

8

Using the policy cycle: Practice into theory and back again

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USE LARGE MAPS. (Cary 1944, p. 374)²

Introduction: Context and focus

My professional practice as a senior public servant between 2004 and 2016 was very much informed by my knowledge of policymaking theory and research. In that period, I led several policy, evaluation and program design teams in the Australian Public Service (APS). The observations and conclusions outlined here are based on my ‘lived experience’ as a senior policy officer in Australian Government social policy departments. My approach was effectively a form of ‘action research’, which is a valuable

1 I am indebted to Professor Meredith Edwards and Dr Trish Mercer for invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

2 In Cary’s 1944 novel, *The horse’s mouth*, the artist Gully Jimson gives this advice to his young protégé in the closing scenes. He tells Nosey that the world is unfair, messy and difficult to negotiate; the best you can hope for is to have a sense of humour, a willingness to press on regardless and a ‘map’—which is, of course, an abstract simplification, a theory or mental model—to help guide you. And, according to Jimson, it is advisable to use ‘large maps’ (i.e. abstract depictions that nonetheless reflect the terrain you are seeking to traverse). Policymakers could do worse than heed Jimson’s advice when trying to understand the complex, messy and difficult world of public policy analysis, advice and implementation.

approach when seeking to generate discussion and debate within and across the domains of practice and theory (Creswell & Poth 2018; Ely et al. 1991).

In the mid-1990s—following a 12-year career in the APS—I undertook doctoral research at the University of Canberra. Completing my PhD—‘Policy markets in Australia’—involved gaining a deep and broad understanding of the theory and literature around how public policy is (or ought) to be created. Towards the end of my candidature, I began working as an independent public policy consultant and trainer, a role I maintained for five years. In 2004, I returned to the APS and completed another 10 years in the service, mostly at the senior executive service level.

Summary of the approach

Box 8.1 provides a summary of how I sought to bring policy theory into the APS. It was a somewhat ‘covert’ approach, whereby I used my various roles as a manager and leader in policy branches to introduce my colleagues to some of the ideas around policymaking. I focused on the policy cycle framework, but also discussed some other perspectives, especially from the literature around policy systems.

Box 8.1. Summary of the approach.

Premise: there is no such thing as a theory-free public service, but there can be ‘theory blindness’ among practitioners.

Observation: there is a culture of pragmatic scepticism in the APS that occasionally takes the form of a casual, cynical dismissal of ‘academic’ approaches, and is sometimes mirrored in academia by a dismissal of ‘practitioners’.

Approach: I took an understated, low-key approach to theory mainly with more junior colleagues (i.e. less imbued with dominant culture).

Model: I used a version of the Australian policy cycle (Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2018) mixed with a little disjointed incrementalism, a taste of ‘garbage can’ and, every now and then, a dash of complex systems.

In line with John Maynard Keynes’s observation that ‘practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist’, I believe there is no such thing as ‘theory-free’ action in government. Indeed, it is oxymoronic to conceive of policymaking as unshaped by theory. That said, there can be a form of ‘theory blindness’, in which practitioners fail to reflect on the

underlying rationale for their policymaking and what constitutes ‘good’ (i.e. effective, efficient) policymaking process and what does not. One of the reasons I sought to promote the theoretical underpinnings of policymaking was to help reduce the risk of theory blindness undermining a reflective, learning-based approach to policy development among the teams I led.

Linked to the risk of theory blindness is what I perceived as a tendency to ‘pragmatic scepticism’ as part of the APS mindset (Mercer this volume, Chapter 3). A pragmatic policymaking approach has much to recommend it, especially as an antidote to reflexive ideology in political decision-making, and it is very much a part of the Australian (and New Zealand) tradition in public administration (Davis et al. 1993; Fabian & Breunig 2018; Halligan 1995; Head & Crowley 2015).

The APS partakes of the general Australian scepticism about academia and the world of experts. In principle, scepticism is healthy and productive, but sometimes it tips into wilful blindness—an unwillingness to see that experts and academics might have useful things to say to those who are looking to improve their professional practice.³ Given this culture, I generally took a low-key approach to policymaking theory as a factor shaping practice. However, from time to time, I ran information sessions on the theory of policymaking for my own staff, the content of which is the basis of this chapter.

