

## IMPROVING THE VALIDITY OF PUBLIC PROCUREMENT RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper argues that, at the level of the organisational strategy and management, the fundamental difference between private and public procurement has been largely overlooked in public procurement research; that of the voice of democracy, politicians. As a consequence there is little understanding of politicians' views. The paper argues that research claiming to be on strategic public procurement cannot be considered strategic if it leaves out the role of politicians; local, regional and national. The paper therefore discusses why a political perspective is important, suggests that the gap in research has arisen as a result of researcher myopia leading to bias, and makes recommendations both for improving the validity of public procurement strategy and management research and for future research.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that, at the level of the organisational strategy and management, the fundamental difference between private and public procurement has been largely overlooked in public procurement research; that of the voice of democracy, politicians, a major stakeholder in public procurement (Murray, 1999 and 2007). As a consequence there is little understanding of politicians' views, even though Ellram and Carr (1994) advocated that research would be of benefit which compares Procurement's view of itself with that of top management. Furthermore, the paper argues that research claiming to be on strategic public procurement cannot be considered strategic if it leaves out the role of politicians; local, regional and national. The paper therefore discusses why a political perspective is important, suggests that the gap in research

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has arisen as a result of researcher myopia leading to bias, and makes recommendations for improving the validity of public procurement strategy and management research, and for future research.

### **IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL PROCUREMENT**

There are many facets to the interplay of politicians and procurement managers in public procurement; this paper only explores democratic accountability, strategic procurement management, the principal/agent relationship, and the performance management roles. Other facets exist but it is not necessary to explore those, as if only one key facet is accepted as overlooked, the core argument is supported and there is potential for improving the validity of public procurement research.

### **DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY**

The public sector works within a framework of democratic governance strategy and management; local people exercise their right to determine how and by whom they should be governed through the 'ballot box'. In turn, those elected not only have a representative advocacy role but take on the responsibility of being democratically accountable to the electorate for the decisions made 'under their watch' (Hill, 1974; Mulgan, 2006; Stoker, 2006; Murray, 1999 and 2007; Caldwell, *et al.*, 2007, pp.149-159).

Elected 'members steer' (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993) in determining outcomes to be achieved, what public money is to be raised and on what public services it is to be spent (Lyne, 1996, pp.1-6), while 'officers row' in recommending the best-fit delivery means. This has manifested itself in recent times as a shift to a mix of service providers (Donahue, 1989; Walsh, 1995). The UK best value regime considers this choice of service delivery options to be procurement decisions (DETR, 1999) and they are recognised within procurement literature as the 'make or buy' decision (Baily, *et al.*, 1994, pp.187-200; Saunders, 1994, pp.128-134; van Weele, 1994, p.18; McIvor, 2005, pp.7-8). These decisions are truly strategic procurement decisions (Cox and Lamming, 1997; Ramsay, 2001).

The predominant informant of existing public procurement strategy and management research rarely, if ever, considers politicians perspective as opposed to that of procurement managers, even though

those same officers are considered to be ignored from many of the strategic decisions (Murray, 1996; de Boer and Telgen, 1998; White and Hammer-Llyod, 1999; Ramsay, 2001). Logically, if elected representatives are democratically accountable for public procurement decisions, research, to be robust, needs to consider politicians' perceptions as opposed to only those of procurement managers who are rarely involved in the strategic decision-making process.

