how best to address complex policy problems, can be fast-paced efforts to alter bureaucratic structures (see, for example, Andrews & Boyne, 2012). In our case study, this manifested in a lack of change management and support processes and structures. Through the structural change, which brought together disparate cultures, PM&C abolished the policy "shadow teams" which once performed a cultural broker role. Previously, the role of these teams was to act as boundary spanners between PM&C and line agencies (Williams, 2002). They sought and coordinated policy briefings and advice from the different line agencies, and then translated these briefs for the Prime Minister. The shadow teams also managed relationships and spanned the different cultures between PM&C and line agencies. This was important due to the considerable cultural differences that were evident between PM&C and the line agencies, which were manifested in the different timeframes the agencies operated within. PM&C legacy (pre-merger PM&C) was driven by the need to be responsive to the Prime Minister's requests and provide accurate whole-of-government policy advice within short timeframes. In contrast, the line agencies were concerned with a particular realm of responsibility (i.e., Indigenous or women's affairs), which often involved undertaking detailed work. Here we can see that seemingly rational (and rationalized) actions of individuals to not "double up" on roles had significant unintended consequences for the functioning of both PM&C legacy and the line agency groups (Giddens, 1984):

... a lot of the program implementation work is reiterative, it's developing a series of products whether it be guidelines, whether it be help manuals for the providers, whether it be performance templates ... [whereas with] a PM&C central agency approach, you have to take a very strategic high level, 'is this in line with the government's other 50 million policies? Are there implementation issues? Are there people in my area who need to know about this in case it conflicts with something they're doing?' So it's a very high level approach [P01].

Issues also emerged in both the content of briefs and the way in which they were written. Traditionally, staff from PM&C legacy wrote short briefs with "a lot of active language, a lot of very precise wording, a lot of very clear wording [and] a lot of precise wording. No waffle" [P03]. This approach differed to that adopted by

some line agencies which provided detailed policy advice: “[the line] agencies, because they’re often talking about the detailed policy matters ... [they] will have, you know, huge chunky paragraphs” [P01]. The shadow teams performed an important, though informal, translation function where the different worlds could meet in a manner that minimized tensions and enhanced the effectiveness of policy advice. Their removal was based on the belief that because Indigenous Affairs was structurally placed within PM&C, there would be knowledge and skill transfer (or “joined-up working”). However, this belief proved to be erroneous, as the different cultures – or informal institutionalized practices – made joining-up incredibly difficult. Previously, the shadow teams in PM&C fulfilled a boundary-spanning role between these divergent worlds, and dealt with differences in culture, perspectives, and needs between line agencies and PM&C legacy:

... the ‘Legacy PM&C’ involves the act of shadowing. ... So previously there’d be an area that would oversight the Deregulation, Area of Finance or the Women’s area or the Indigenous Affairs area.... The Prime Minister and the Secretary [of PM&C] might want something different from your Portfolio Minister or your Secretary. [Their role was] to be able to understand ... points where the relationship may break down. Points where there will be differences of understanding or differences of approach. Points where there’ll be policy differences or implementation differences or differences in outcomes [P01].

Despite their integral boundary spanning role, these “shadow teams” were removed following the PM&C structural change. As noted above, this decision was based on the assumption that once the structural boundary (i.e., the existence of separate departments) was removed, shadow teams – or boundary spanners – were redundant. The loss of the shadow teams removes the function through which PM&C provided oversight to Indigenous Affairs and is underpinned by the institutionalized myth that joined-up working leads to better outcomes, and that structural change alone can achieve joined-up working.

This points to an interesting interplay between formal and informal institutions. As public administration scholars have long pointed out, there is no ideal institutional structure for government (6, 1997; Andrews & Boyne, 2012; O’Flynn, 2011; Pollitt, 2003). Whether bureaucracies are organized on the basis of issue, geography, priority, or some other means coordination issues will emerge because of the formation of new boundaries (O’Flynn, 2011). In response, informal institutional arrangements emerge to “patch” gaps

created by formal institutional structures (Stinchcombe, 2001). In this case, it appears that policy teams within PM&C undertook “boundary spanning” activities to bridge formal institutional limitations (i.e., the differences between central and line agency cultures and perspectives). Changing formal institutional structures is highly disruptive (Andrews & Boyne, 2012). The fact that gaps created by restructuring were still present (and at the forefront of policymaker’s explanations of the change) over 2 years later demonstrates it takes considerable time for new practices emerge that mediate the limitations of formal institutional structures. The extant literature suggests that formal and informal institutions are substitutable or, at the very least, emerge in coordination with one another (Kay & Daugbjerg, 2015). Our case study highlights that this is unlikely to be the case – informal practices had not yet “caught up” to formal institutional structures.

