

What Use is a Policy Cycle? Plenty, if the Aim is Clear

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What use is a policy cycle? Plenty, if the aim is to help public servants make sense of the policy task. Setting out a sequence of steps to turn ideas into Cabinet recommendations can provide structure in the otherwise dizzying world of policy-making. It would be a mistake, though, to see a policy cycle as other than a first step, a guide amid complexity. To read the policy cycle as rationalism revived is to misjudge both form and intent.

Debate is a wonderful thing, and we are pleased the policy cycle described in The Australian Policy Handbook (Bridgman and Davis 2000) has stimulated a response. Although we believe a critique in the June issue of the Australian Journal of Public Administration (Everett 2003) is misguided, it invites reflection on the purpose — and limitations — of a policy cycle approach.

Why A Policy Cycle?

Please excuse the personal story that follows, but we wrote *The Australian Policy Handbook* from a decidedly pragmatic perspective, and it may be useful to explain briefly its central aim: to help make sense of policy processes for the puzzled.

In 1993 Glyn took a call at Griffith University from a somewhat panicked graduate trainee in Queensland Health. Though she had never studied politics, policy or administration, the trainee had been instructed to 'write a food nutrition strategy for Queensland quickly' to meet an overdue intergovernmental obligation. The most junior, inexperienced person had just been handed this daunting task, and she could find no departmental or academic publication to help. She did stumble on a public policy textbook (Davis, Wanna, Warhurst and Weller 1993), but it just said policy is complex and political. So she turned to one of its authors hoping for some practical hints.

Independently, Peter was also contemplating the problems facing novices to public policy. His experiences were informed by working with professional staff in large government

departments. They too were often required to realise significant public policy goals armed only with their disciplinary training and some bureaucratic experience. Even basic civics sometimes proved unfamiliar to those trained as engineers or lawyers. They needed a bridge from technical expertise to the policy domain.

These must be commonplace experiences. Most public servants do not have degrees in public policy, yet they are expected to manufacture policy products. So our thoughts turned to the usefulness of a 'primer' in the American sense, a practical, how-to guide for those encountering public policy anew. We decided to create a policy manual, a user-friendly text for public servants new to policy, something beyond the format requirements stated in Cabinet Handbooks. We believed such a manual should combine description with prescription, since effective action requires both. Weaved into that mixture we wanted some context about the institutions of government and an introduction to concepts informing the policy literature, so readers could pursue more critical knowledge.

Over three months in 1995, Peter and an advisory team of senior public servants and academics drafted the *Queensland Policy*

Handbook (Office of the Cabinet 1996). Glyn contributed further academic material while Peter turned to work on a *Queensland Legislation Handbook* designed to aid those called on to develop legislative instruments. (The entire collection was finally realised in 1999 as *Governing Queensland*, a world first suite of handbooks published on the internet covering Cabinet, Executive Council, legislation, parliamentary procedures, and responsibilities of members of boards as well as policy processes: see <<http://www2.premiers.qld.gov.au/governinqld/index.htm>>).

As a precursor to *Governing Queensland*, the *Queensland Policy Handbook* was so 'hands-on' it included the phone numbers of officers who could advise on particular aspects of a cabinet submission. Completed in early 1996, the book quickly found an audience inside the Queensland public service. Government bookshop stocks sold out in days. However a change of government soon after publication rendered the text out of date, and though much photocopied it was not reprinted.

If Queensland experience was any guide, we suspected other public servants might welcome simple advice on writing policy. So we took the underlying concept but started writing again from scratch, producing an entirely new volume aimed at a national audience. It is necessarily less specific than the Queensland original, though extra length provided more opportunity for reflective material. There is no text in common across the two books — writing the first version provided a wealth of ideas for rethinking the approach. But the intention remained to provide a practical grounding for public servants who might (sadly) never read another book on policy or ever engage with critical material about their practice.

A key educational challenge was how to describe the policy process in a simple, accessible way. This had to be precise, setting down in sequence the actions required to turn an aspiration for a nutrition strategy into concrete, fully-costed recommendations a minister might take to Cabinet. We wanted this description to be memorable as it conveyed three key features:

- the dynamic, provisional, unending nature of policy effort;
- a match with the familiar institutions of Australian government; and

- a pathway of actions to help public servants start the long journey from inchoate demand ('we need a policy') to something that could inform a Cabinet decision.

We knew this path to be well trod but hoped to improve on existing schema. Many frustrating hours with pads and pens later, we were not so sure. We produced various two- and three-dimensional policy cycles, complex triangular designs, cycles in which each stage had its own spinning wheel, loops both open and closed. These versions succeeded in conveying complexity but not the desired intuitive step-by-step approach.

