56. The Fourth Frontier

Michael Wesley[1]

This book is the product of a long search by its author to systematise the mutually strengthening linkages among different fields of research and focusing their attentions on addressing real social problems. I must declare at the outset that I am a card-carrying partisan of this cause, having grown progressively disillusioned with discipline-bound research for its own sake, pursued solely for the purposes of reputation, seniority and bragging rights. Indeed I fear that the worldwide movement towards government-led 'assessment' of research performance, measured by appearances in the world's 'top' journals, will further distort academic research towards discipline-bound research for its own sake.

Those who occupy the privileged position of scholars should always be mindful of their obligations towards improving the society that ultimately makes their positions possible. Arguably, my own discipline, International Relations (IR), has the largest divide between academics and practitioners of any of the social sciences. Here is how Allan Gyngell and I described that divide nearly ten years ago:

> On the academic side, as IR cements its position within Australian universities, it has succumbed to the common tendency for academic disciplines to privilege theoretical over applied inquiry as they seek to consolidate their positions and build respect within the academic world. In the process, the attention of the academic IR community has become increasingly focused inwards. Debates among IR academics have singularly failed to arouse the attention or interest of any but the IR community; and measures of professional esteem largely seem to be internally set. For its part, the practitioner community seems to have grown increasingly uninterested in the results of academic research, thinking it lacks much relevance to the real world…The practitioner's view of foreign policy is of a world of complex detail and incessant demands on time, attention and resources. The policy field of the practitioner resists simple solutions and evades summary or generalization…Practitioners look for exceptions to general statements about foreign policy issues. Their experience of trying to implement

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policy in the difficult, wilful, resistant world of IR makes them sceptical of high-sounding schemes and principles, as well as the moral simplicity and unqualified solutions offered by academics and public alike.[2]

The framework of Integration and Implementation Sciences (I2S) is Gabriele Bammer's impressive attempt to mediate a double divide at the heart of the pragmatic research enterprise. One is a disciplinary divide between scholars who look at the social world from the viewpoint of different approaches, preoccupations and methodologies rooted in the centuries-old division of the social sciences into different disciplines. The other is the vocational divide between scholars and practitioners.

Both divides are extremely difficult to bridge in a meaningful and sustained way. The systematic richness of Gabriele Bammer's frameworks for doing so is testament to years of patient research and discussion, trial and error. I2S has the feel about it of a framework that will inspire further work by other scholars, that will see it develop into a rich meta-discipline over time.

Having said that, I think there is a major element missing in the I2S framework. As it exists it is a framework that lives in the rarefied world of rational discussion, away from the messy world of politics, rivalries, rent-seeking and egos. In many ways this is a good thing, but for a framework that intends to grapple with policy problems, it could be a major disadvantage.

What I am arguing is that there is a third major divide that the I2S framework needs to bridge: the divide between policy and politics. Or, more accurately, it needs to address the problems thrown up by a crumbling divide between politics and policy. While we need to be careful of the golden-age fallacy, there has been a progressive diminution of the distinctions between these realms. Politics is the purview of contested values, world views, conceptions of change and agency, whereas policy is the realm of objective expertise and management, the rational workings of the benign influence of the state on society.

The divide between politics and policy was never clear and wide, but in recent years we have watched with dismay as the domain of objective policy analysis and actions has been dragged into that of values-based contestation and the contending of absolute knowledge claims. A classic example was the weapons of mass destruction–based case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In several countries, the politics of the Iraq war came to depend heavily on the policy questions of whether Iraq did or did not possess weapons of mass destruction. The search for supporting evidence became all consuming, while corrupting all processes of

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2   Gyngell and Wesley (2003).

rational data gathering and evaluation. On the other side, sceptics of the case for Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction had their motives impugned and their reputations held up to question.

The greatest casualties outside Iraq were the integrity and reputation of the intelligence and policy agencies that are required to analyse, act and advise objectively. Expertise has become something that can be challenged and questioned from any quarter, irrespective of the expertise or position of the sceptic. What we have seen is the slow diminution of the authority and legitimacy of the realm of objective analysis and knowledge.

