

The Policy Process

Policy process. What process? The problem is that new policies, and policy decisions, can arise in, and are handled in, a multitude of different ways, as is made clear by Mark Turner and David Hulme:

What must be banished is any lingering idea that policy is some highly rational process in which expert technicians are firmly in control using highly tuned instruments to achieve easily predicted outcomes. Such an image is inappropriate for OECD countries let alone the developing world . . .

But it is often possible to discern a number of separate stages, including

- identify a problem
- research,
- consultation and gaining knowledge,
- exploring options,
- more consultation and
- taking a recommendation through to Ministerial agreement.

However, it is important to realise that the individual stages do not operate sequentially, but overlap as policies become firmed up.

To begin at the beginning, someone has to identify a problem or an issue or an opportunity. That 'someone' can include a political party (especially when in opposition and writing a manifesto), a Minister, the media, a pressure group, a think tank, a trade association, an 'expert', a member of the public or a civil servant. The difficulty, therefore, is not that there are too few ideas, but that there are far too many, and it is quite impossible to run with more than a fraction of them. The natural result is that both Ministers and officials are forced to spend much of their time in defensive mode, either explaining why nothing will be done or just avoiding the issue.

Some generators of ideas are more likely than others to be listened to. Ministers, obviously, are in pole position – as long as they concentrate on a small number of initiatives and do not come up with a new idea every day. Outside experts and pressure groups can also be very effective, as long as they are truly respected by their peers. And so can civil servants, but only once they have earned the respect of their Ministers.

So there are some lessons in this for the civil servant. First, try not to be over-defensive. The world is full of good ideas, hidden amongst even more bad ones. Your job is to help Ministers identify the good ones, even if they are counter-intuitive, from an unusual source, or from a highly critical pressure group.

Second, take every opportunity to gain the respect of your Ministers before espousing a novel idea. New Ministers bestow power on those they trust. To begin with, they will prefer to deal with their political advisers and others that have

previously supported them through thick and thin. They will come to trust you, as well, and bestow power on you, but only if you earn that trust over a period, and by responding positively to their agenda.

Third, seize an opportunity when it presents itself. Don't let it slip by. The best moments of your career will be when you have put an idea to a Minister, or a Minister has put an idea to you, and you jointly see the possibility of achieving real change. You will dash off to gather colleagues around you, and map out a dramatic and challenging strategy. You will write your ideas up that evening, re-write them when you have calmed down in the morning, and get back to the Minister, with a really positive programme, within 24 hours – and then you really are on your way.

There is a nice example, told by Sir Geoffrey Holland, a former Permanent Secretary in the Education Department, which illustrates much of the above. Every year – a good time ago – the British Safety Council used to send a telegram to the Prime Minister drawing attention to the accident rate in factories and saying that the situation warranted an enquiry. Every year the telegram was passed from Downing Street to the Secretary of State for Employment, then down through the department until it reached the desk of a middle manager who each year drafted the same defensive reply: 'The Prime Minister thanks the Safety Council for their telegram, the contents of which have been noted'. But one year the telegram was accidentally seen by a senior official called Charles Sisson who recognised the truth of the point that was being made, and penned a minute agreeing with the Council. Out of this came the Health & Safety Executive, and our whole approach to health and safety at work was modernised.

Gaining Knowledge

It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that our advice to Ministers must be based upon experience and knowledge. It should be the aim of every one of us to be the acknowledged expert in our policy area. Once we have been in the job for some time, it should be a matter of professional pride that no-one else should understand our patch better than us – and that includes Ministers and our line managers, even if they have the advantage of seeing a wider picture. Conversely, senior officials do not need to be familiar with all the detail that ought to be at the fingertips of others. But they should be able to hold their own in any discussion of the major issues, trends and currents that affect their policy area.

The besetting sin of civil servants is to mix too much with each other.

Sir William Beveridge

It follows that we cannot be effective if we never get out from behind our desks. We must find a way to experience for ourselves the problems or issues with which we are dealing. Seeing, after all, is believing. We also need to be familiar with the political context of our work, and to be conscious of the world outside our own environment. Not everyone is a white-collar worker, not everyone has GCSEs and

not everyone lives in the South East of England. Indeed, 99 per cent of the world's population, and 96 per cent of economic activity, is outside the UK. We need to be aware of opportunities, trends and ideas outside our immediate experience. Without such experience we will never fully understand the arguments, emotions and undercurrents which condition the people and businesses with whom we deal. And only with such experience can we avoid the trap of recasting reality in our own image, and believing that our elegant and logical view represents the only possible view of the issue under consideration.

