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Quango state reconfigured rather than abolished

Posted on Thursday 11th July 2013

Less than 10 per cent of quangos axed by the Coalition government have actually been totally abolished, new research shows.

A three-year study into government attempts to reduce the size of the state has revealed that despite the closure of some 200 non-governmental organisations, the functions of those bodies have "mostly" been transferred to new arm's length institutions.

The research, carried out at the University of Birmingham and the University of Sheffield, also found:
• New arm's length bodies are being created as others are being abolished
• Abolition mostly affects small-spending quangos and there are "ambiguities" about the extent of efficiency savings expected
• Reorganisation is often at the expense of transparency and accountability

The ESRC-funded report, Public Bodies Reform by the UK Government 2010-2013, provides a detailed account of the government's reform agenda. It acknowledges that the government has achieved "significant" and "far-reaching" reforms but adds that "at the same time it is important to acknowledge that the quango state has been reconfigured rather than abolished".

The report states: *"This reform process has achieved much greater impact than the efforts of previous governments in reducing the population of public bodies…*

"However, in many cases the abolition of a public body has involved all or some of its functions transferring to a new arm's length body, into a government department, and in some cases to local government or the charitable, not-for-profits or business sectors."

Professor Chris Skelcher, professor of public governance at the University of Birmingham and lead author of the report, said: *"The promise to abolish quangos is far more complex than many commentators and politicians recognise.*

"Our research shows that far from being a wasteful irrelevance, many such bodies undertake tasks that are valuable for government and society. That is why most of their functions carry on, even though the body itself may have been abolished. It is easy to call for a bonfire of the quangos; it is much harder to scrap everything they do."

The report states that: *"In only 80 (9%) of the non-departmental public bodies proposed for abolition are all the functions of that body to be abolished. In most cases where non-departmental public bodies are subject to abolition, their functions continue to be exercised in whole or in part by other organisations."*

On efficiency savings, the report says: *"There remain ambiguities about the extent of efficiency savings expected to be delivered by the Public Bodies Reform programme, with the Public Accounts Committee questioning the £2.6bn savings estimated by the Cabinet Office, on the basis that administrative reorganisation is unlikely to deliver this figure."*

The study also found that "the extent to which ministerial accountability has been improved remains an open question."

Ends
For more information or to interview Prof Skelcher, please contact Deborah Walker, PR Manager for Policy and Social Affairs, University of Birmingham, 0121 414 9041 or mobile 07776 465138 or email **d.s.walker.1@bham.ac.uk (mailto:d.s.walker.1@bham.ac.uk)** Out of hours contact 077889 921165 or **email.pressoffice@contacts.bham.ac.uk (mailto:email.pressoffice@contacts.bham.ac.uk)**

Note to Editors
1) A copy of the full report is here.
2) During the 2010 general election campaign, the manifestos of the three main parties contained commitments to reform public services. In May 2010 the Coalition Government included this commitment in its Programme for Government, and gave particular emphasis to two ambitions: saving money and increasing accountability.
3) The Shrinking the State project is a three year study, funded by the Economic & Social Research Council, which commenced in May 2012.
4) This initial report outlines how the Coalition government has attempted to deliver on its commitment to "reform the quango state".

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