Dysfunctional practices arose in PM&C, as formal structures and informal practices collided. For example, staff from the Indigenous Affairs and Office for Women groups being required to “switch hats constantly and take very different perspectives in their work” [P01] and simultaneously develop and critique their own policy advice. Normative and mimetic isomorphic pressures to adopt particular solutions to important wicked policy problems led to hasty and ill-planned structural change. The decision to abolish the shadow team was not accompanied by investment in the development of skills and knowledge necessary for enabling staff to bridge the different worlds and undertake the critical translation function when providing advice to the Prime Minister. Importantly, there was a lack of training and development to enable staff to shift from adopting a narrower line agency perspective, focused on a particular area, to a big picture, whole-of-government approach:

... there was little capacity and very little training and engagement with being able to [move to adopting a broader PM&C view]. So whenever we asked them for comments, they would give a very line agency thing of, ‘Well, [our Minister] wants this, that or the other’ ... Or ‘my stakeholders won’t like it’ ... You’re not trained to think about, or you’re not in a mindset of, that you think about the commonalities or you think about the big picture [P01].

The act of removing shadow teams suggests that it was assumed that the structural change would be sufficient by itself for enabling the different groups to work together and create joined-up action on wicked policy problems of Indigenous Affairs and gender inequity: “We didn’t put enough resources into the move at the start. We didn’t realise how big an organisational



change it would be... managing changes in culture, the functions, the role. No we didn't do that well, I don't think we invested in it." (P10). However, our findings indicate that the structural change alone is insufficient for enabling staff to bridge the central and line agency worlds. In fact, the reliance on structural change, and associated lack of consideration for the mechanisms necessary to support the change, impeded the ability of staff to perform their roles effectively. This is consistent with findings from the field of new institutionalism in dynamic organizations, where actions taken on the basis of external isomorphic pressures results in organizations that are not structured in ways which align with goals and function (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1991). It has been found that organizations "do not always embrace strategies, structures, and processes that enhance their performance but, instead, react to and seek ways to accommodate pressures following external scrutiny" (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004, p. 285). While informal practices may emerge to overcome these issues, our case indicates that this takes time; changes to practice are incremental due to the highly conditioned and path dependent nature of social action (Giddens, 1984; Stinchcombe, 2001). Hence, structures may be quick to change but practices will evolve much more slowly (Giddens, 1984).

### **Implications for agencies brought into PM&C**

Just as the decoupling of structure and function (or formal structures and practice) created problems for primary PM&C (legacy) functions, issues also emerged for line agency functions. For line agencies, it was anticipated that they could leverage the power of PM&C as a key central agency to have greater impact across government. However, at the time of the research (2 years after the merger) this had not been completely realized:

[We were looking to have a] positive impact [and] leverage [the] ability to say things and have other agencies take notice ... [because when you operate] in PM&C they [other departments] look to you for instructions. We're still seen as a line agency with our own agenda. So we haven't been able to capitalise on the opportunities that being in PM&C brings. There have been a few wins ... but, say with education, have we changed the education department's focus? I don't think so. We call it mainstreaming and that's still a work in progress [P10].

In fact, rather than realizing the potential benefits associated with merging with PM&C (i.e., capitalizing on the institutional power of being part of a central agency), the merger had far reaching negative

implications for the line agency functions with external stakeholders and/or service delivery functions. These ranged from cultural issues to more practical, day-to-day issues. It was assumed that the structural change would bridge the cultural divides and silos, with the then Secretary advocating: "we're going to [be] one PM&C" [P07]. However, the cultural differences remained, as did the mistrust and misunderstandings that resulted from these differences:

There was kind of a mistrust that we're not really an agency that understands how to do service delivery, so we're probably going to muck it up. And the sad thing is, a lot of people were right about it, and what's ended up happening is we actually have two PM&Cs operating under the same roof. We have one that's service delivery agency focussed on Indigenous Affairs, and it feels like two very different cultures when you move between the two [P7].