Gaining experience can also be great fun. For a start, it often involves travel. And although you might be criticised for travelling to interesting places at the taxpayer's expense, you will be criticised even more strongly – and with more reason – if you never get out at all. And you do not necessarily need to travel very far. I will certainly never forget my pre-dawn start, sorting and delivering the Royal Mail, or the time when my secretary and I worked together on the production line at Longbridge. Both experiences taught me great respect for those who do such jobs, day in day out, without letting quality standards slip. For instance, it would have been all too easy, with a new car coming along every eighty seconds, to let a mistake go uncorrected in order to be ready for the next vehicle, but no-one did so. Such experiences also taught me the difficulty of managing in non-office environments, in out-dated buildings, and at times of day when none of us are at our best.

By the way, a good place to look for information is in the minds of front-line staff in departments and local authorities, and in the minds of others to whom the policy is directed. They will very often have a clear idea about why a situation is the way it is and why previous initiatives have failed. You should certainly never rely on middle or senior managers. For instance, Deutsche Bank asked 2.4 million customers and their branch managers and their junior branch staff, to rate branch performance. There was a very high correlation between the junior staff's perception and that of their customers, while there was almost no correlation with the branch managers' perceptions and the customers'.

Analysing What You Have Learned

You should not, of course, simply accept all the 'facts' that are presented to you. Statistics can be particularly misleading.

- Aggregated statistics can look very different to the underlying figures. For instance, vehicle accident statistics generally include young and accident-prone drivers, as well as injuries to pedestrians and cyclists. Indeed, I understand that a middle-aged car driver in good weather may well be just as safe, over most long journeys in the UK, as if he or she were flying, which is a very safe form of transport.
- Different organisations will record data in different ways. The classic example is in France where, if an elderly person is found dead without evidence of

health problems, it is acceptable to attribute the death to 'old age', thus reducing the apparent incidence of heart attacks. But crime statistics can be similarly unreliable, as are many others.

- The fact that there have been no incidents does not mean that something is safe. It is possible that fewer children are now killed on our roads, not because they are inherently safer than decades ago, but rather because they are so dangerous that many children are not allowed near them.
- Death and injury rates can look very different when presented as a number (e.g. number of children killed in an incident) rather than as a proportion of the exposed population per annum.
- A report of deaths caused by, for example, air pollution might include a high proportion of those whose death was already imminent, rather than deaths from amongst an otherwise healthy population.
- Isolated statistics can give a misleading impression. For instance, the radioactivity of a beach near a nuclear plant may be higher than many others, but is it also lower than other beaches which are nowhere near such a plant?

It is easy, too, to frighten people with 'science'. 76 per cent of one group of adults, presented with a number of true facts about the chemical di-hydrogen monoxide, concluded that Government should regulate its use. The other 24 per cent presumably knew that the chemical's other name is 'water'.

Scientific 'facts' are also often anything but 'facts' as you or I would understand the term. Indeed, you can always tell good scientists by the way in which they acknowledge uncertainties, make assumptions explicit, distinguish between what is true and what is speculative, and present options.

By the way, do not be tempted, when faced with a hostile press or a one-sided lobby, to assemble your own dodgy statistics – or dodgy science – to fight them off. The inevitable result would be that those with whom you are trying to communicate would then see you as prejudiced and/or adversarial, and you might also then fail to pay insufficient attention to perfectly reasonable arguments from 'the other side'.

Moving beyond science and statistics, you must remember that it is unfortunately in the nature of our society that most correspondents, and most of the people that we meet, will present a one-sided view of an issue, drawing attention to all the relevant facts and arguments which support their case but failing, either deliberately or through sheer conviction, to take account of inconvenient facts or opposing arguments. But as you gain experience, you will quickly learn to detect the pure advocate or bullshitter.

Take care, therefore, not to be too trusting and bear in mind the famous warning that 'He would say that, wouldn't he!' No one who is applying for a grant will tell you that they will in fact go ahead even if they do not get it, and no businessperson will

tell you that the principal purpose of their latest acquisition is to build market power. Similarly, most people are reluctant to admit their errors, and their reluctance will be in proportion to the seriousness of their error. Therefore, if you are questioning the propriety of someone's behaviour, be cautious about attaching significant weight to the views of the person being questioned. Find out the facts and let them speak for themselves.

The same applies, but less strongly, to professional advisers. Lawyers, accountants and merchant bankers are employed by their clients to persuade you to do certain things. They will usually tell you the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth. They will also sometimes imply, and indeed believe, that their opinion (e.g. about the viability or prospects of a company) is a fact. If your instinct is to the contrary, then rely upon your instinct, at least to the extent of probing further.