The APS can be particularly sceptical about ‘experts’ or ‘academics’ who do not demonstrate a sufficiently grounded understanding of, or experience in, the realities of government. This is understandable, if somewhat frustrating to academics. A fast-moving, uncertain and ambiguous environment demands an approach that is flexible (‘agile’ in current parlance) and not overly constrained by the straightjacket of a rigid theory or prescription about how the work ought, in an ideal world, to proceed. Not dwelling too much on theory can also promote a ‘bias to action’ (or ‘cut through’), allowing the APS to more rapidly and effectively

3 A sceptical mindset can also be a form of psychological defence. If you are given the task of taking a government’s agenda and policy direction and finding ways to implement it, an analytical framework that encourages starting with deep questions around problem identification and questioning priorities can be distracting (or even disheartening) when dealing with the cut and thrust of government and public administration.

take the government's policy positions to implementation, achieving the 'deliverables' and 'outcomes' beloved of the new public management approach (Ayres 2001a; Hood 1995; Lane 2000).

Sometimes, official scepticism about the value of theory in the art and craft of policymaking can seem rather self-serving. Jocular references to laws being like sausages (in that it is best not to see how they are made—erroneously attributed to Otto von Bismarck) are occasionally used to deflect inquiry into how and why decisions of government are made. This tends to create a 'black box' effect around the decision-making process, shrouding it in mystery. This approach is sometimes coupled with references to the particular way of thinking that is required to 'do' policy in government. Officers are sometimes identified as possessing (or not possessing) a 'policy brain', without any real articulation of precisely what this is, or why it seems to be something inherent in the individual and not able to be learned. It can seem as though there is a 'priesthood' of elite policy officers, with their own secrets and specialist knowledge, acquired through being admitted to the inner sanctum of government and not to be divulged in any detail to external scrutiny or critique.

Implicit in this approach is a level of exclusivity: if you are inside the 'black box', the box does not have to be explained to you. You experience it every day of your professional life, and your knowledge of it is implicit and rarely examined or critiqued. This is 'learning by doing', with a quasi-apprenticeship model applied to the recruitment and on-the-job training of young public servants who are considered to have a 'policy brain' and concomitant skills of analysis and written and oral communication, and the capacity to take general propositions and create practical policy propositions, implementation plans and so on.

I do not want to overstate the case here; this tendency is neither uniform nor universal within the APS. Attitudes towards theorising about policymaking vary from individual to individual, between organisations and from issue to issue. Many public servants working in policy roles are curious about policymaking theory. They seek and consume academic literature on the topic and attend seminars, conferences and workshops to hear what academics, researchers and theoreticians have to say about policymaking. They take a critical interest in political, economic and business-based models of decision-making and implementation, adopting and adapting ideas from diverse disciplinary fields. But the underlying

character of the institution remains sceptical, pragmatic and with a ‘bias for action’ that does not engage deeply or in a sustained way with theory, ideas or concepts.

As a senior public servant, I was on the continuum between ‘theory-oriented’ and ‘practice-oriented’, and found myself moving up and down it, depending on the circumstances. As a general preference, I gravitated to the rational-comprehensive approach embodied in the policy cycle. I did not do this because I thought the policy cycle is always the best explanation or description of how policy gets made and implemented. Rather, I thought the policy cycle approach was the best known and most easily communicated framework available to assist understanding and communicating how policy development and implementation might, in an ideal sense, be done.⁴

As a leader of several policy teams, I also thought that, for many public servants to properly grasp what the policy cycle is about, it was best to start with their own day-to-day experience. I sought to guide my colleagues towards a way of seeing theory as relevant, even useful, to their professional goals. The next section explains how I sought to do that.

