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**PUBLIC POLICY**

to take responsibility as an agent not just to lay blame, but to imagine constructive alternatives too.

Mediators find this “future orientation” to be axiomatic, for the blame game escalates easily and displaces contingent and constructive offers, “What if we tried X, Y, Z? Could we do A, B, C?” Similarly, interviewers can probe not only for the allocation of blame, but for the suggestion of possibilities too—and enrich their research results by doing so.

In a land use case a mediator we’ll call “Monica” put this search for proposals this way:

Whenever somebody put something negatively, I would just try to find a positive idea there.

I’d try to turn it around to a positive idea. So someone would rant and rave, somebody could become angry about houses being built in cornfields, let’s say they didn’t want to see that, and they mentioned something about a land trust in the course of talking. So I’d pick out that idea, and I’d say, “So are you saying it would be good if we had a local land trust that could try to protect some of this land?” and they’d say, “Yes.”

So it was really a question, whenever anybody spoke negatively, of trying to turn it around into a positive suggestion, or just coming back with, “Well, what would you like to see happen?”

That set the tone for our meetings, and it really set the tone for our organization as a whole about what we’re trying to do which is find positive solutions.

## 5.9 Let a Sense of Humor Break Presumptions

Having a sense of humor does more than produce smiles and laughter. It conveys to interviewees that an interviewer has a sense of perspective about her work, that she is not so earnest, so narrow-minded, or so grimly serious that the interviewee must worry from the very beginning, for example, about giving “inadequate,” “wrong”, or “stupid” answers. Bringing a sense of humor does not only lighten the work for the interviewer, but sharing that sense of multiple perspectives encourages interviewees, too, to share the contradictions and complexities, the riddles and peculiarities they see in cases at hand.

Sharing a sense of humor signals to the person being interviewed that the interviewer is not in full control of the situation; he or she doesn’t know all the answers; he or she is prepared for the unexpected, for multiple meanings and views, for not just a soberly serious attitude but for the contributions that a playful approach might make as well.

Having a sense of humor in this way can help build trust and ease the anxieties of interviewer–interviewee relationships; it can align questioner and respondent together collaboratively in the face of ambiguous and puzzling, complex, and contentious subjects. Not least of all, having a sense of humor can make it possible for both interviewee and interviewer to face very difficult, even painful subjects, recognizing them and yet not being held hostage to them (Forester 2004a; Sclavi 2003).

### 5.10 Take a Walk!

Still another approach to interviewing takes a less conversational and more physical, even more ambulatory, form. Talk less about issues in the abstract, and instead get out and move around more and look at the setting or city or neighborhood or view corridor or open space together. As you do things together, you will learn things, and sometimes talking may only come after walking, traveling, touring, moving through space together, going door to door or site to site together. In Tony Gibson's memorable phrase describing participants working together on community planning strategies and physical models: "Eyes down (to the work), hands on, rubbing shoulders, a lot less big mouth" (Gibson 1998).

### 5.11 Pre-brief and De-brief

It might help to realize that interviews live in our imaginations not only before we "do them," but after we have "done them" too. So it can help, early on, to talk to trusted and informed others about what we're getting into—what we might ask or not ask, do or not do. Similarly, we might discuss what we've heard and what we think we've learned with others after the fact, for often others will bring other perspectives, insights, and knowledge to bear on what we've heard, and we will learn even more than we first thought as we "go over" what we've heard with others.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

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So inter-viewing means listening to and learning from others and doing that with their cooperation, even collaboration. To interview well is to act practically, responding to the particulars of the person to whom you're talking in the unique situation of your conversation. In more philosophical terms, doing an interview requires a form of practical rationality, a context-sensitive rationality that's finely aware of details and richly responsible to encompassing histories of obligations and responsibilities (as Martha Nussbaum (1990) might put it).

