Government and the Academy: Will the Twain Ever Meet?

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When Nathan Caplan (1979) published his seminal work on two communities' theory, I was a newly-minted teacher. Beyond the learning that took place in my classroom, I had little concern for the theory and practice of knowledge mobilization or *research utilization*, as the field was originally termed. But life takes unexpected turns. Some years later, after I left classroom teaching to work in a ministry of education, knowledge transfer became part of my stock-in-trade. During much of my tenure in government I worked in the areas of assessment, research and planning. This involved the typical work associated with monitoring and reporting on educational outcomes, but there was also a primary and more immediate responsibility – feeding the political appetite for information, statistics, comparisons and talking points in defense of government's position on any given educational issue. The Minister is the voice of the government and when s/he "goes out publicly" on any policy issue, any and all information and resources are brought to bear – with remarkable efficiency.

In a government department, the rules and conventions are entirely different from those of schools, universities, and perhaps from any other public agency or institution. There is an old adage that says "any would-be government's first priority is to get elected and their second priority is to get re-elected." In my experience, senior bureaucrats – the ones who survive successive governments – understand these rules very well. The practice of public administration is tightly coupled to political considerations, such as popularity and favorable public opinion. However, "permanent" public servants must strive to find the right balance in their interactions with elected officials and this is often a risky proposition. On one hand they must mediate their policy advice and direction through a research-informed, public interest lens. On the other hand, in order to gain the trust of the Minister, they must stay close to the politics side of policy-making. Too far towards the political can paint an official as partisan, but, a rigid focus on regulations and processes can earn them the reputation of being inflexible and rules-bound. The line between public service and political service is, therefore, fuzzy and difficult to discern. In government, executive appointments to senior public service posts are made through "Orders in Council". It means that senior public servants serve "at the pleasure of the government" and they may be removed at any time, at the discretion of the party in power. One of the ever present conflicts, therefore, in the life of any senior bureaucrat is how to advocate for sound public policy while remaining cooperative and accommodating to political directives.

The move to a university environment has taken me away from the day-to-day machinations and pressures of life in the public service. This has not only been physically and mentally invigorating; it has enabled me to reflect on how my practice as a policy advisor could have been different – driven less by political pressure and need to deal with the immediate problems of the day and more by sober reflection and research evidence. In this short paper I consolidate some of these reflections, examine the role of public servants in mediating policy evidence and explore the challenges associated with mobilizing academic research in a political environment. I draw on my lived experiences and research on evidence-based policy to describe the research and policy communities and to suggest ways the two might be brought closer together.

Life in the Public Service

People have been studying and writing about governance for centuries. In 1651, Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, in which he explored the nature and functions of government. Hobbes described government as a system whereby citizens confer political power to a smaller group of individuals to make rules (legislation and policy) on their behalf – decisions that are expected to foster the public good. The public service represents the enabling apparatus for the elected government, however; the extent of its involvement in shaping public policy is open to question. One view of public governance represents public servants as just that – 'servants' or functionaries whose purpose is to simply execute policies and initiatives formulated by the polity, (Aucoin, 1995); policies that are often driven by political factors. A more deprecatory strain of this conceptualization depicts public servants as a 'necessary evil' for enacting government policy (Barzelay, 2001; Lynn, 1996). To many people, the word 'bureaucracy' connotes 'bad public administration' and is often expressed pejoratively, accompanied by adjectives such as 'incompetent', 'indifferent' or 'bloated'. Even the term 'bureaucrat' itself is rife with deprecatory connotations – mindless bureaucrats; bureaucratic mentality, and empire-building bureaucrats. Goodsell (1985) cites an 1981 American Press article as a prime example of a media metaphor capturing popular disgust with the public service; the bureaucracy is described as "a brontosaurus of unimaginable size, appetite, ubiquity and complexity" (p. 2). Such characterizations are widespread, even finding their way into reference books. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, for example, provides four definitions of bureaucracy including this one: "a system of administration marked by officialism, red tape, and proliferation". In short, there is a general distrust of the bureaucracy in the historical literature – a "perception of a runaway bureaucratic machine" (Goodsell, 1985, p. 58) dating back millennia; from references in ancient Chinese stories about 'difficult bureaucrats' to Western references such as the century-old French term 'paperasserie', which means, 'caught up in paper'(Lindblom& Woodhouse, 1993).

An alternative perspective casts public servants as "policy gatekeepers" who act for the public good and whose role is to identify public issues, evaluate policy proposals against the best research available, and provide frank and fearless advice about policy options – oftentimes to an unreceptive audience. Paul du Gay (2000) has argued that the Westminster form of government has traditionally afforded a robust policy development role to non-elected senior officials. While civil servants remained relatively anonymous from a public perspective, du Gay notes that the "convention of ministerial responsibility never required that ministers should be the policy-makers and officials merely the advisors and administrators" (p. 90). In major departments of government, he argues, it would be a practical impossibility for ministers to know and actively participate in all policy decisions. Thus, the traditional role of the bureaucracy was not simply to perform a managerial function. The real constitutional check or 'sober second look' occurred as a result of a permanent, independent public service, whose function was to serve the interests of the public and not to be beholden to any political party or faction. Du Gay (ibid.) writes:

> Public bureaucrats work within a political environment: that is their fate. Most of what they do has potential political implications, even activities of an apparently routine nature. […] Awareness of the political nature of their work, an expertise in the dynamics of the political environment within which they have to operate, is a crucial competence

they have to master. However, this political dimension does not make them partisan political actors in their own right. […] The public bureaucrat may be a political beast but she is not a party political beast. This is a crucial difference (p. 141).