Building a policy cycle from the bottom up

This section outlines the presentation I prepared for several teams I led in the APS, especially in the various incarnations of the current Department of Education, Skills and Employment. These included teams working on specific policy and implementation issues in early childhood education and care, and in research and development. I also used this presentation for teams working on program evaluation. These teams were generally working under tight timeframes with considerable pressure to deliver particular outputs, such as Cabinet submissions, Commonwealth–state agreements, program implementation plans and guidelines, or evaluation strategies and plans. The culture was generally action-oriented and task-

⁴ There is an extensive literature on different types of policy frameworks. I acknowledge considerable debt to authors such as Lindblom and Woodhouse (1993), Lasswell (1951), May (1998), Edwards (2001), Bridgman and Davis (2003), Considine (2005), Colebatch (2009), deLeon (1998), Di Francesco and Uhr (1996), Halligan (1995), Head and Crowley (2015), Parsons (2002), Peters (1998), Schon and Rein (1994) and Stewart (1999). I also draw on previous publications with Jenny Stewart (Stewart & Ayres 2001a, 2001b).

focused. I therefore decided to use inductive reasoning ('bottom up') rather than the usual deductive ('top down') approach that is common in presenting or explaining the policy cycle.

My aim was to take my colleagues' own experiences in their work as policy officers and resolve these down to their most fundamental components, before building them back up to a reasonably consistent heuristic they could use to understand at least some of the theory behind what they did on a day-to-day basis. I also encouraged them to exercise some of their natural scepticism to critique the theory when it did not seem to fit or help in their practice. The model towards which I built was a variant on the excellent Australian policy cycle devised by Althaus, Bridgman and Davis (2018). My aim was to draw out the implicit concepts and mental models that public servants use and blend them with the explicit policy cycle model.

Step 1: The two things public servants do

This is the starting point. Every public servant would acknowledge there are two fundamental things they collectively do in their day-to-day work (see Figure 8.1). Public servants:

- advise government so it has information on which to base its decisions
- implement government's decisions, including coordinating the work of third parties.

It is important to note that, even in this highly simplified model, there is a feedback loop between the two elements. This shows that the advice mode influences the implementation mode and vice versa. I included this feedback loop to allow for the later development of a form of complex systems thinking (as a more advanced version of my approach) if that seemed warranted. This feedback loop also reflected the importance of early and close involvement of those responsible for implementation—including public servants, service providers and other governments—to help ground policy advice in a sound understanding of the constraints and possibilities of implementation.

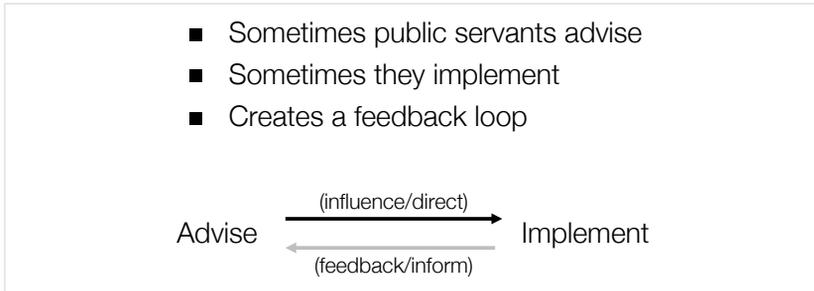


Figure 8.1. Step 1: The two things public servants do.

My ‘real world’ experience tended to greatly complicate this obviously oversimplified picture. For example, in 2013 I led a small policy team in the Department of Education tasked with advising the Abbott government on the terms of reference for a major Productivity Commission (PC) inquiry into childcare and early education. The team continued once the inquiry was established, managing the department’s interactions with the inquiry team and providing advice and analysis to both the PC and the assistant minister for education, Sussan Ley. The PC’s final report was released in October 2014.

In one sense, the team was in advising mode, as we were not implementing a program or initiative on behalf of the government. However, many of the policy parameters had already been determined. The Coalition had fought the 2013 election campaign in part on the basis of a commitment to hold a PC inquiry to advise on how the national system of childcare and early childhood education could be made more ‘flexible, affordable and accessible’ (Liberal Party of Australia 2013) for parents and more effective in supporting carers’ (mainly mothers’) workforce participation. The new government was also very keen to ensure childcare funding was fiscally sustainable, having previously issued draft terms of reference for the proposed inquiry (Liberal Party of Australia 2012).

From that standpoint, the team I led might be characterised as implementing an agenda already determined by the government. Many issues, however, were not well known or understood, and there was a need for significant analysis of the options around childcare funding and regulation. Therefore, I focused the team on analysis and modelling options rather than assuming that the policy position was fixed and clear.

