1 Introduction: The Centrality of Decentralisation

The notion of decentralisation lies at the very heart of the dominant contemporary theories of public management. Decentralisation, the story goes, frees managers to manage. It makes possible speedier and more responsive public services, attuned to local or individual needs. It contributes to economy by enabling organisations to shed ('let go of') unnecessary middle managers ('downsizing'). It also enhances efficiency by shortening what were previously long bureaucratic hierarchies ('delayering'). Decentralisation even produces more contented and stimulated staff, whose jobs have been enriched by taking on devolved budgetary responsibilities and by an increased sense of room for manoeuvre. Beyond these administrative and managerial benefits, political decentralisation brings even larger rewards. It makes politicians more responsive and accountable to 'the people', less distant and more trustworthy. All in all, decentralisation is sometimes made to sound like a miracle cure for a host of traditional bureaucratic and political ills. Academics with a taste for postmodernism would no doubt refer to it as an attempt at a meta narrative – a conceptual and linguistic project designed simultaneously to supersede (and therefore 'solve') a range of perceived ills within the previous discourse of public administration. In Whitehall and Westminster almost all political factions support it – the left and right have somewhat different variants of course, but officially the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties all subscribe to the rhetoric of decentralisation. Tony Blair's Labour administration seems just as enthusiastic about it as were his Conservative predecessors.

Any concept that is so universally popular is bound to attract both academic interest and academic suspicion. In our case decentralisation certainly attracted both. We began with the fairly naive notion that we would go out and see whether managerial decentralisation was really taking place. As is the way with such simple projects, however, our topic complicated itself as soon as we began seriously to think about it.
It rapidly became clear that the concept had been used by different writers and speakers in different ways, so that a preliminary job of concept clarification would be needed. Then the idea of doing empirical research began to bristle with complexities. Where should we go to look? Which methods should we use?

Eventually, assisted by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council, we conducted more than two years of fieldwork research in 12 British public sector organisations, four each from the healthcare, housing and secondary education sectors. This book reports that research but does more besides. It draws on government and other public documents, the general academic literature on decentralisation and the findings of many other researchers. From these ingredients we seek to build an account of both the theory and the practice of the decentralised management of public services. In this account we are able to offer at least preliminary answers to questions such as: Has decentralisation really taken place? What, exactly has been decentralised? What seems to have been the effect of decentralisation on the performance of the organisations concerned? And what lessons can be learned from looking at different approaches to decentralisation in different settings and sectors?

The organisation of the book is (we hope) relatively straightforward. In Chapter 2 (Theories and Concepts) we set out the theoretical and conceptual apparatus that we have found most useful in conducting our research and, more generally, thinking through the issues that decentralisation throws up. In particular we distinguish between decentralisation and devolution, and between horizontal and vertical decentralisation. Because of our strong interest in the links between decentralisation, efficiency and quality we also spend some time discussing the concept of organisational performance. Having thus clarified our conceptual vocabulary we briefly introduce the theoretical apparatuses that have informed our investigations. These include rational choice theory, a critical modernist variety of organisation theory and a rhetorical analysis of the kinds of arguments used to sell, defend and attack the different elements of management reform.

Chapter 3 (Reform Doctrines) commences with an examination of what ministers, senior public officials and other prominent 'practitioners' have said about decentralisation. This should give the reader a feel for the rhetorical usages of decentralisation and how the concept has been connected to the doctrine of the 'liberation' of public services managers, that is, 'letting managers manage', or, in its more authoritarian version, 'making managers manage'. This examination of