What public sector reform means, why it occurs, whose interests it serves, whether it makes the world a better place, even whether some supposed reforms are much more than shadow play – these are things about which we continue to disagree. The word ‘reform’ often has positive connotations of course. When I claim my proposed policy change is a reform, I am claiming an improvement in the state of affairs – and surely only the insane would justify their proposed reforms by saying they are making their world a worse one. A claim to reform also implies discontinuity, rather than steady natural evolution or piecemeal tinkering on the edges. Something substantial happens in a reform. We are often claiming big changes, looking at fundamental re-orderings, significant reworkings and bold steps. Claiming to reform also suggests there is something wrong to begin with. There is some failure, some problem, some crisis, that needs to be addressed and needs to be fixed – and my proposed reform is often the best solution.

On the other hand, for a social scientist, reform might not mean any of these things. It might refer to a process of change, but whether change is for the good, the bad or neither, is a question for evidence and analysis to answer. Studies of reform can look to how this process of change comes about, or at reform movement involvement. ‘Reform’ might simply be a useful shorthand for political, management or social trends, or smaller or bigger changes. Scholarship can show the problems that the reform is supposed to fix can often be contested, socially constructed, post hoc justifications, or entirely invented. The link between proposed reforms and these problems, if any is given at all, can sometimes be difficult to find. In sum, reform is a highly politicized, highly ideological, and often highly contested process. It is seldom the tidy, technical problem-solving activity often portrayed in undergraduate textbooks and by the reformers themselves.

We use ‘reform’ to capture a variety of changes to public sector management over the past few decades or so. We accept that reform usually refers to deliberate and sustained attempts at non-incremental change in the process of government, and indeed some of these reforms have led to substantial re-orderings of state structures. Some may have been small changes at the edges. Some may have taken on the rhetoric and staged political battles over reform, but resulted in little significant change – more ‘rituals of reform’ than substantive transformation. Many reforms programmes fail, either in achieving their restructuring aims or, when these are achieved, new structures do not deliver the benefits promised. Of course, many reforms may be carried out for uncertain and contested aims, or with no clear aim in mind or problem to be solved. As such success or otherwise can be difficult to determine.

To greater understand the difficult issue of reform, this collection provides a broad overview of public management reform across the world and across the last three decades. It has come together at a time when some writers are describing the New Public Management (NPM) movement as being ‘middle-aged’ while others are noting the emergence of a ‘post-NPM’ movement. Questions are not just being raised about whether NPM doctrines will continue to provide impetus for future reform but about the extent to which it actually provided a sharp break from the past. Quite clearly these questions
are best addressed through a careful study of the impact of NPM on particular countries and of those themes that continue to remain problematic from an NPM perspective.

Drawing on leading writers from across Europe, Asia, North America and Australasia, we first embark on a series of theme chapters examining the role of economic ideas, human resources, leadership, accountability and e-government issues. We then move to a series of country studies, first with the Anglo-American democracies, then Western Europe, Scandinavia and Asia. Our studies show the sheer diversity of reform processes – and how perhaps the argument for a NPM consensus is somewhat exaggerated.

As co-editors, Shaun Goldfinch and Joe Wallis would like to take this opportunity to make a number of personal acknowledgments.

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