Step 2: Add in ‘decide’

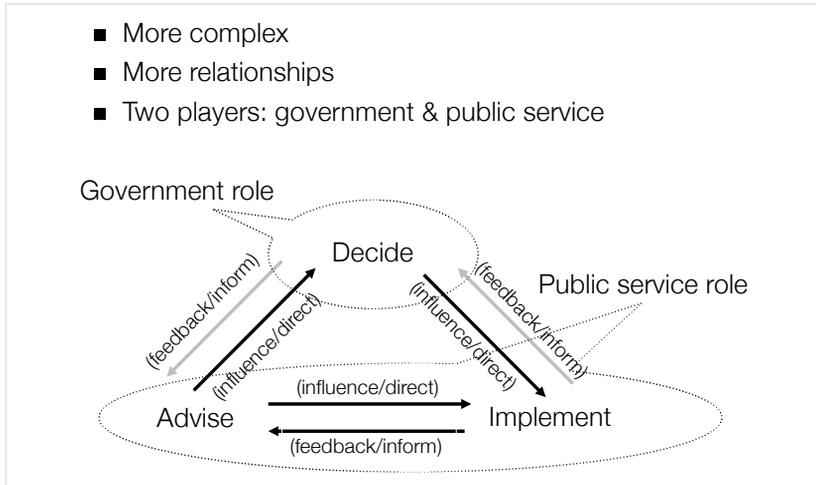


Figure 8.2. Step 2: Add ‘decide’.

Building on the simplified model derived from public servants’ ‘felt’ experience in Step 1, I introduced the element of ‘decision’ and the role of government (see Figure 8.2). I would emphasise to my colleagues that this is still a highly idealised model—neither descriptive (empirical) nor normative (prescriptive). Rather, it is a heuristic: a rule of thumb guide. It borrows a little from the ‘is’ of empirical description (because it is grounded in how public servants tend to work) and a little from the ‘ought’ of normative prescription (because it refines the process to a set of steps or phases), but is not really either. Like all conceptual models, it cannot match the complexity and contingency of the real world. In conveying this point to colleagues, I would note that:

- governments obtain advice from many sources and they often use non-public service institutions and individuals to implement their agendas⁵
- public servants are empowered to make decisions, either through formal, legislative delegation or through convention

5 In 1997, Prime Minister John Howard articulated the principle of contestable policy advice in a speech on the Australian Government’s expectations of the public service (Howard 1998).

- the functions of advice and implementation are not always distinct, especially in organisational structures within government, and sometimes within the briefs given to external agents, such as policy consultants and service providers.⁶

Nevertheless, the model as I presented it was getting closer to a framework that could be used as a rough guide in the real world of public policy and administration.

Step 3: Complete the basic problem-solving model

As shown at Figure 8.3, I add the evaluation function at this point. I do this partly because I have a background in program evaluation and I often lead teams with a role in evaluation, especially in education, early childhood and Indigenous programs. I also add evaluation because I have a background in total quality management, and I sometimes highlight W Edwards Deming's (1986) quality improvement model, which also has four elements:

- plan
- do
- check
- act.

While the Deming model does not directly map to the policy cycle, there are some interesting similarities at the level of project management and operations between the world of policy and its implementation on the one hand, and the world of systems management and engineering on the other.

I called this the 'problem-solving' stage of the model, because it is similar to the many problem-solving cycles used by management consultants, perhaps most famously developed and promoted by McKinsey & Company (see Chia 2018). The language and frameworks of management consulting are familiar to many public servants, as they are often exposed to the work of consultants and the implicit and explicit models they use.

⁶ See, for example, the role played by ACIL management consultants in driving industrial relations on the Australian waterfront in the 1990s (Ayres 2001b). Service providers are often engaged both as delivery agents of government and as participants in the policy development process, especially the larger not-for-profit organisations such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

