Research and policy change: the power of opportunism

William Solesbury encourages researchers and campaigners to look for opportunities to contribute to policy discourse.

We often talk of policy making and policy makers. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'make' is 'to form something by putting parts together or combining substances'— as in making a cake or making a car. To talk of making policy is to use the word metaphorically. But it is a bad metaphor, for making implies a number of things that do not apply to policy. It implies a clear, structured process—as with a recipe or a production line—rather than the 'muddling through' characteristic of politics. It implies agency, that is, someone acting as the maker—the cook or the engineer—is in charge of the process, rather than the many hands—politicians, experts, lobbyists, researchers—who shape policy. And it implies a clean slate (to use another metaphor) as the starting-point from which the process of making proceeds, whereas in most fields of policy, there is already a set of purposes and actions in place, sometimes with a long history.

So, it is more realistic to talk not about making policy but about changing policy. This shift of vocabulary is also more helpful in thinking about how research may contribute to policy. For the truth is that research is rarely, if ever, the dominant influence on policy. The Eureka moment—when a scientific discovery is announced and changes the world forever—is exceptional. Policy changes for reasons other than the discovery of new knowledge: for example, because of shifts in the public mood, the political
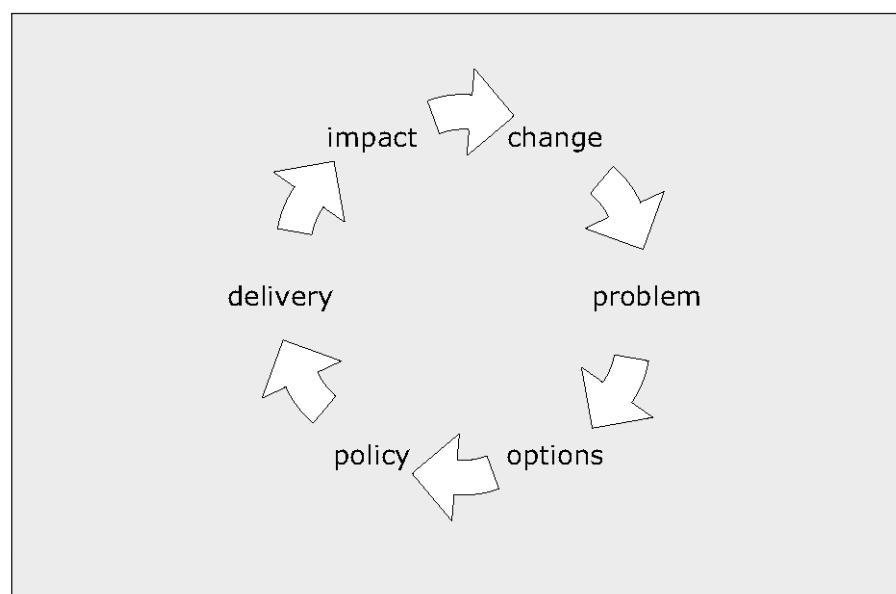
commitments of new administrations, crises and cock-ups, the personal ambitions of politicians, the obvious failure of past policies. All this is endemic in democratic politics. The important point for researchers to grasp is that when change is 'in the air', for such reasons, then policy people are in the market for knowledge and understanding about the world. Their old cognitive certainties may have been eroded, and they may be looking for something new to put in their place. For researchers who are seeking influence that is the time to strike.

How to recognise such moments? Four aspects of policy change matter: the policy cycle, the in/stability of knowledge in different policy domains, the dimension of change,

and the competing influences that shape change (Figure 1). The concept of the policy cycle (see the diagram) is simple, indeed a simplification, but useful. It posits that there is a sequence in which changes in society become recognised politically as problems to be addressed, options for doing so, choices are made and expressed as policy, that is then delivered and has an impact in society which then changes—or not, if the policy fails. The concept's value is that it identifies different kinds of relevance to policy that any given research might have. For example, is it problematising some social change? Or is it exploring—perhaps through international comparison—some options for policy? Or is it evaluating the performance of policy? This understanding helps the researcher to choose the audience, timing, and format to maximise influence.

Different policy domains vary from time to time in the stability of the knowledge that informs them. Geoff Mulgan, former Director of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, identified three types (Mulgan, 2005:221). First, there are stable policy domains where theoretical foundations are strong, government broadly knows what works, there is a strong intellectual consensus, and research is mostly filling in gaps and refining insights: examples in recent years might be macroeconomics, labour market policy, and public

Figure 1: Policy cycle

health. Second, there are domains in flux where empirical knowledge is contested, and there may even be strong theoretical disputes, policies do not seem to be working, and there is disagreement on either diagnosis or solutions: this might include much of education, crime, environmental policy, drug abuse, and public services. Research reviews may come into their own here, but importantly heterodox ideas must not be discounted. Third, there are novel policy domains where unfamiliarity or the rapidity of change precludes the existence of strong bodies of knowledge, and there is no certainty about policy options or their likelihood of success: current examples might be biotechnology, media convergence, privacy, and surveillance. Investment in developing new knowledge is essential here.

The dimension of change will also vary between domains. A useful distinction can be drawn between paradigms, polices, and practices. By paradigms is meant the model or theory of behaviour that underpins a policy, often implicitly; there are some generic paradigms that are often found in policies—such as markets, partnerships, capacity building, and regulation. By policies is meant the bundle of targets, rules and requirements, resources, and skills that are to be deployed in pursuit of an objective. By practices is meant the actions that people—as managers, workers, professionals, and consumers—take in going about their business. These three are

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mutually influential and not just in a hierarchical way with paradigms shaping policies that determine practices. Contrariwise, a policy change may implicitly cause a paradigm shift; and changing practice is often running ahead of policy. The key thing here is that research will often have most relevance to one of these dimensions. An analogous distinction from Organisational Development is between transformational change (paradigms), transitional change (policies) and developmental change (practices) (Ackerman, 1986).

In all these cases, knowledge, evidence, or research will not be the sole influence on policy change. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, in its recent report on *Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence Based Policy*, concluded 'It would be more honest and accurate to acknowledge the fact that while evidence plays a key role in informing policy, decisions are ultimately based on a number of factors—including political expediency' (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2006:103). On those factors, Carol Weiss, doyenne of American evaluators, offers a useful typology (Weiss, 1995). She argued that there are four influences at work in shaping policy and practice (the context for her original paper was school management): information (aka evidence or knowledge), ideology, interests, and institutions. She noted their interaction such that, for example, people of a particular ideological persuasion will tend to

value certain kinds of evidence and dismiss others; similarly interests. And the importance of institutions is not so much as a driver of change but—with their different structures, processes, and cultures—as a constraint on change. The consequence is that in presenting research evidence to bear on policy, one should be mindful of how it will fare in the competition with these other factors.

There is a saying regarding evidence-based policy that 'policy makers need to know when they need to know.' This captures the essence of my argument above—that the best chance for evidence to influence policy is when policy is changing. Identify those occasions and identify who is driving change, and, if there is something that your research can contribute to the policy discourse, then pitch in. Opportunism is all. ∎

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References

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