In interviewing well, we try to explore possibilities of understanding the world in new ways. We are asking questions not simply to confirm our suspicions, but ideally to be surprised and to be taught, to be shown in new ways the world about which we care. In policy and planning situations, interviews often involve the sense of future as well as the perception of the past, and in conversations of depth, we can come to see both past and future in new ways—so that we reconstruct the past as hardly so "past"

after all, for we may come to interpret that past as we have never before beheld it and acted upon it.

So too in interviewing do we necessarily probe matters of fact and value together, even simultaneously. We probe, after all, the facts that matter, the facts that we take to be worth asking about, the facts that our interviewees find worthwhile noting, drawing our attention to, telling us how much they count.

In planning and policy contexts, then, inter-viewing to explore future possibilities reaches far beyond traditional interviews that might collect multiple-choice answers to pre-scripted questions. Policy and planning interviewing values objectivity not as opposed to subjectivity but as building upon it, as established by inter-subjective confirmation, by public scrutiny rather than private bias. In the policy and planning fields, interviewers dispense with the fictions that salient knowledge could be adequately pre-scripted, and so in these fields, open-ended interviews become essential to open up possibilities of action and design, negotiation and conflict resolution, collaboration and modes of recognition that lie beyond the initial presumptions of the interviewers. In planning and policy contexts, interviewing becomes exploratory, normatively inquisitive, action-oriented collaborative research.

Interviewing, we see, begins with a form of relationship in which strangers often approach each other to talk. In the course of such talk, we can transform relationships (for better or worse), so that interviewers can often create trust and rapport, can make their presence well worth the time of the interviewee. In other cases, of course, interviewers damage relationships by being presumptuous, condescending, threatening, callous, disrespectful, short, confounding, or worse.

When we consider the harm interviewers can do, we can see vividly how the work of interviewing involves an ethics that involves the treatment of others to whom we talk. The ethical considerations that become immediately relevant involve issues of respect, recognition, and emotional sensitivity. So interviewing combines matters of epistemology and ethics: interviewers must care deeply not only how they can know about the world, but also about how they can treat others with or from whom they hope to learn about and perhaps change the world.

Interviewing requires us to listen far beyond the literal words we hear, far beyond the “facts of the matter,” so that we assess meaning and significance, so that we assess emotional nuances and feelings as well as factual accuracy, so that we take our conversations not as last words about complex matters but as first words that open them up for us.

Lastly, the challenges of interviewing make clear to us a deep insight of Hannah Arendt's: our work of social enquiry must have a moral resonance with the subject matter, the experiences, the political and moral complexities that we wish to explore (Benhabib 1990; Slack 2003). This sounds simple enough, but perhaps no challenge in social enquiry is more daunting. Pre-scripted questionnaires will hardly do. Just how can one person ask insightfully about another's experience of family or neighborhood or community disintegration, or about the humiliations, perhaps due to racism or sexism or job loss or incapacities, of another's loved one(s)?

Just how can we ask sensitively, not stupidly, about one another's real and precious hopes, or tragic losses?

For all those concerned with matters of public policy possibilities, the work of interviewing is inescapable, ever-present throughout organizational and political life. Technical and non-technical work alike will depend deeply on the skills and insights we bring to our interviews, so we have our work cut out for us.

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## CHAPTER 7

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# POLICY ANALYSIS AS POLICY ADVICE

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RICHARD WILSON

POLICY analysis and advice, and the decisions based on them, should in an ideal world be united in one smooth continuous process: research, analysis, options, consultation, proposals, and decisions, all guided and informed by advice at each stage. This simple sequential model is one which many policy advisers themselves have in mind in setting out on the path leading to a decision.

In practice the world inside government is not always as simple as that. The policy process can be more tortuous. The steps may come in the wrong order and some may be omitted. External factors may have an unpredictable impact on what happens. Even a strong Minister may be swayed late in the day by a word from an influential outsider or a media report or a new statistic. Policy analysis is usually an important part of policy formulation, but it is not necessarily the whole story. This chapter explores why.