There is perhaps no greater example than the case of climate change. The scientific case for the science of climate change has been under sustained attack for several years, and most intensely since late 2009. Both sides of this argument (it is surely not a debate) now marshal impressive statistics and data to back their case. The ordinary person in the street now confronts a range of vociferously disagreeing partisans (even the sceptics disagree over whether the Earth is actually cooling or whether it is warming but humans have nothing to do with it). Ultimately the only person who could make an informed assessment of the cases would be someone with the requisite training in a range of disciplines, from atmospheric physics to geology. But because there are so few of the general public with these skills, the mass of society is thrown back on pre-existing prejudices and commitments to make the choice about which side to believe. Politics, not objective knowledge, determines the level of popular support for one side of the argument or the other.

Politics intrudes on both sides of the I2S equation. Before I2S kicks into action, integrating and applying interdisciplinary expertise to a real-world problem, there will inevitably be a political contest over the problem itself. Partly this is a question of sequencing. When the problem is identified first, the politics will start to divide opinion about how to attack it. Should it be a government-led or private-sector-led solution? Is the cause of the problem too much 'nanny state' intervention or the perverse outcomes of the market? Where does this problem sit as a priority among all the other issues that demand attention and resources? On the other hand, when the political contest discovers the problem, the politics can be even more intense. One side of politics can choose to identify a policy problem as a way of highlighting a weakness on the other side. The other side's response will be fairly predictable.

After I2S has proposed a solution, politics comes back. The solution—any solution—will immediately be interpreted in a partisan way. It will be either overkill or a squib. It will either worsen the problem or be ineffective. And its implementation will draw close scrutiny, with a marked preference for finding

failures over reporting successes. In politics, Ken Henry argued, 'penalties and rewards are not scored symmetrically; losses are valued much more heavily than gains'.[3]

Solutions, once they are promulgated and even more after they are adopted, inevitably become part of the political contest. Either supporting or questioning a policy is immediately interpreted in terms of the presumed allegiances of the supporter or questioner. In May 2011, the Lowy Institute published a careful analysis that argued that the five-year Australian Government policy on selective isolation of Fiji's military regime had not worked and had little prospect of assisting Fiji to return to democracy. The analysis proposed a comprehensive new approach.[4] The Australian Government responded by disparaging the research and accusing its author of supporting the Fijian dictator, Commodore Bainimarama.[5] Rather than disagreeing with and attempting to refute the analysis and its proposals, the response was to impugn the author's motives.

It is worth asking whether there are any policy problems that exist free of actual or potential political contestation. I can't think of any. In the meantime the genuine policy problems faced by our society are poorly addressed because of the rising tide of partisan politics.

So while I admire and endorse Gabriele Bammer's I2S framework, I urge her to take one further step: to address this fourth frontier, without which even the best academic analysis and policy design won't translate into effective solutions. This may be the most difficult of all the divides to mediate. It will involve holding contested cases to account and adjudicating between their alternative research and knowledge bases. Potentially, the politicisation of policy can be reversed—but it will require an enterprise every bit as ambitious and detailed as I2S to do so.

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3   Henry (2007).
4   Hayward-Jones (2011).
5   Marles (2011).

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Brief Biography

Michael Wesley is the Executive Director of the Lowy Institute for International Policy. He is a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and an Adjunct Professor at Griffith University and the University of Sydney. Previously he was Professor of International Relations and Director of the Griffith Asia Institute at Griffith University. Prior to this, he was the Assistant Director-General for Transnational Issues at the Office of National Assessments, and a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of New South Wales. Between 2007 and 2009, he was the Editor of the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. He has served on the Australian Research Council's College of Experts and the Queensland Art Gallery's Board of Trustees. His most recent book, *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the rise of Asia* (NewSouth Books, 2011), won the 2011 John Button Prize for best writing on Australian public policy.