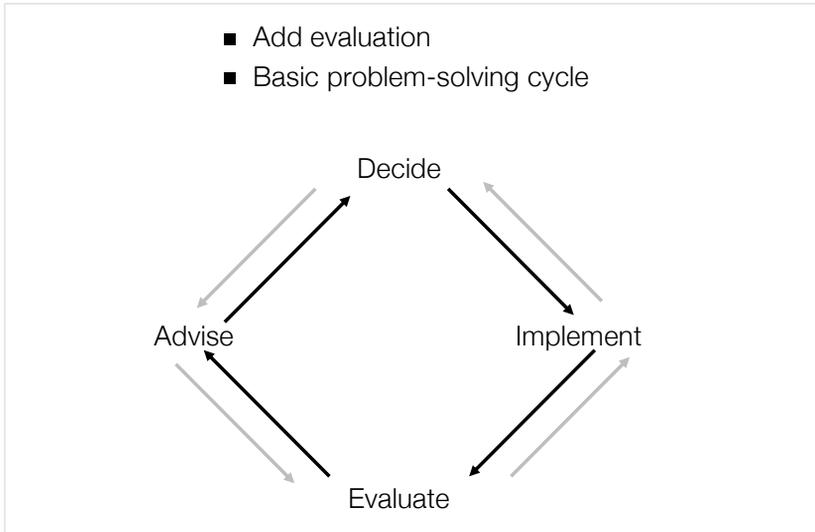


Figure 8.3. Step 3: Complete the basic problem-solving model.

Building evaluation into the model was always an important step for the research and evaluation teams I led, whether working at a whole-of-department level or within a specific policy stream. I found that evaluators responded well to the idea that their role is integral to the policy and implementation process. I also found that having this approach facilitated working across policy and program areas, with evaluation acting as the linchpin between the two.

Step 4: Refining the model

I completed the inductive development of a policy cycle by breaking down the 'advise' section. This is because the policy 'engine room' of the APS is quite complicated and involves the pursuit of several types of activity, often simultaneously. As shown in Figure 8.4, the five new elements I introduced were:

- identify the issue or issues
- analyse the issues and the instruments available to address them
- consult stakeholders
- coordinate across government
- recommend a course of action to government.

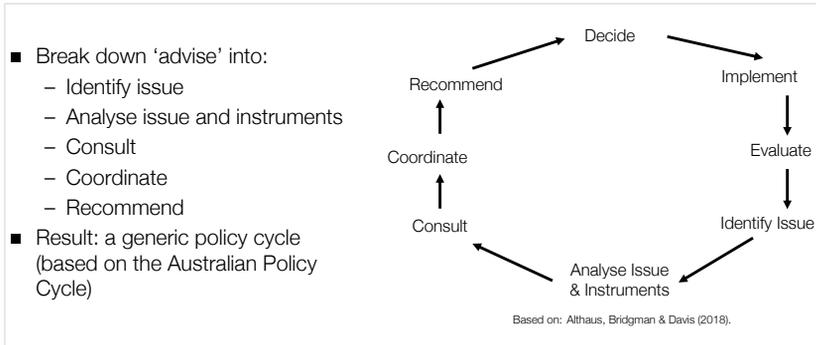


Figure 8.4. Refining the cycle.

This generates a variant on Althaus, Bridgman and Davis’s Australian policy cycle (see Figure 8.5), but with some notable differences. I would combine ‘analysis of the issues’ with ‘analysis of the instruments’, as in my experience the two processes are often combined in the APS. In part, this is due to the way governments often constrain the choice of policy instruments, for example by determining a preference for competitive markets for service delivery over direct provision by government agencies.⁷

I would also add the step of making a recommendation to government. In my experience, the work that goes into crafting and negotiating a Cabinet or ministerial submission’s recommendations can be quite exhaustive and complex. Leaving such a major task out when talking to public servants—especially public servants who work closely with ministers—risks leaving a large and obvious gap in the model.

These ‘tweaks’ of the Australian policy cycle may well be debated, but they do not materially change the foundations of the useful and well-known model presented by Althaus, Bridgman and Davis.

⁷ However, Meredith Edwards (this volume, Chapter 7) rightly observes that there is an important distinction to be drawn between the ‘issue’ and the ‘problem’. The issue may be a large, systemic concern (e.g. homelessness), while the problem may be a specific factor underlying the issue (e.g. housing affordability).