The chapter is written from the viewpoint of a practitioner who has worked inside government departments and the Cabinet Office since the 1960s, in a position of both giving and receiving advice. It takes no account of experience elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Every country does these things in its own way, influenced by its own administrative culture and conditions. This is a local account, hopefully with relevance to others.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For corresponding accounts of US practitioners, see e.g. Eizenstadt 1992; Schultze 1992; Neustadt 2001; Barber 2001. For more analytic accounts drawn from a US experience see e.g. Neustadt 1960, 2001; Neustadt and May 1986; Wildavsky 1979; Porter 1983, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For other academic accounts of the British case, see e.g. Brittan 1964, 1969; Hecló and Wildavsky 1974.

## 1. WHAT IS “POLICY?”

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The word “policy” is imprecise and usually used loosely by those who make it. It may indicate an overall objective (“we will take effective action to combat the terrorist threat,” in the words of the 1997 New Labour manifesto (Labour Party 1997, 35) ) or a guiding principle (“we will be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime” (1997, 5) ) or a specific action which will be taken to help reach the objective (“we will halve the time it takes persistent juvenile offenders to come to court” (1997, 5) ).

Definitions of policy are sometimes crafted for a particular purpose. For instance, a Government White Paper on Modernising Government in 1999 said: “policy making is the process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions to deliver ‘outcomes’—desired changes in the real world.”<sup>3</sup> The National Audit Office, which audits public expenditure on behalf of the UK Parliament, similarly said: “Policy is the translation of government’s political priorities and principles into programmes and courses of action to deliver desired changes” (National Audit Office 2001). These definitions were intended to give a signal to particular audiences, and are incomplete. For instance, “policy” may relate to the principles and priorities which a government adopts in relation to an issue, and not to their translation into action: see above. And not all policies are about bringing about change. In some cases the objective of policy is continuity. To take a random example, the British government has declared, as a matter of policy, its joint commitment with China to stability, prosperity, and a high degree of autonomy for Hong Kong.<sup>4</sup>

In other cases “policy” is used with other meanings for other purposes. For instance, Michael Howard, the then Home Secretary, faced demands in Parliament for his resignation following a serious lapse in prison security for which he had dismissed the director general, Derek Lewis. He said:

I am personally accountable to the House [of Commons] for all matters concerning the Prison Service. I am accountable and responsible for all policy decisions relating to the service. The director general is responsible for day to day operations.<sup>5</sup>

Here the Minister was proposing a distinction between policy and day-to-day operations as a basis for defining personal responsibility. The distinction was not new. Similar distinctions had been drawn in other contexts, for instance in the relationship between governments and nationalized industries.

The distinction needs to be used with care. Policy making and day-to-day operations are not separate spheres of influence but inextricably linked. The policy maker may, for instance, regard it as morally and politically unacceptable for inmates of a prison, who are there for punishment and correction, to have television sets in their cells, and may decide that they should be withdrawn as a matter of policy. The person

<sup>3</sup> Cm 4310.

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister, press conference, 10 May 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Hansard, 19 Oct. 1995, col. 518.



in charge of day-to-day operations, on the other hand, may regard withdrawal as an operational matter which may lead to disturbance, rioting, and even a loss of control in prisons. Different roles may have different objectives and priorities and ultimately the policy maker has to be responsible for operations as well as policy. But day-to-day operations can of course be delegated within that framework.

Another way of putting the point is that there are different levels of policy making. At the highest level, governments define their policy objectives and how they will be achieved. But at lower levels there is often a myriad of intermediate policy decisions about the interpretation and implementation of policy which is the stuff of daily life in government departments including day-to-day operations; and it is where success and failure often lie.