### **STRATEGIC PROCUREMENT MANAGEMENT**

Within the public sector the core objectives are set by politicians (Hill, 1974; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993; Lyne, 1996). Theoretically those choices should set the objectives of the procurement strategy, yet of the little comparative analysis of politicians and procurement managers' priorities, Murray (2001a) demonstrated a lack of correlation. That being the case, it is quite possible that procurement may be pursuing goals at variance to those of their political leaders. For example, while there has been considerable research devoted to the pursuit of socio-economic goals (such as Murray, 2000; Cogburn and Rahm, 2005, pp.23-53; Bolton, 2006, pp.193-217; Valkenburg and Nagelkerke, 2006, pp.250-273; Erridge and Hennigan, 2007, pp.280-303; Walker, *et al.*, 2007) and collaborative procurement (Bakker, *et al.*, 2007, pp.14-44; McCue and Prier, 2007, pp.45-70; Murray, *et al.*, 2008), apart from Murray's (2001a) tripartite survey and his case study (2001b), setting out that it was only through consulting and gaining the confidence of politicians that ownership was gained of a procurement strategy, there has not been any empirical research to establish that those priorities, on a case-by-case basis, are shared by the corresponding politicians. It may therefore be that procurement managers are pursuing dysfunctional strategies.

While these scenarios are hypothetical, in the absence of research taking the views of an array of key actors, and primarily those of politicians, how can it really be known what are the areas of increasing significance in the public sector and how the academic community really make the maximum contribution in solving the problems of the future.

### **PRINCIPAL-AGENT RELATIONSHIP**

Significant literature has been devoted to the principal/agent relationship in procurement strategy and management research (for example, Sappington, 1991; Donahue, 1989; Walsh, 1997) however, that research is presented from the buyer/supplier relationship and the need of the buyer, as the principal, to minimise the risks posed by the agent. Little attention has been given to the reality that, within public procurement, procurement managers take on the role of agent for elected representatives.

Therefore, research has been skewed and failed to address how procurement managers behave as agents of politicians. Do politicians view procurement as a major risk, and how do politicians protect against asset specificity, moral hazard, first mover advantage, etc.?

### **PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

There has been little specific discussion on public procurement performance management and that which has been reported failed to address engagement with politicians. The research appears to imply that Procurement's customers are actually internal departments.

If these approaches to public procurement performance management are typical, and there is an absence of literature to demonstrate they aren't, it would suggest that the needs of politicians are not only ignored in the design of the systems but also in the management of performance. Given the importance of strategic alignment and procurement managers appropriately acting as agents of politicians, it could be that a lack of understanding politicians perspectives compromises the integrity of public procurement performance management, indeed it may be, having ignored that perspective there is room for improving public procurement performance management.

### **WHAT ROLE DOES EXISTING RESEARCH ALLOCATE TO POLITICIANS?**

The core of the argument within this paper is that public procurement strategy and management research has generally overlooked the role and perspective of politicians. However, given the above discussion, and the

pre-eminence of politicians in the public sector, it makes sense to consider how politicians are presented in public procurement strategy and management literature.

Perceptions (Lian and Laing, 2004; Baeyens and Martel, 2007; Caldwell, *et al.*, 2007, p.156; Soudry (2007, p.438) which appear anecdotal, view politicians as only being engaged in discussions on the conditions of contract, contract awards and purchasing initiation, while concerned about image; together with public accountability being viewed as a hindrance, present a negative and very narrow perspective, yet there does not actually appear to have been a balance of empirical research into the actual roles and potential roles of politicians in public procurement strategy and management. Indeed such perceptions of politicians engagement with public procurement may undermine the very democratic process so fundamental to public procurement and highlight the need for a wider understanding of how public procurement fits within democratic governance.

Ironically, Murray (2007) demonstrated, from a small number of action learning research projects, that, within UK local government, politicians, in collaboration with chief officers, exhibited an enthusiasm and appeared to have the capabilities to be engaged in strategic procurement management, specifically, determining the corporate procurement strategy and mapping the procurement portfolio; challenging the desired procurement outcome; challenging procurement delivery options; supplier selection and contract award; and, post-contract management and review.

### **LIMITATION OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES**

If the role of politicians in public procurement is so critical, why has existing research not reflected that? A scan of the existing public procurement strategy and management research methodologies literature reveals that key informants, almost without exception, are procurement professionals – there appears to be little triangulation of other actors perceptions, particularly those of politicians. One potential limitation of existing public procurement research methods is therefore that it suffers from an in-built bias as a result of a reliance on a single group of key respondents, procurement managers, without triangulating the views of politicians.