Finally we returned to the classic literature in the field, in particular the writing of Harold Lasswell (1951), who characterised policy-making as a sequence of intelligence; recommendation; prescription; invocation; application; appraisal; and termination. Others suggested different labels but essentially stayed with the schema of policy-making as a sequence of actions. Such steps were presented not as rational, but logical, a chain of steps with each informing the next.

Our version of the Lasswell cycle (Figure 1) went through several iterations before appearing in *The Australian Policy Handbook* in the form of a closed continuous loop.

As we noted in the accompanying text, a policy cycle approach views government as a process rather than a collection of venerable institutions. It disaggregates complex phenomenon into manageable steps. A policy cycle is normative, suggesting a particular sequence practitioners can use to comprehend and implement the policy task. But *The Australian Policy Handbook* is more than the cycle. It also covers a range of research methods and discusses organisation, planning and management encompassing the sweep of government work.

Limitations

This focus beyond the cycle illustrates limits to the policy cycle approach. A policy cycle is a first foray into complexity, organising observations into familiar patterns and so providing a guide to action. No policy model can claim universal application since every policy process is grounded in particular governmental institutions. Practice varies from problem to problem, as Edwards (2001) confirmed when she applied

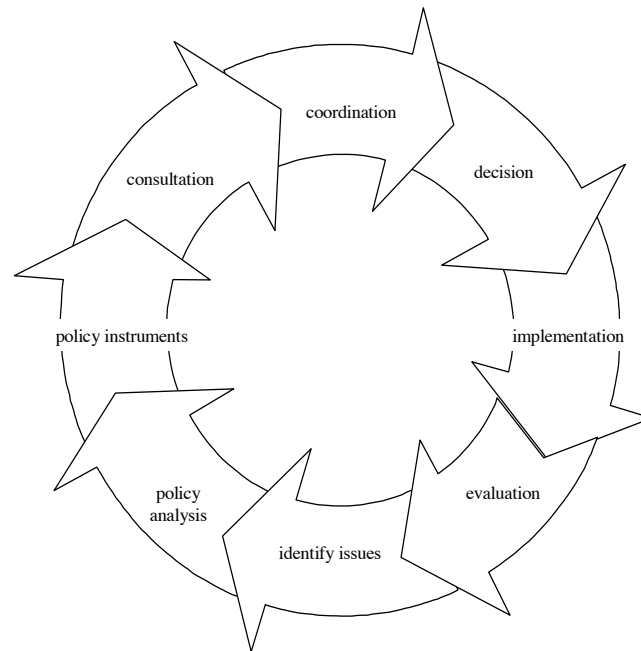


Figure 1: The Australian Policy Cycle (Bridgman and Davis 2000:27)

the policy cycle model to a range of Australian national policy histories.

A policy cycle is just a heuristic, an ideal type from which every reality will curve away. It is designed to answer the daunting question ‘what do I do now?’ Followed, a policy cycle might assist a public servant move from vague problem to authoritative government deliberation.

The Australian Policy Handbook found a place in the market and will shortly be re-published in a third edition, but it has attracted little comment from academic colleagues. Private correspondence suggests those who teach from the book understand the policy cycle in its context: it is and always will be a simplified representation of the policy world, an aid to understanding. It is not offered as a theory, explaining or predicting behaviour.

Some, though, detect more serious limitations. Dr Sophia Everett (2003) believes a policy cycle ‘reverts to some form of rationalism’. It is ‘erroneous and simplistic’ because it describes process but not content. Indeed a policy cycle can tell us little about how difficult

decisions are made, only about the management of such choices. Though good process matters, suggests Everett, it is not to be found in the policy cycle approach.

To make this case, Everett relies on three unrelated points. These can be ranked from most to least significant.

The first hurdle Everett believes is insurmountable — she argues the normative values of a policy cycle make it rationalist in the sense rejected by American pluralists a half century ago.

Even if the policy cycle could stagger over this barrier, the inherent focus on process rather than content misses the political content of policy-making — especially the ‘power plays’ from which decisions emerge.

Finally, while Everett concedes ‘some issues can be resolved applying the policy cycle model’, she argues the approach pays insufficient attention to community pressures, since some issues are decided through political rather than bureaucratic processes.

As the genesis of the policy cycle suggests, all three criticisms read too much into the

model. It is not intended to be rational, to create an alternative process to power plays or to supplant politics. But even given limited aims, the policy cycle approach survives the Everett critique.

Rationalism

Everett's first hurdle is a 'straw person', based on a misreading of some ageing academic literature. Nearly two generations ago, a few rationalists ventured into print to suggest a rigorous and unchanging form of analysis would ensure a single, correct answer for any policy problem. Advocates such as Dror (1968) sought to carry a romantic view of scientific method into public life. They were quickly and effectively repudiated, for how could anyone in government believe there is only one (or any) answer to a messy policy problem? Government, after all, means constant trade and compromise. This is why the policy cycle includes 'consultation' to test opinion and win support — essential in the subjective world of policy-making but irrelevant if truth is singular and demonstrable.