The change in formal institutional structure also created a wide range of more practical hurdles to effectively carrying out primary line-agency functions. Many of these hurdles related to the specific constraints of PM&C. Participants stated that due to being a small central agency, PM&C had outdated IT and HR systems: "They're quite old fashioned in their technology. And even their filing systems and stuff just aren't as sort of technological as what we're used to. So I think that old-fashionness may be hampered a few things" [P12]. The technological issues, due to PM&C's outdated systems, were argued to impede effectiveness, specifically in service delivery. The integration of the service delivery function meant that the new PM&C was suddenly required to manage a workforce that was geographically dispersed across Australia and distribute funding to service providers, neither of which was it adequately equipped for. This meant that PM&C lacked the "supportive infrastructure" (O'Flynn, Buick, Blackman, & Halligan, 2011) necessary to enable effective service delivery:

PM&C is not in any way, shape or form ... set up for service delivery ... There were no real systems for anything in terms of service delivery. And then we brought in nine different departments, all with service delivery [functions] ... And tried to combine the two. So we had no customer relations management system, no I.T. management system, no payment systems, no, there was absolutely nothing. We went from a situation where we suddenly had more invoices every day than we would have had in a month in the previous setup [P07].

Participants argued that working within PM&C specifically was an impediment to investing heavily in new and more sophisticated systems.

... because it's the Prime Minister's department, no Prime Minister likes to spend money on themselves, so that's one of the reasons why the system is so basic. Because numbers of times through history people have said, 'we need a million dollars for this system', or 'we need a decent records management system'. It's like, 'no, no, no, the Prime Minister cannot be seen to be spending money' [P07].

This meant that the existing technological systems and processes within PM&C could not effectively house the line agency functions. Therefore, the systems and processes were not fit for the *new* purpose of the combined agencies, resulting in inefficiencies. The emergence of such inefficiencies are documented in the new institutionalist literature which demonstrates that action based on external environmental pressures (such as international trends) frequently leads to organizational structures that are not fit-for-purpose (Ferris & Tang, 1993; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). These, like social practices, are slower to emerge.

Similarly, the structure and culture of PM&C carried implications for how line agencies were able to maintain stakeholder relationships with those outside government which is critical to effective service delivery on wicked policy problems. Here, the fast paced nature of PM&C was fundamentally different, and ultimately a barrier, to stakeholder engagement. Given the networked nature of policy implementation, hampered stakeholder engagement is likely to be detrimental for policy outcomes.

...I suspect there was more of a communal or a consensus driven approach to engagement with the stakeholders [in the previous department]; that's still part of the flavour here but probably less so and done in a more fast paced, it's a fast paced environment here. Whereas I think it was, they were able to spend more time on getting consensus and also able to identify personally more strongly with the issues and stakeholders [P01]

And then the policy officers would then kind of implement it and work it and turn it into a real shape. And other departments it would start at the bottom up. So you had that immediate clash of cultures where people were doing policy in completely different ways. And the network felt complete disconnect from policy, because all policy and decisions were brought into Canberra away from the network. And many of the network had been used to developing quite high level policy, or being involved with it. And that disappeared over night [P07]

Hence, the structural change within government to breakdown silos which emerged as a result of isomorphic pressures hampered the ability of government

agencies to work with non-government organizations within policy networks. On one hand, policy networks may seize on the perceived institutional power of their government contacts being located in PM&C. On the other hand and less favorably, however, the differences in culture and ways of working could lead to greater challenges in undertaking cross-boundary working. Much integration across government and non-government entities relies on relationships and trust, which requires shared ways of working (Keast & Brown, 2006; Keast & Mandell, 2011). The unique culture and character of central agencies may in fact mean they are not fit-for-purpose to undertake the network coordination role often assigned to them

## Discussion

Governments frequently undergo structural change as a means for enhancing joined-up working. However, the notion that structural change will automatically lead to enhanced joined-up working and the achievement of better outcomes, particularly for addressing wicked policy problems, is not substantiated by the literature. As Jun and Weare (2011, p. 502) argue "public organizations must be perceived as politically legitimate, which requires that they conform to social expectations concerning organizational form and functions". Social actors, be it governments in power or individual public servants, must appeal to external institutionalized practices and pressures in order to maintain legitimacy. These operate primarily at the symbolic and ceremonial levels, creating the possibility that public sector organizations adopt structures and practices which are socially credible, but lead to decreased performance (Jun & Weare, 2011; Scott, 1991). Moreover, our research has demonstrated that continual structural change exacerbates tensions between formal institutional structures and informal institutional practices.