This is not to say that public procurement research is alone in this procurement practitioner respondent myopia; it appears to be a weakness in procurement research *per se*. van Weele (2007, p.205) suggests that the single respondent bias has a simple justification, namely, “*when it concerns research in the purchasing and supply chain management domain, it is usually easiest to use purchasing managers as a prime source of information*”.

A bias in empirical research leads to consequential weakness in literature reviews; if the available literature has left out one of the key actors, the literature review has a built-in bias, which in turn suffers from the pitfall that they exclude any reference to the political aspects of public procurement. We therefore end up with key political issues, such as, market shaping, contestability, shared-services and third sector commissioning being overlooked through no fault of those reviewing the literature. A second potential limitation on existing public procurement research is therefore that of making use of literature reviews without critically reviewing the methodologies behind the literature for weaknesses and omissions.

A further potential reason is that public procurement strategy and management has tended to suffer from the ‘Tyranny of Experience’ (Cox, 1997, p29), paraphrased as assuming that the research mythologies adopted for private sector procurement will be appropriate without adjustment, in the public sector, this is illustrated in that the scope of the International Study of Public Procurement was confined to the operational aspects of selecting potential suppliers, contracting, ordering, expediting and evaluating suppliers, and evaluating purchasing (Knight, *et al.*, 2007, p.6) – these are traditional private sector approaches to procurement research and yet fall short of addressing the fundamental distinguishing feature of public procurement, the political dimension. A third potential limitation of existing public procurement research is therefore its tendency to focus on traditional, private sector procurement aspects as opposed to fully exploring the uniqueness of public procurement.

Snider (2006, pp.275-276) provides a further possibility:

[procurement] literature is generally introspective in that it is produced by members of the procurement community in procurement-related publications, the principal audience of which are members of that same community ... basic

procurement texts indicate that the field essentially defines itself in a way that excludes it from participation in a major activity of any organisation determination of need that may result in a procurement action. Through such texts, procurement professionals learn to think of their field in a way that discourages them from participating in strategic decisions and thus acting as organisational and institutional leaders.

Therefore a fourth potential limitation of existing public procurement strategy and management research approaches, paradoxically is its focus on operational procurement as opposed to strategic procurement decision-making.

Does this mean that all the public procurement strategy and management research heretofore has to be disregarded? No, but, in some studies, a limitation should be acknowledged that the findings were not triangulated with those of other actors, for example, politicians, and there may therefore be questions of validity.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has argued that the fundamental difference between private and public procurement strategy and management, that of the political interface, has been overlooked in research. The role of politicians is not fully understood and sometimes presented in a negative light. Politicians have major responsibilities for strategic procurement management as a result of democratic accountability, the need to set strategic procurement priorities, ensure procurement managers have the will and competence to deliver aligned procurement strategies, and in the performance management of procurement strategy implementation.

Existing public procurement research approaches have limitations as frequently there is an in-built bias and lack of triangulation through an over reliance on procurement managers as the sole key respondents, carrying over the in-built bias of empirical research into literature reviews through not critically reviewing the methodologies behind the literature for weaknesses and omissions, tending to focus on private sector procurement research attributes and questions, and a tendency to focus on operational as opposed to strategic public procurement decision-making.

To improve the validity of public procurement strategy and management research there is a need to be more critical of potential responses from procurement managers and look for triangulation from other actors, particularly those of the respective politicians. Indeed there is a need for more research on politicians' perspectives on public procurement.

Given the above, research would be of benefit which answers the following research questions: do democratically elected public representatives believe that procurement is not a political tool, is procurement politically maximising its contribution, is public procurement an underused political tool, what are the actual views of procurement managers with regard to the leadership of politicians in procurement strategy, is there a difference between the procurement strategies of the political left or right?

#### NOTES

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