To argue the policy cycle works from an embedded rationalism, Everett relies on a false analogy. She suggests a series of sequential steps 'is not dissimilar to the rational decision-making model'. Well no — a series of sequential steps is nothing like the rationalist model. She mistakes form for substance, the very ill she sees in the policy cycle. Following Everett's logic the recipe for a cake is a rationalist creed, since it too comprises a series of sequential steps with an objective in mind. In Dror's work rationality has a specific meaning in which every alternative is examined against specified objectives, until just one answer emerges. The policy cycle assumes no such process or outcome. The policy cycle is logical — each step leads to the next — but does not embody formal rationality.

Process Over Content

Everett stresses that policies are about content rather than process — and good content 'does not necessarily result from an effective process'. We agree. Good processes sometimes produce bad results. It is no substitute for good content. Decision-makers are fallible, misreading situations, imposing too much or too little politics, relying too much or not enough on technical advice. A policy cycle approach might encourage testing of ideas within and beyond govern-

ment but nothing can save us from ourselves.

But from where does good content arise? Political processes may throw up options for debate, but much of government is routine, thousands of small questions welling up from operational units within the bureaucracy, flowing through an orderly Cabinet process. Policies are rarely a single decision but the accretion of related choices. Hence the need for a nutrition policy — to fill a gap in the broader architecture of health initiatives. It is possible the Minister for Health had not given much thought to the topic until a Cabinet submission on good nutrition policy arrived for formal consideration, the product of a policy process. Everett confuses the decision — which is about content — with the whole process of identifying needs, weighing evidence, making a case for intervention. Whether Cabinet adopted the nutrition submission recommendations with enthusiasm or sent the matter back for a radical rethink, good process in good hands should have delivered substantial content. Process and content are intertwined, not contending opposites.

Consultation

The same tendency to evoke empty dualities — politics versus bureaucracy, process versus content, rationality versus democracy — mars Everett's analysis of consultation. She believes some policy problems involve entrenched interests and so are not amendable to consultation of the sort suggested by the policy cycle. Well, up to a point — consultation should be appropriate to the problem at hand. Some proposals, such the location of coal loading terminals, may eventually be fought out in the political arena. But Cabinet will still want to know about the issues involved, the options open to government, the opportunity costs of one choice over another. Compiling such information for Cabinet is the routine work of public agencies, and typically follows the same processes guiding less contentious issues. Politics is the bigger context but it does not always crowd out the work of a policy cycle.

The Australian Policy Handbook places consultation within the policy cycle, while acknowledging the non-linear nature of engagement. For many technical decisions consultation is a mandated part of decision-making, such as requiring the use of Environmental Im-

fact Statements. Everett confuses consultation with deliberation, when public controversy may be no more than a step in a broader process. Not every decision is a major infrastructure project in a marginal seat requiring sensitive political handling. But even when it is, consultation within the policy cycle helps provide the proposals and evidence around which politics congeals.

Conclusion

A policy cycle approach can help public servants develop a policy and guide it through the institutions of government. A policy cycle starts with a problem, seeks evidence, tests proposals and puts recommendations before Cabinet. Its outcomes are subject to evaluation and the cycle begins again. The policy cycle offers a modest and flexible framework for policy-makers. Whatever its flaws, the policy cycle does not suffer from the rationalist tendencies identified by Everett. Nor does government need to choose between process and content, between consultation and politics. Policy is a series of interlocking steps, a dialogue between procedures and substance, between public debate and private analysis. The policy process is more than a decision, more than power plays among interests and politicians.

Any suggestion for guiding policy-making deserves critical evaluation. There are testing questions worth posing about the policy cycle model contained in *The Australian Policy Handbook*. These are not issues of rationality but of how policy is made and understood in our book. A serious critique might question the way we define and make policy operational, the validity of evidentiary techniques, the biases implicit in Cabinet routines. Ambiguity in our approach to the policy cycle — not quite descriptive, not confidentially normative, just an action plan for would-be policy-makers — reflects the origins of the project as a pragmatic guide for the bewildered (a point touched on in Colebatch 2003).

Everett's criticisms do not hold, but they open the possibility of informed debate about the nature of explaining public policy to practitioners. Are policy problems *sui generis* or, as we believe, are there patterns that can inform policy practitioners? If so, are there closed, continuous cycles as suggested in *The Australian Policy Handbook*, open continuous loops (Coastal Resources Centre 2003) or a loop with a 'ramp off' as Marchildon (2002) suggests? This short rejoinder outlines why *The Australian Policy Handbook* is offered as a toolkit not a theory, but we would nonetheless be delighted if it encourages a debate informed by theory about public policy in Australia.

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