

Identifying policy priorities and communicating with decision makers

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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 internal 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.”

G. Bruce Doern and Richard W. Phidd,
Canadian Public Policy (1993: 176)

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