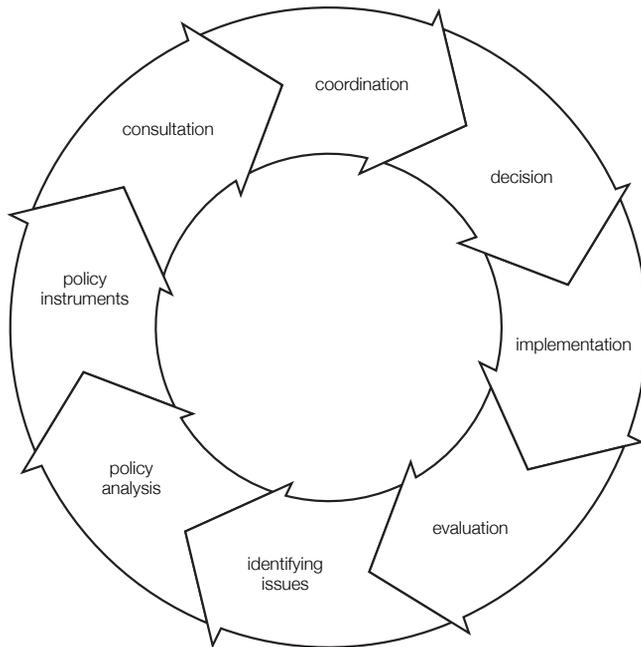


Figure 8.5. Australian policy cycle.

Source: Althaus, Bridgman and Davis (2018).

Step 5: ‘Complexifying’⁸ the model

As a final—somewhat tongue-in-cheek—stage in the process, I would take the model one step further (Figure 8.6). At the risk of echoing Barry Jones’s notorious ‘Noodle Nation’ diagram (Australianpolitics.com 2001), I believe it is important to reflect the felt experience of many public servants who perceive their work lives as contingent and incremental rather than cyclical or linear—like Lindblom’s (1959, 1979) ‘muddling through’. Some of my colleagues were inclined to see the policy process as a jumble of post-hoc rationalisations and solutions looking for a problem, along the lines of the ‘garbage can’ model, as described by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972). For different reasons, many academics also criticise the

8 This term was coined by the secretary of the Department of Administrative Services in the 1990s, Noel Tanzer, who observed that public servants are very good at ‘complexifying’ issues that don’t need to be that complex. I think this is certainly a tendency among public servants (I was not immune to it myself). Yet, the fact remains that many public policy issues are inherently complex, and there is considerable wisdom in HL Menken’s observation that ‘for every complex human problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong’.

rational-comprehensive approach as not being apparent in the empirical evidence, as discussed by McCool (1995). The problem seems to be a clash between description and prescription. A more accurate depiction of how policy development actually happens does not necessarily afford participants with a useful guide for how they *should* proceed in any given circumstance. The policy cycle at least helps to shape action, even if it may be seen as deficient as a description of what an external observer sees.⁹

In my presentation to colleagues I tried to reconcile this tension, at least to some degree. Many—perhaps all—‘real world’ policy processes progress in a nonlinear fashion, with shifts across and between elements of the cycle, and with various elements being conducted in tandem. It is this tendency that I try to depict at Figure 8.6.

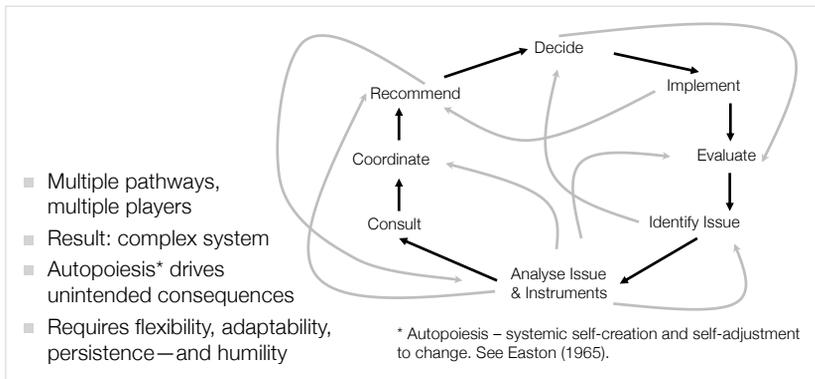


Figure 8.6. ‘Complexifying’ the model.

