Introduction

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a new international reform category emerged, the agency. Although not always consistent with local titles, the agency label was associated with public sector arrangements observed in countries as diverse as England (O’Toole & Jordan 1995), Sweden (Fortin 1996; Gustafsson and Rhodes 1989), Portugal, Japan (James 2000), The Netherlands (Ter Bogt 1999; Van der Knaap et al. 1997), Latvia (Pollitt et al. 2001; Pollitt 2002), New Zealand (Boston et al. 1996), Canada (Aucoin 1990), and Australia (Armstrong 1998; Rowlands 2002) – to name just a few examples. Agencies were also introduced by the European Commission to assist in EU policy making (Keleman 2002) and they were enforced upon developing countries such as Ghana and Tanzania as a condition for financial aid from the World Bank (Talbot & Caulfield 2002; Minogue et al. 1999). Their spread was the consequence of seeming universal agreement that they were a good thing and could bring about a range of benefits to all kinds of cultural political administrative contexts (see OECD 1997a:19). By the turn of century however the success story of agencies had changed. They were no longer regarded as solutions in a whole range of contexts but rather as a problem for accountability and coordination (OECD 2002; James 2004; Smullen 2004). Empirically this apparent pendulum swing presents a range of puzzles to be studied in this book. These include how similar public management reforms emerge across different political cultures, the nature of their commonality, and how and why they change?
The claim that the adoption of agency reforms constituted a new kind of administrative arrangement should be clarified. Broadly speaking, agency initiatives have been characterized by three features: their structural disaggregation from central departments, management autonomy and performance contracting (Talbot 2004:6). They function at arms length from departments but still remain part of the central core of government. This arms length relationship is not of itself a novel aspect of the organizational structure of administrative systems. Historically many countries used legal independence of government organizations for purposes of state building, harnessing expertise in particular policy fields, or for nurturing the role of civil society in implementing policies (Van Thiel 2000). Agency reform as studied here however was distinct to the period of New Public Management (NPM). NPM has been characterized by both reform activities of a substantive kind – certain practices, but also as a normative perspective which aspires to make government work more like a business – a certain story (Hood 1996; Smullen 2004). Typical watchwords in this NPM story included efficiency, management and financial autonomy, performance contracting, customer service and sometimes getting closer to the citizen (Hood 1996; Pollitt 2000; Smullen 2004). It was the trans-national character of NPM ideas, and the intensity of knowledge exchange, that made it and agencies, original to recent public management experience. Through both the forums of the OECD, but also cross country exchanges, the initiation and refinement of agency reforms was informed by a trans-national community (Sahlin-Andersson 2001).

The purpose of the book and theoretical background

The purpose of this book is to examine and compare the ideational evolution of agency reform in specific national contexts. It seeks to investigate the extent to which there was convergence in the way agency reform attained, and also lost, credibility across national political cultures. Studies of convergence in a range of policy fields have ensued in recent years as a consequence of the increasing transnationalization of policy making. In public management this has inspired research into the role of national political and administrative institutions in shaping the introduction and trajectory of reforms (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000; Pollitt et al. 2004; Sundström 2003). Many