

# Foreword

To govern is to make policy. We can count generations of practical experience of government, but, until recently, little academic study of how and why choices are made.

Indeed, it was not until the 1970s that the first academic research appeared in Australia and New Zealand with a specific focus on policymaking, and a decade later before the first textbooks emerged.

Scholars were keen to demarcate the focus on organisation that characterised the older discipline of public administration, promising instead a new spirit of inquiry about the content of government decisions. Over time this would become a distinction without a real difference, as it became clear that policy is influenced by institutions, and institutions by the purposes they adopt.

Those first textbooks were aimed primarily at undergraduate classes, and were written for students keen to understand the alchemy by which political imperatives translate into programs, and who, perhaps, might one day join the public service.

And then, suddenly, the 1980s saw unprecedented dialogue emerge between academic and practitioner. Public sector reform in a number of state jurisdictions and in Canberra and Wellington sparked sudden debate between senior public servants and academic critics.

Arguments about the nature and merit of 'managerialism' engaged scholars and officials alike, with passionate monographs, numerous conferences and animated controversy the result. National centres to study public management, funded by the Commonwealth, were established at Griffith and Monash universities in Australia, while an influential governance institute developed at Victoria University of Wellington. New Zealand scholars carried news to Australian gatherings of radical change to public sector practices across the Tasman.

This dialogue between practice and theory found practical expression in 2002 with the establishment of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), eloquently described by John Wanna in this volume. ANZSOG is significant for the vision it embodies: a desire to educate public officials across state and national jurisdictions, so creating a shared body of knowledge and concepts with deep networks informed by contemporary research.

Nearly 20 years on, ANZSOG graduates occupy agency leadership positions in every jurisdiction served by the school. The ANZSOG governing board continues to attract the most senior officials in both nations, alongside vice-chancellors representing the 15 member universities. The school is an important conduit of ideas and publications.

ANZSOG represents a confluence of academic and practitioner concerns. It must answer the question debated through all those symposia and journal exchanges: how do we understand policymaking, and what skills should be taught to a new generation of public servants? ANZSOG must write and deliver curriculum for its Executive Master of Public Administration and other executive programs; embedded in these courses are hypotheses about the nature of the policy process and the best ways to improve policymaking and administration.

Appropriately, this volume arose from a workshop supported by ANZSOG, and has been edited with skill by a mix of academics and practitioners. Many contributors have worked on both sides of the theory–practice divide during their distinguished careers. They speak to debates about curriculum by exploring the interaction between ideas, case studies and teaching expressed in the classroom.

As the chapters make clear, the debate is not resolved. Arguments continue about how to define policy, explain its variations and educate those entering the field. Here academic criticism meets practitioner need and, in turn, academic models get tested through trial and error in the field. So, even while contributors carefully delineate contending schools of theory, the volume also offers sharp judgements from senior public servants about what works when theory faces ever-shifting political and departmental circumstance. ‘No plan survives contact with the enemy’ is a well-known military observation, but plan we must, and any plan contains an implicit theory of what will work.

In describing experience in the field, contributors find value beginning with an intellectual framework drawn from the academic literature, even if it must quickly be modified on the run. Policymakers are informed by scholarship, even as they deal with contingency, seeking defensible and robust policy proposals. Decision-making is never perfect but, thanks to theory, it can be better than ad hoc incremental drift.

The dialogue between the academy and public services has enriched both sides, as most contributors to this volume agree. They find plenty to argue about still, in lessons deftly distilled by Allan McConnell in his chapter on synthesising theories and practice. These worlds overlap and yet diverge, sometimes informing each other, other times operating in parallel.

Many students have asked about the value of studying a policy cycle when the circumstances are always different, the steps are often compressed, time is short and politicians are impatient. Yet, if you don't know what 'good' looks like, you have no place to start, no way to proceed and no way to evaluate your recommendations. Certainly, in time, the cycle becomes second nature for those making policy, as they tailor each process to the situation, and learn what can be skipped and what is vital. But policy can be better when informed by theory and the self-awareness about process this provides.

In the meantime, we can learn from movie making and an exasperated Francis Ford Coppola during the filming of *Apocalypse Now*. An actor refused to learn his lines on the grounds that he was better at improvising in the moment than slavishly following the script. Eventually Coppola exploded: 'once you've learned your lines, then you can forget them!'

There is much in this volume to learn, and much that will be absorbed and thereafter forgotten because it is now instinctive. For reminding us of the journey, and providing this rich array of perspectives, academic and practitioner alike—and all who move between these worlds—we are indebted to Trish Mercer, John Wanna, Russell Ayres and Brian Head and the authors they present in this fine volume of reflections.

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