I struggled with this ambiguity throughout my 16 years in government, but especially in the second half of my tenure when I served as a senior education executive. Because a minister's term of office is short (typically less than four years), their actions are often, perhaps necessarily, mediated by political considerations; but the bureaucracy is intended to be a relatively permanent fixture. Its operation and ethos is intended to be governed by different parameters and different values. The most significant of these is respect for public versus political interests. The casting of politicians as policy leaders is born out of the notion that a public servant is a "servant to the public", but in practice this idea has been corrupted to mean "servant to the government" as represented by the Minister. This view depicts senior public servants as instruments of political processes but with a severely limited role in policy formulation (Wilson, 1999).

One difficulty with these arrangements is that under a more traditional model, public servants were free to provide impartial advice without fear of reprisal; however, this independence is changing. Knight and Lingard (1996) observed that the public service has become more politicized, a change they describe as *ministerialization*. The practice of placing political appointees into more or less permanent senior executive and senior advisory positions has increased the power of political interests within the bureaucracy. Although scholarly references to the politicization of the public service are rare within the Canadian literature, some are beginning to emerge (e.g., AuCoin, 2004; Dutil, 2008). As I have argued elsewhere (Galway, 2008) this practice places the provision of independent advice in jeopardy and creates an impoverished policy environment. These changes mean that non-political policy advisors must weigh the risk of providing independent advice against the safer path of remaining neutral or dispassionate in the face of political decision-making and 'groupthink'.

Another problem with this paradigm is that there have been well-documented changes in public management accountabilities – a shift to distinctive private sector driven principles, themes, styles and patterns of public service management (Barzelay, 2001; Galway 2012; Kettl, 2000) and these have also created greater risk for public servants. The alignment of government departments with corporate managerial principles tends to further restrict opportunities to provide honest and independent advice to politicians in the formulation of policy decisions, but it places more direct accountability for the execution of such decisions in the hands of bureaucrats. Under such arrangements, as many of my colleagues and I learned, public servants share the risk associated with failed policies without necessarily having had very much input into their formulation.

Life in the Academy

A variation on the famous Winston Churchill quotation goes something like this: "policy is like sausage – you don't want to see either being made". As a government insider working in a 'line department' I had first-hand knowledge of how the proverbial policy sausage was prepared. My journey from public servant to academic was shaped by questions about how we could change the recipe and make education decisions that were informed by a broader confluence of factors.

As a researcher I wanted to understand how the knowledge gained through independent research could figure more prominently in the policy decisions of government. This was the work I undertook nearly a decade ago when I began the transition to an academic life.

Part of the pan-Canadian study I completed in 2006 also centered on the respective policy roles of politicians and public servants. It showed that senior public servants were cognizant of the risks and problems of a heavily politicized policy environment and that they adapted their practice by developing certain techniques to influence policy at the developmental stage. Through direct or indirect negotiation or through the provision of selective policy advice, senior bureaucrats felt they could successfully influence some decisions to be consistent with what they understood as sound public policy. Although the political actors who were part of that study represented public servants as having no substantive role in policy formulation, they did concede that their professional advice and internal knowledge were valued. These findings seem to signal an implicit recognition of a more robust policy role for senior public servants and a tacit acceptance, on the part of ministers, of a shared policy relationship that is constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated.

Part of the raison d'etre of a social scientist is to influence public policy through research and public discourse, yet we know that political actors resist the influence of external research-based knowledge. There is little to suggest that elected policymakers pay much attention to independent research, even when it is available and accessible. As Levin (2001) comments, "[t]he political world is …shaped by beliefs more than facts" (p. 14). Relative to the range of other forms of evidence, political considerations, such as public opinion and media spin are highly valued, while external (university-based) research has very marginal standing (Galway, 2006). My work with politicians suggests that education research is seen as foreign and detached from the policy questions that were important to government. Moreover, politicians consider the critical stance taken by some researchers on education issues to be wrought with political risk.

Discussion

The foregoing discussion suggests that the marginal direct impact of research on government policy described by Caplan (1979) over three decades ago is still valid in the Canadian educational context today. In Rudyard Kipling's (1892) poem, *Barrack-room ballads*, he lamented how poorly the British and the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent understood one another:

Oh, east is east, and west is west, and never the twain shall meet.