It was often important at this point to distinguish between chaotic randomness and systemic complexity. Recognising that the real world is not as neat as the policy cycle implies—and, indeed, asserting that it can never be thus—does not mean that policymaking is necessarily chaotic or random. As Kingdon (1995) shows, policy decisions can be seen as the product of several ‘streams’ (policy, politics and implementation) that coalesce at a ‘window of opportunity’ to generate momentum for change and a new policy direction or position. This description carries

9 I have some sympathy for Smith and May’s (1993) proposition that the argument between rational and incremental models of policymaking is, in the end, somewhat artificial. Both approaches are valid, they simply seek to achieve different ends in the attempt to understand, explain and guide policymaking.

considerable empirical ‘weight’—it ‘feels’ about right as a way of describing policymaking. It is, however, perhaps less successful in guiding action as participants operate within and across Kingdon’s streams.

Normatively, it is desirable to impose a disciplined, structured way of thinking about policy analysis. When I presented my suggested way of seeing and applying the policy cycle to colleagues in the APS, it often generated interesting and productive discussions about specific cases and alternative pathways for difficult or challenging policy work. This blended model can help open the minds of practitioners working in public policy and implementation to more possibilities and more creative approaches to their work.

In my presentation to colleagues, I would also sometimes also introduce some concepts from complex systems approaches to the objects of policy, such as social systems, the economy or international relations. As outlined by a range of authors (Cairney & Geyer 2015; Easton 1965; Stewart & Ayres 2001b), there are some important concepts arising from complex systems theory that relate to large social systems, including:

- feedback (in which information cycles back and forth between elements or nodes in the system to reorient their trajectory or behaviour)
- autopoiesis (in which the system tends to be ‘self-generative’, adjusting and changing in response to developments within and around the system over time).

The notion of autopoiesis is especially important, even though the term is unfamiliar and can distract some audiences. As a concept, it helps to place government as an element *within* the system, rather than as a god-like manipulator outside the system. The tendency for the system to reorganise around new information and to find a new stasis is itself a signalling factor for the system as a whole and not simply a unidirectional causal process. This can help explain phenomena such as the unintended consequences of government action (or inaction).

I would generally conclude my discussions with colleagues by considering the qualities required from public servants working on policy development, analysis and advice, including flexibility, adaptability, persistence and humility.

Any impact? Possibly ...

In preparing this chapter, I asked a former colleague who worked in several branches I led if he remembered me talking about the policy cycle. I was struck by his response:

I do recall you talking about using policy cycle frameworks and interspersing the theory with practice.

What I remember more clearly however, is the practice—and then reflection on the extent to which it departed from theory, and how individual effort and vision can, from time to time, ‘bend the shape of things that haven’t happened yet’.¹⁰ (R Ciesniewski, personal communication, 2 July 2018)

This encapsulates the main point I want to make. The interplay between theory and practice is real and substantive, even if some practitioners may not always be conscious of that interplay, or the role of theory in the complex, highly contingent world of government. Theory can help practice, but in the APS practice is a deeply pragmatic activity. It deploys tacit knowledge, mixes analysis with trial and error, values persistence and judgement, and follows shifting pathways and purposes. Getting the job done starts with some level or form of normative theory—however sketchy or incomplete—but acting (and reacting) in the real world of government and administration is an exercise of will and negotiation that can never be adequately encompassed by theories, models or frameworks.

Conclusion: Implications for the profession

Reflecting on this aspect of my public service career, there may well have been more opportunities to introduce ideas from the growing body of theory around policymaking into the world of practice than I realised at the time. Certainly, in the past decade or more, several universities have increased the opportunity to study public policy, especially at the postgraduate level (Di Francesco 2015). Some departments and agencies have also undertaken organisational development work to deepen the connection between theory and practice, while others have encouraged their staff to undertake short courses in policy development.

¹⁰ The quotation is from a Neil Finn song, ‘Faster than light’.

Given these advances, there are likely to be increasing numbers of public servants who are familiar with, or open to, some of the theories, models and frameworks that seek to explain or improve policymaking. There would seem, therefore, to be an opportunity to further explore these issues to determine to what extent public servants are aware of theories of policymaking, the ways in which they use those theories, and how effective they find the theories in the conduct of their day-to-day work in policy analysis and advice. Such analysis is likely to be valuable to theorists and practitioners alike, and it could help deepen and extend their mutual discourse.

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