Policy Success and Failure

Embedding Effective Learning in Government

REPORT

Policy Success and Failure:
Embedding Effective Learning in Government

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What constitutes success and failure in public policy?

The focus on the effectiveness of policy delivery by modern governments has thrust questions of policy success and failure firmly into the spotlight. But how do policy-makers interpret and learn from policy successes and failures? How do policy-makers use expert evidence to inform their decisions in the first place? How does policy learning take place and what can different national polities learn from each other about best practice in policy-making? How can we embed a culture of effective policy learning in institutions and governments?

In November 2018, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge, brought together practitioners, academics and other policy stakeholders to seek answers to these vital questions on a collaborative basis, using case studies from the UK and internationally.[1]

This report offers:

- Two pages of topline recommendations for practitioners on how to make successful policy
- A summary of the event's key conclusions across the three main areas that emerged on the day:
    - o How do policy-makers define success and failure in public policy?
    - o How do policy-makers learn lessons from policy successes and failures?
    - o What roles do evidence and expert advisers play in the policy-making process?

Recommendations

Avoid groupthink by making sure policies are decided by groups of decision-maker with multi-disciplinary perspectives and high levels of demographic diversity. It is important to be able to 'see things out of the corner of one's eye'. Signs of negative groupthink include: countervailing evidence being filtered out of discussions; limited attention to alternative policy options; over-egged, tiny, fragmented snippets of evidence in support of the preferred policy; and obvious warning signs about potential pitfalls in a policy being ignored.

Promote a healthy culture of organisational learning and development.
Short institutional memories, exacerbated by high staff turnover, limit the capacity for learning because the lessons of the past quickly get forgotten. High churn amongst politicians is an inevitable part of democratic governance, but the need to keep a reflexively critical institutional memory is key. Overly rigid hierarchies and inward-looking institutions with low levels of accountability in which people lower down a decisional chain fear speaking out against a policy orthodoxy tend to make more policy mistakes.

Establish early-warning mechanisms that can highlight obvious flaws in a project before it is too late. There need to be contingency plans and an individual/collective willingness to pull the plug if things are off-track. The benchmarks for what *is* working need to be agreed by all stakeholders at the decision-taking stage and integrated into a systematic review process as the project rolls out. This should help avoid 'white elephants' such as the Bataan nuclear power plant in the Philippines, or vanity projects such as the London Garden Bridge.

Experts should not hold back from telling politicians things that did not work. The task of the researcher is to quietly and confidently stand by their research and findings, nudging policy makers in the right direction. Advisers should be more than 'yes' people, there to confirm policy-makers preconceived or 'gut' opinion. Researchers should not fear presenting evidence that only speaks to pre-cooked political preferences.

Brevity and clarity are needed when presenting academic research findings to time and resource-constrained politicians. Ministers do not want, or have the time, to read academic journals

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and weighty research tomes, even if they have access to them. Presenting useful, critically informed evidence using a shared 'language' is the key.

Do not seek the 'silver bullet' policy solution. Questions that should be uppermost in one's mind, therefore, are: Is our favoured solution worth it in terms of time and money? Is the policy deliverable? What are the risks and are they acceptable? Has the policy been tried before? Who will win and lose from the policy and what does this mean for its overall effectiveness?

Working well is better than working cheap. The Grenfell Tower fire in London and the Genoa bridge collapse are just two examples of infrastructural tragedies arising from poor strategy and oversight, cynical cost-cutting for profit and diffuse responsibility for the most vital decisions that ultimately gave the go ahead to bad projects that cost lives.

A nice sounding press release rarely equates to good policy. Attention-grabbing of this nature might be politically attractive but is not a replacement for entrenching long-term policy success. Goal setting and a strategic approach to policy formulation and execution are fundamental, but this requires courage on the part of politicians tempted by the appeal of vote- or media headline-grabbing.

How do professionals communicate their expertise? Post-truthism is not something separable, now, from the conduct of politics and policy-making, but integral to it. We are in need of more robust evidence than ever, at the same time as the production of evidence and the value attached to it are under serious threat from corrosive forces. In an era of disaffection with 'experts', institutions and professional organisations of all kinds need to think seriously and critically about how to engage publics and explain why expertise matters.

Own a failure, just as you would own a success. When a crisis hits or a policy falls short it is tempting to play the blame game and avoid taking responsibility for what happened. In some measure, this is attributable to the way in which politics is discussed in the media as a constant search for scapegoats. Rising above the temptation to play this game is the hallmark of a mature democracy and although very difficult, could lead to changes in the way we think about policy-making, policy failure and policy success.

