

Acceptance speech Van Poelje Award 2017

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Dear colleagues,

Earlier this year, our colleague Christopher Pollitt published a paper in the International Journal of Public Sector Management. The paper had the title: 'Public administration research since 1980: slipping away from the real world?'. In the paper, Pollitt explores the perceived widening gap between top academic research and practitioner concerns. Based on a review of the highest impact journals in our field, he found that, *indeed*, public administration scholars have recently paid very little attention to some of the most pressing challenges that policymakers need to engage with, including

climate change, demographic change, austerity, and technological change. Without going into the details here, Pollitt explains this development as the negative consequence of four, otherwise largely positive, developments in our field: professionalization, specialization, increased competition over academic positions, and the increased use of metrics to assess scholarly quality. Together, these developments make that the academic-practitioner dialogue has severely weakened. With his paper, Pollitt joins an emerging call for re-directing our field to the study of real world problems and associated governance practices. In that sense, he is very much in line with the arguments presented during the VB debate this morning.

Apart from being an indescribable personal honour, I therefore consider the jury's decision as a great encouragement for what I refer to as *applied* public administration, with which I mean applying a public administration lens to scientific and societal debates about very real problems. At the public administration group of Wageningen University, we for example think about the roles governments should play in dealing with climate change, or how to integrate environmental and public health concerns into agri-food policies.

Or take the issue of food security, which I dealt with in my dissertation. Tackling hunger and other forms of malnutrition is probably the oldest policy problem that humankind has faced. However, despite the availability of plenty of resources, major

technological innovations, and intelligent policy programs, the problem has remained invariably persistent. Bringing in a public administration perspective helps to account for why this is the case; why well-functioning governance is both key and highly challenging; why sky-high ambitions often do not proceed beyond paper realities. And even though from a wicked problems perspective it may not be possible to formulate definite solutions, our discipline offers a broad range of suggestions for improved governance to draw upon, ranging from clumsy solutions to collaborative networks.

I believe that by closely engaging with policy actors, studying real world problems, and serving as honest brokers, we will not only keep our discipline relevant to society at

large, but will also identify and open up new avenues for theory building. Put differently, applied public administration works in both ways. To give an example from my own dissertation: I noticed that various EU decision-makers repeatedly promised to increase the coherence of food security efforts. This led me to think about how I could assess whether they lived up to these promises, eventually resulting in the development of a new policy integration framework.

Whereas many public administration scholars cherish the advantages of being generalists, I would, for the reasons just described, encourage a debate about how we at the same time can use our master and PhD programs to stimulate at least some of us to become substantive experts as well.

Maybe this is something we can further discuss during this conference.

Let me finish by saying that even though writing a PhD dissertation is an individual proof of competence, it is not a one-man show. Over the years, I have had the chance to learn from, and be inspired by many interesting people. I would like to thank my former teachers at Utrecht University, current and former colleagues at Wageningen University and the University of Antwerp, family, friends and colleagues elswewhere, and of course the jury members of this great award. A particular word of thanks goes to my promotor Katrien Termeer and co-promoters Gerard Breeman and Robbert Biesbroek, without who's guidance this project would not have come to such a successful end. I look forward to

many more fruitful collaborations with all of you and with others present here. Let's start by making a big success out of this conference.

Thank you very much.