Identifying policy priorities and communicating with decision makers

Presentation to the “Bridging Research and Policy: Changing Practice and Influencing Policy.” Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, UBC September 25, 2009

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Objectives

- How to think about and to identify provincial priorities in public policy and governance

- How to enhance communication between researchers and policy makers
What are policy priorities?

- Those items at the top of an *agenda*
- The “things that should be done first”
- Democratic expectations by the public of what needs to be addressed
- The *mandate* a political party receives when elected government
- A way of managing and imposing order on the complexities of the modern state and society
Types of priority agendas

- **Societal**: broad trends in public attitudes, concerns, preferences

- **Governmental**: mandate as interpreted by executive leaders and other members; political judgment of those in public office; derived in part by platform of the party, election promises and other commitments

- **Alternative**: views of opposition political parties; interest groups, associations, think tanks, mass media, and other organizations in civil society and the market economy
Priority occasions of provincial governments

- Throne speeches
- Budget speeches and updates
- Service plans of ministries and crown agencies
- Key legislative initiatives
- Decisions to accept or to appeal court decisions on major policy issues
- First Minister speeches
- Summit meetings and communiqués
Policy fields and priorities on governmental agendas

1. Issues persistently at or near the top of governmental agendas: e.g., health care, education
2. Issues that fluctuate up and down: e.g., housing, social services
3. Issues that tend to be marginal, groups on the outer fringes: e.g., people with disability, First Nations
Challenges in sustaining priorities over time

- Changes in local and global circumstances
- The election cycle and political survival
- Limits of information and knowledge
- Scarcity of resources
- Pressures, externally and internally to government, to change priorities to increase support for neglected areas and unresolved grievances
An illustration: The Campbell Government in BC

The February 2005 Throne Speech set out a five-point plan called “Great Goals For A Golden Decade:

• Make BC the best-educated, most literate place in North America
• Make BC a model for healthy living and physical fitness
• Build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, special needs, children at risk, and seniors
• Lead the world in sustainable environmental management
• Lead Canada in job creation

In 2006, a de facto sixth great goal appeared on the government’s agenda: Aboriginal relations and reconciliation.

In late 2008 and through 2009, the priority issue is managing the economic recession, investing in stimulus measures, introducing a Harmonized Sales Tax (HST) and dealing with government deficits for the next four years.
Priorities and Budgets

- Budgeting both shapes and is shaped by priorities

- “Priorities must be forged in the context of some judgment about the fiscal position and revenue needs and capacity of the economy.”

Identifying priorities in spending decisions and trends

- **Masked priorities**: not readily apparent due to delayed expenditure effects, or data are reported in partial ways

- **Unintended priorities**: rising costs that are automatic, fixed commitments, driven by formulas

- **Masquerading as priorities**: policy announcements without many resources or without adequate implementation plans
Enhancing communications between researchers and policy makers

- Discussions from the perspective of researchers and/or from policy makers
- Frequently informed by a rationalist model of decision making, where scientific evidence is king
- The rationality of liberal democratic politics commonly ignored
Features of effective research and communication

- Timely information linked to policy cycles
- Accurate and credible
- Clear, concise and understandable
- Tailored to audiences
- Communicated through multiple channels and formats
- Relevant to local context
- Suggestive of actions
The political reception of research and advice

Depends upon:

- Origins of research and who are the researchers
- Types of knowledge and other analyses in circulation
- Arenas of decision making in which research might be used
- Different processes of policy making
- Nature of the policy community and networks of relationships in effect
Communicating with policy makers: Cabinet Ministers

Types of ministers by styles:

1. Minimalists
2. Ambassadors
3. Executive Managers
4. Policy Selectors
5. Policy Initiators
Communicating with policy makers: senior officials

Policy roles that may be operative:

- Initiators
- Massagers
- Blockers
- Trouble shooters
- Negotiators
- Filters
- Sponsors
Conclusions

- Talking about policy priorities is about what we want to do about the future
- It is also about what of the cumulative past we wish to retain in services, scopes of practices, authority arrangements, and myriad social effects
Conclusions

- Sticking to a priority list over a period of time is not easy: drift becomes the design
- The other side of priority setting is the politics of relegating items to a low status and preventing certain issues and ideas from getting on, or moving up governmental or organizational agendas
Conclusions

- Our understandings (and puzzlements) of the research-policy interface rest upon assumptions of how policy decision making is formulated; and, of how we understand power and knowledge, and democratic governing in the early 21st century