Today, we might apply the same maxim to the separation between government and the academy. Researchers and education policymakers have, for some time, been criticized for walking different paths (Levin, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Neilson, 2001; Sheppard, Galway, Brown &Wiens, 2013; Slavin, 2002, 2003; Stone, Maxwell & Keating, 2001), and this detachment seems to have grown stronger as school boards and education departments struggle to meet the demands of an increasingly impatient public. Some theorists place responsibility for infusing more research into education policy with policymakers – for deliberately ignoring research-based knowledge. Others accuse researchers of ignoring important policy areas in education (Lindblom&

Woodhouse, 1993; Neilson, 2001; Pring, 2000; Stone, 2002) charging that they must do more to disseminate and promote their research, and to make it more relevant and accessible to policy makers.

Political actors and researchers still operate in two worlds, where their values, accountabilities and motivations are entirely different. Governments and their ministers are in a constant public struggle for legitimation – a pressure not necessarily felt or understood by researchers. While the generation of research knowledge is inscribed in the academic community, it has only marginal relevance for political decision makers. Their world is consumed with the more immediate problems of governance – sustaining the economy, providing public services, avoiding and deflecting criticism and maintaining the support of a fickle public. As I have argued elsewhere, the changing social and technological landscape of education in Canada has led to a kind of 'democratization' of public education policy whereby political decision makers feel considerable public pressure for continuous reform and readjustment (Galway, 2006). In such circumstances, policy makers come to value political-democratic policy evidence (the human element) over research-based forms of evidence.

The two problems discussed in this paper – the politicization of public-sector decision making and the underutilization of research knowledge are connected. For political actors, basing policy decisions primarily on research evidence would likely be considered technocratic and politically risky. This begs the question: How then might things be different? How can research matter more in how policy makers exercise the authority granted them by the electorate? And perhaps more to the point, what actions from knowledge producers might help bridge the two communities and partially disrupt the political influences on education decision making?

The research and lived experiences I have described here suggest that if we are to have any meaningful influence on policy, the cultural separation between government and the academy must be upset, so that the contexts of knowledge production and policy development are better connected to one another. Put simply, there must be active engagement with political actors. One way the education policy process could be different is if there were a more robust and trusted channel through which independent research evidence could enter the policy arena. A promising avenue through which this type of change could be accomplished is by researcher engagement with the mid-level and senior-level public servants.

Although there appears to be no agreement on the extent of policy involvement, many authors agree that bureaucrats, either overtly or tacitly, play a significant role in policy development (Birkland, 2001; Goodsell, 1985; Majone, 1989; Lynn, 1996; Levin, 2004; Stone, 2002). Notwithstanding their views about the policy roles of public servants, political decision makers say they value the knowledge produced or compiled by ministry bureaucrats. The decision makers I interviewed placed a high value on material that had been produced or vetted by insiders, a finding consistent with Majone's (1989) claim that the policy analyst plays a pivotal role in determining what mix of evidence goes into policy documents and how that evidence is presented. This suggests that knowledge may well originate in independent scholarly research, but until it is acquired, authenticated, restated and repackaged by ministry staff, such research is not likely to figure into the policy mix.

The preceding discussion suggests that education researchers and academic administrators could greatly enhance the proclivity for better evidence-informed policy by working to make external research more familiar and less risky for policymakers. This, I suggest, could involve consideration of how academics represent their research in the public, and where appropriate, moderating the critical stance some scholars portray in commenting on the policy directions of government. While certain traditions of inquiry lend themselves to critical review of social institutions and processes (Creswell, 1998), the findings from this study suggest that consistently vociferous critical commentary on the policy directions of government may serve to position academic research as foreign and threatening to policymakers. When academic researchers publicly argue for a strict (research) evidence-informed approach to policy, they may inadvertently overlook the political dynamic of a policy situation, and situate themselves as adversaries. An alternative approach would be for researchers to moderate criticism of existing policy and situate themselves as catalysts for change. This would involve opening a dialogue with senior public servants towards 'selling' the value of university-based research to politicians as part of the 'package' of policy evidence that informs a systematic approach to policy development. Political actors make choices in the context of an overwhelming and widely diverse set of public expectations. Researchers, therefore, must also be open to a personal research agenda that involves attention to active policy issues. Otherwise, some education research in Canada may continue to be housed in rarely-accessed on-line journals or in the tomes of university libraries, the subject of discussion with other researchers, working within the same community, but unfortunately, somewhat disconnected from the site of policy development. Finally researchers must be prepared to engage with political actors themselves – even occasionally coming to their defense – instead of mostly framing the education decisions of government as 'bad policy'. Researchers could use the political process to their advantage by becoming sensitive to the influence of the mass media on politicians and using the popular media as a means of drawing attention to their research.

Kipling's epic ballad chronicled the conflict between two strong forces, the Britons and the native Indians, but it ends on a hopeful note, when both sides make overtures to try and understand one another. Throughout my career, first as a public manager and policy advisor and now as a researcher and university administrator, I have had the benefit of working in both communities. The inherent conflicts between political decision making versus research-informed policy are not insurmountable, but challenging the problem requires that we find ways to develop new understandings about the two communities and to bring them closer to one another.

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