It can be argued for instance that the chances of successfully introducing the poll tax (community charge) were dramatically reduced by an intermediate policy decision (see Butler, Adonis, and Travers 1994). The Conservative manifesto in the general election in 1987 included a commitment to the tax. The intention was to introduce it alongside its predecessor system, the rates, and to phase out the rates over four years, an arrangement known as “dual running.” Then in late 1987, after brief discussion, it was decided to abandon dual running and introduce the tax in one go in April 1990. This intermediate policy decision was arguably as important as the policy itself but it was taken quickly and with only a small fraction of the care and thought.

In this chapter policy means the actions, objectives, and pronouncements of governments on particular matters, the steps they take (or fail to take) to implement them, and the explanations they give for what happens (or does not happen). Policy advice means the advice which is given to governments in connection with these things, including how to achieve a policy goal, once it has been decided upon.

## 2. THE EXERCISE OF POWER

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Policy in government is fundamentally about the exercise of power by the state. Policy advice is advice about how that power should be exercised, and to the extent that it actually influences what governments say or do it may itself represent the exercise of informal power. Policy analysis is about providing a basis for the exercise of power, and may or may not be powerful, depending on how far it actually influences what happens. The policy process does not exist in a vacuum, nor does it operate in a world of pure rationality. It can only be seen and understood in a political context.

This is why the relationship between policy analysis and policy advice is rarely straightforward. Power—and therefore control over policy—never remains con-

stantly in one place with one person: it is a matter of degree, dependent very much on time and circumstance. This applies even at the highest levels of government

Policy advice must take account of these things and therefore goes wider than policy analysis. It includes “the art of the possible,” the art of judging what can be achieved within the constraints which limit a government’s freedom of maneuver (see e.g. Vickers 1983). These constraints are many and varied. Lack of resources, lack of legal power, lack of parliamentary support, public opposition on moral or other grounds, opposition from elsewhere in government, opposition from powerful vested interests such as the trade unions in the 1960s and 1970s or the media today, the reaction of financial markets, lack of technical know-how: these and many similar factors curb the policy options open to governments.

### 3. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

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There are many ways in which context may affect the policy processes of government.

The chances of a policy analysis being accepted may depend in part on who carries it out and for whom. For instance, where the analysis is the work primarily of people at the centre of government working for a Prime Minister or a Chancellor of the Exchequer who is strongly placed in relation to his colleagues, with a large majority in the legislature, the chances are that policy decisions will be in line with the analysis although this is not always the case. Reports from influential inquiries or bodies such as Royal Commissions set up by government are also more likely to carry weight than analyses volunteered unasked, particularly if the group or individual concerned has an obvious interest in the outcome, unless of course it suits the convenience of government to cite them in support.

Where analysis is the subject of dispute within government and differing advice is being given in different quarters to different ministers, a policy analysis which lends weight to a particular viewpoint is more likely to have an effect than one which further muddies the water. So too is a report which is clearly authoritative and independent, in particular on a scientific or social issue of current concern. So too is a report which is clearly expressed and can be grasped by a busy Minister or official reading late at night in the back of a car.<sup>6</sup>

Much of government is about reconciling conflicting points of view held by different groups and individuals outside government. Policy analyses which command wide support among experts or others, and are well documented and supported by authoritative evidence, are more likely to have an impact than analyses which are disputed by other authorities and supported only by one strand of opinion. But even where there is consensus it may not prevail if political conviction and belief points to another course as the best for the long term, as the

<sup>6</sup> For a more general analysis of these phenomena, see Majone 1989.

Thatcher government demonstrated with macroeconomic policy and the trade union reforms of the early 1980s, and as Prime Minister Blair showed over military action in Iraq from 2003.

In practice, if an issue is highly contentious, too many views may come from too many quarters—experts, businessmen, quangos, people inside government, Parliament, the media, pressure groups, and so on—for any rules or generalizations to apply. The issues simply have to be thrashed out in whatever Cabinet Committee or other forum the Prime Minister of the day uses to debate them.

