Conclusion: Taking Stock of the New Public Management

The fact is that complex work cannot be effectively performed unless it comes under the control of the operator who does it. Society may have to control the overall expenditures of its Professional Bureaucracies – to keep the lid on them – and to legislate against the most callous kinds of professional behaviour. But too much external control of the professional work itself leads...to centralisation and formalisation of the structure...The effect is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Technocratic controls do not improve professional-type work, nor can they distinguish between responsible and irresponsible behaviour – they constrain both equally. That may, of course, be appropriate for organisations in which responsible behaviour is rare. But where it is not – presumably the majority of cases – technocratic controls only serve to dampen professional conscientiousness (Mintzberg, 1993: 212).

From the preceding chapters it is clear that, over the past two decades, public services in Britain were subjected to some unprecedented demands for change. Conservative governments initially sought to control the costs of welfare provision, but subsequently turned to the reorganisation of services by introducing more management to augment their cost cutting agendas. They did this on the assumption (which was not seriously disputed) that doing so would increase efficiency. Broadly speaking, the goal was to substitute a model of managed provision for the existing ‘custodial’ producer driven approaches to organising work. This turned out to be a project involving fundamental reform, which, as time went on, drew intellectual credibility from private sector man-
agement ideas to which successive governments were increasingly and overtly committed.

More recently, under New Labour since 1997, the emphasis of reform shifted to an agenda of ‘modernisation’. This has been apparently less doctrinaire and more pragmatic, as in the suggestion ‘what’s best is what works’ (Cabinet Office, 1999). But the use of management as a means of transforming the way services are organised and delivered remains central. Today, perhaps even more so than a decade ago, the dominant image projected by politicians and the media is of a public sector crying out for change. This message is reinforced by a constant barrage of critical reports highlighting performance failure, the limited availability and uneven quality of services.

This book has been specifically concerned with the way these policies worked themselves out. Our starting point was the perception that there have been some persistent threads in managerial reforms. We noted how these were brought to bear in different ways in different sectors of the welfare state, and that such differences might be systematically compared for their effectiveness. Thus, our analysis departs from the emphases found in other studies, which either analyse public services as separate cases – usually in order to consider particular problems – or emphasise the same general trends in them all. Our goal was to be more focused and to come up with a more subtle and directly comparative account of the reform process. Hence this book has sought to calibrate, more precisely than is commonly attempted, the variable degrees of new management developed in chosen areas of public services – health, social care and housing.

In the previous three chapters a substantial body of evidence was presented focusing on developments in three services. The purpose of this final chapter is now to stand back from this and draw some broad conclusions. Anticipating those conclusions a little, comparative analysis of health, social services and housing suggests that effective reform has been inversely proportional to the efforts expended on it. The most sustained efforts to introduce management have been undertaken in the NHS, although this has not yielded proportionate results. There have been changes and improvements, yes, but nobody would pretend that the vastly increased expenditure on administration and the decades of change in the organisation and delivery of care, eliminated the problems governments set out to address. By contrast, the shift in housing toward a more managed system has been more effective (at least in administrative terms). The new housing associations were a