Summary: conference proceedings

1. How do policy-makers define success and failure in public policy?

In line with much of the extant research into policy evaluation (Bovens and 't Hart 1996), speakers throughout the panels agreed that policy success and failure are difficult to identify and define because notions of 'success' and 'failure' are perspectival. The policy evaluator operates in 'grey areas' not absolutes, making objective benchmarking and precise measurement difficult (McConnell 2010a).

Policies combine politics, programme and procedure, not all of which are weighted equally (McConnell 2010b). Practitioners who addressed the conference tended to highlight the short-term and highly "politicised" notion of success as vote-winning. For politicians, successful policies are retail policies which attract voters or, at minimum, avoid them leaking away to other parties. Success can, therefore, also constitute: uniting a party or government, including keeping donors on board; and addressing a party's perceived weakness by providing a policy shield, for example Gordon Brown's 1997 commitment to matching Conservative spending plans to head off the "tax bomb" critique of Labour's economic strategy.

By contrast, the academics tended to work to a broader chronological perspective, with questions of process and outcomes over the long-term equally significant. Scholars also allocated greater weight in their evaluation to the perspectives of stakeholders negatively affected by a given policy - look at the UK's Social Care crisis for example. For academic "outsiders", programme and procedure emerged as equally important features of the evaluation process.

There was greater consensus about the meaning of policy "failure", exhibited by one or all of the following outcomes as described by Claire Dunlop: a policy that does not achieve its key goals or deliver what was intended, where this is stated or implied by the policy at announcement stage; where opposition to the policy remains consistently high over a significant period of time; or when

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support for the policy starts and remains low amongst the key stakeholders targeted by the policy, politically or in society. Theresa May's "dementia tax" is a good example of a policy that failed on these grounds.

During Panels 1 and 4, Jagjit Chadha, Diane Coyle, Helen Thompson and Vicky Pryce stressed that policies always involve elements of *risk* to one or more stakeholder. Risk has to be thought about but is difficult to integrate into forecasting because no one can predict the future (Chadha 2017). Scenario planning can mitigate against some of the worst excesses of policy failure. Nevertheless, communicating risks publicly can be politically dangerous even though it is integral to good policy-making.

Sanction at the ballot box for an unpopular policy can also be indicative of policy failure. In domestic policy, Margaret Thatcher's Poll Tax remains the totemic example for politicians and speakers from the world of public policy-making in the UK. It has evidently been joined by the Liberal Democrat commitment not to impose Tuition Fees, only to go and do so. Both were held up as examples at the sharp end of "failure". However, to echo a big theme of the day, it was widely suggested that there are few unvarnished successes just as there are few absolute failures or fiascos.

Time can also be important, with success today turning into a failure tomorrow as new evidence on "winners" and "losers" from a policy come to light. Nested within an apparent short-term success can be a cause of long-term failure that was ignored or overlooked at the time. An obvious example of this is David Cameron's 2013 pledge to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, which temporarily plastered over the Conservative Party's cracks over Europe, but which a few years later led to the party fracturing over its Brexit strategy.

A further consideration is that politicians are resistant to admitting they were wrong, particularly if they are personally associated with a given policy, or it was one in which they invested lots of political capital and resources. They can also be resistant to processing the warning signs that a structural, existential crisis is looming (Stanley with Wdowin 2018: 16), or on a more limited scale that a project lacks feasibility or support from key stakeholders. Boris Johnson's "garden bridge" in

London is a good example of this feature, as was the attitude of the UK Treasury after the onset of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, as we learned from Patrick Diamond. This feature of contemporary politics – the scapegoat culture – can limit the space for introspection on performance.

Jagjit Chadha, Claire Dunlop, Catherine Haddon and Matthew Hanney explored a theme that ran through the day, that when seeking the "cause/s" of a failure or success, establishing with clarity where policy ideas come from for the purpose of evaluation is a tricky business. Policy ideas often circulate as half-digested, half-formed entities within policy communities, picked up and run with sometimes almost by chance, rendering an account of agency problematic.

Scholars and practitioners were unified in agreeing that policy evaluation is shot through with politics, necessitating awareness of: who is making the evaluation; the power structures operating in support of the evaluation; and the nature of the evidential basis on which claims about success and failure are made. Such practicalities will structure who wins the narrative "blame game" when a failure arises, or who gets to take the credit for an agreed success (Howlett 2012: 539–555). In an endemic "blame culture" such questions are hugely important in molding perceptions of who wins, who loses and who are victims of given policies (Stanley with Wdowin 2018: 5).