For example, in the late 1970s, the government was faced with a decision on the choice of thermal reactor for the next generation of nuclear power station orders in England and Scotland, a highly technical issue involving many scientific, safety, environmental, and commercial factors. Passions ran high and reached the front pages of newspapers. Opinion was divided between those who favoured the British Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor (AGR), the American Pressurized Water Reactor (PWR), no new nuclear orders, or something else. The policy process was a model of its kind. A technical assessment of the options was prepared at a cost of some millions of pounds; the Secretary of State launched a process of public consultation and personally took evidence from as many groups as possible, including his own civil servants; and the Central Policy Review Staff (see below) prepared their own analysis. In the end there was no obvious “right” answer, no consensus, no determining factor, no greater agreement when everyone had had their say than at the outset of the process. The final decision, taken by the Cabinet after prolonged debate, was a compromise: one AGR for England, one AGR for Scotland and a design study for a PWR which was later built at Sizewell. Sometimes in government there are no “right” decisions, just decisions. (For an academic study of some of these episodes, see Williams 1980.)

Good timing can be a key factor in the influence which a policy analysis may have. There are some fundamental issues such as, say, the elimination of poverty which governments are most likely to be prepared to tackle at the beginning of their period of office or later on when they begin to be accused of running out of steam. Attempts to persuade governments to tackle such issues at other times when there is no public pressure to do so are likely to end up in the long grass however rational the case for addressing them, unless of course they are taken up by a policy unit or individuals close to a strong Prime Minister—as with Prime Minister Thatcher on global warming, for instance—or Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Governments are more open to new thinking at some times than at others. Where consideration of a policy issue is still at an early stage and thinking is still fluid, it is easier to influence it than later when thinking has hardened. The chances of influencing thinking are even greater if a review has been running for a while without making progress and no one knows what to do (which may not always be apparent from the outside). The review of the National Health Service in 1988 which lasted a year had reached few conclusions after six months’ work. It had been initiated with no idea of where it would lead and found itself conducting an exercise which required original thinking with relatively little ready-made analysis available to assist.

This happens in government from time to time, particularly in fields which are peculiarly the business of government such as health or social security or rail privatization.

Other things being equal, proposals which involve an increase in taxation, the introduction of legislation, or new public expenditure are less likely to be accepted than proposals which are self-financing (or even better, raise money) or which can be implemented within the existing law. The parliamentary timetable has room for only a limited number of major bills in each session, generally fifteen to twenty: competition among departments for one of those slots is intense and begins well over a year before the session begins.<sup>7</sup>

These are all examples of extraneous factors which may influence the effectiveness of policy analysis and the content of policy advice.

## 4. POOR DECISION MAKING

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No amount of good policy process can remedy the wrong political judgement. Those involved in the community charge, referred to above, regarded it as a model of policy analysis. One of the ministers most closely involved, William Waldegrave, said later:

In the way the policy was originated, formulated and carried through it was a model of how ... modern policy should be formulated. There was a project team. There were outsiders. There was published analysis and enormous consultation. There was modelling of outcomes using the latest technologies. What there wasn't (it is now generally alleged) was a correct political judgement by the Cabinet of the day. That was nothing to do with the civil service and the outside experts who had performed exactly what their democratically elected masters had asked of them ... In the end there is no magic wand which can ensure that human decision makers avoid mistakes.<sup>8</sup>

Whether it was in fact a model of policy analysis has been questioned: it has for instance been pointed out that the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, composed a devastating critique of the tax which anticipated virtually all the key weaknesses, including the serious distributional impact the tax was likely to have (Butler, Adonis, and Travers 1994). But the central point, that good decisions require good judgement as well as good policy analysis and advice, is a fair one. Where the exercise of power is too concentrated in a department or in government or in one individual this increases the risk of poor decisions.

<sup>7</sup> Rose 1986; van Mechelen and Rose 1986. On the timetable imperative in government, see Cabinet Office 2004.

<sup>8</sup> W. Waldegrave, speech to Social Market Foundation conference on 'Reforming the role of government', 1 Dec. 1993, p. 7.