New institutionalists have argued that formal structures can often be the source of organizational dysfunction, and that this dysfunction becomes more elaborate over time where function has become decoupled from purpose or goals. However, informal practices can also emerge to patch structural deficiencies. This study found that, prior to the recent structural changes, informal boundary spanning practices had emerged in response to limitations in formal institutional structures. These practices ensured vertical integration between line agencies and central agencies; enabling the type of integrated action presumed to be required for addressing wicked policy problems. These informal practices, however, were disrupted by structural changes to PM&C.

As Kay and Daugbjerg (2015) hypothesized, we found that changes to formal institutions can in fact upset or destroy informal institutional practices with severe, or at least adverse, consequences. Notably, this study was undertaken 2–3 years after the initial formal changes were activated, yet no new informal practices were identified that overcame structural limitations associated with the PM&C change. This suggests that, while informal institutional practices can mediate formal structures, they take considerable time to develop. This is consistent with theories of social action and change, which indicate that changes to practice are incremental – requiring changes to actors’ stocks of knowledge and routines (Stones, 2005). Similarly, Andrews and Boyne found in their study of structural change with the UK government that adaptation can take years, and that after formal institutional restructuring there is a significant period of disruption. Our research indicates that the period of disruption from structural change can be long-lived, which is concerning given the frequency of structural change within bureaucracies; there may be insufficient time for policymakers and administrators to develop practices which “patch” gaps left by formal structural arrangements before the next round of restructuring begins. This, in turn, is likely to contribute to policy layering – where new practices and processes are layered on top of old ones (rather than replacing them), creating an increasingly complex context (Head & Alford, 2015). This can be seen in our research where newly located Indigenous Affairs staff were expected to take up boundary spanning practices (i.e. the former ‘work around’ to structural issues), without adequate support, rather than developing new processes.

While Béland (2007) has argued for greater attention to ideation processes in the creation of policy and institutional change regarding ideology, it can be argued that ideas about how governments should be structured are also a powerful force on institutional change. Kay and Daugbjerg (2015) contend that the very structure of a department, or government, is an instrument of government in and of itself – either to deliver services or as a device by which to implement other “instruments” aimed at shaping the behavior of, or assisting, citizens. How governments are structured creates and constrains the future, shaping the practices of individuals. Hence, structural change to government is no small matter – impacting current functioning and the availability of different options into the future for addressing wicked policy problems. For example, the informal practices disrupted by formal institutional changes may never change, leaving critical gaps in knowledge and practice which may have detrimental outcomes for the implementation of policy and/or other “instruments”.

## Conclusion

This article extends our knowledge of how theories of new institutionalism apply to policy and the public sector. The case study examines the implications of normative and mimetic isomorphic pressures, whereby structural change was undertaken to signal action on a wicked problem through increased vertical integration. While previous research has argued for the importance of ideas in shaping public sector organizations and institutions (Béland, 2009, 2007; Farazmand, 2012), the case study presented in this study demonstrates *how* ideas form an important part of isomorphic pressures on the public sector in practice. For example, the research found that formal institutional changes instigated in response to this pressure interacted in unproductive ways with existing informal institutional practices; highlighting the need for research to better conceptualize and understand the interplay between institutional pressures and logics, formal institutional structures and informal practices, and their implications for policy. While much of the literature focuses on how formal institutionalized practices are a source of inertia, this article has demonstrated that informal institutional practices can in fact circumvent problems with formal structures, making them highly productive for achieving policy goals. Through focusing on the interplay between the formal and informal, this article also demonstrates that an over-emphasis on structural change to solve policy problems can be a dangerous trap – creating dysfunction rather than resolving it.

By providing a case study which illuminates the interplay between formal and informal institutions, this article has made two key contributions to knowledge. First, it has demonstrated the ways in which formal and informal institutions can disrupt one another to create dysfunction, and that they are often linked by ideas. Second, these ideas may be about the formal structure that institutions should take to best equip themselves to tackle policy problems, particularly “wicked” problems. When government structures are conceptualized as an “instrument” in its own right, it draws attention to how powerful formal restructuring of governments can be, despite its regular and almost routinized nature in Westminster systems.

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