2. How do policy-makers learn lessons from policy successes and failures?

Politicians and policy-makers talk incessantly about "learning from history" and "learning the lessons of the past", but learning processes, types of learning and modes of successful learning are less well reflected upon and understood, both by practitioners and in the academy.

We tend to frame "learning" as a positive. But what emerged from Panel 1 was that not all learning is positive, just as policy failures are not always negative (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018). Learning out of context can create pathological consequences, or forms of reflexivity that might not help solve contemporary policy dilemmas. For example, practitioners might learn lessons from past dilemmas that are not applicable to addressing present challenges.

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All the panelists touched on the idea that groups of policy-makers can get locked into the idea that a project is "too big to fail". This could be because of group-think (Janis 1982), cognitive dissonance, caution, fear, herd behaviour, or being in thrall to a powerful leader hooked on making a given policy "work" regardless of countervailing evidence. There may also be an "urge to meddle" on the part of powerful members of an organisation, which pushes a decisional chain onto unwise paths not agreed using appropriate structures (Stanley with Wdowin 2018: 32–33).

From Tim Marshall, Ian Mell and Yan Zhang we drew the observation that UK policy-makers can learn from other countries about how, for example, to design and deliver big infrastructure projects, whilst selling the benefits to different stakeholders. Look, for example, at the Netherlands' Spatial Planning Strategy, which set the strategy to 2040 (Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment 2011), the Commission Nationale du Débat Public in France, which promoted high levels of civic engagement with policy development (CNDP), the commercialisation of flood plains in India and the Atlanta Beltline (Mell 2016).

However, from the same speakers we also discovered that cross-national learning is not without its difficulties because of differences in countries' political economies, laws and national "ways of doing things". What works in country X might not work in country Y for all sorts of reasons that need working into policy design and implementation. For example, one could hold up China as a model for delivering big infrastructure projects effectively. But its system of "fragmented authoritarianism" and "institutional bricolage" are difficult to translate into more liberal, decentralised policy processes.

3. What roles do evidence and expert advisers play in the policy-making process?

Several speakers, especially on Panel 3, were keen to challenge the stereotype of the academic operating in her/his ivory tower, spewing inaccessible, jargon-fuelled mumbo-jumbo. By contrast, there has been a good deal of positive "learning" in this field, with social scientists becoming

increasingly adept at talking to policy-makers. They have also become more agile at disseminating cutting edge research findings to public audiences.

Speakers from the worlds of policy advice and political research, especially David Johnson and Matthew Hanney, argued the practical case, that when politicians see how a piece of research can help them attract voters, they tend to become a lot more open to academic research. They are also attracted by low-cost, high return policies. Over-promising on the financial or outputs side can, however, weaken expectations management and heighten the risk of a policy being a perceived failure when it comes on-stream.

Speakers who have researched for politicians, notably Patrick Diamond, Ian Mell, Vicky Pryce and Yan Zhang, demonstrated the importance of knowing when evidence is required, what type, and at what step in the policy-making cycle, so that decision-makers can get the best out of it. In this process, contingency, timing and luck can all play their part, but they are often written out of retrospective evaluations of policy successes and failures.

Tapping in to the contemporary debate about the value of "expertise" in an era of "fake news", from Claire Craig we heard that statistics and "facts" are irrelevant without accompanying stories to give them meaning. We label these stories policy *narratives* which frame issues and give meaning to policy actions, as well as being the means through which policies are communicated and received (Craig 2018). The narratives people live by tell us what they notice and their state of mind. Understanding how narratives shape preferences and interests is one of the next big challenges facing policy communities.

Peter John illustrated the advantages of the "pragmatic" approach to policy-making, which has been enhanced by the "rediscovery" of the Randomised Control Trial (John, MacDonald and Sanders 2015), aimed at identifying behaviour-changing solutions to policy problems. Key to their success is to factor in citizen input and reflection, as is creating a healthy *feedback loop* to identify what worked and what did not. This summed up a major theme of the day about the requirement for greater inclusivity from key stakeholders at all stages of the policy-making process, to generate:

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understanding of policy goals; information about how the policy is intended to function, and who it aims to benefit; openness about possible risks and drawback; and a coherent feedback loop two indicate where things may be going wrong and why.

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