

INTRODUCTION:
RECONSIDERING THE
POLICY SCIENCES

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A day rarely passes without reminders that our collective well-being depends on successfully adapting our behaviour to new challenges: ‘the instruments of influence are words, spoken or written; if the influence is to be for the good, it must rest on knowledge’ (Beveridge 1955: 3). We know the sorts of questions that frame such debate. If prosperity depends on a skilled population, how should education be organised to achieve that end? If the means of living well depend upon success in a world market, who is responsible for the infrastructure that delivers our exports to that market? If my life within the community brings benefits (services, facilities and social support) what should I be obliged to pay to sustain that community and how should the obligation be distributed between the more and the less affluent? Such a list could be endless. The point is that living together entails the solution of such collective problems, and our attempts to prescribe solutions are encapsulated in public policy.

This book is about the intermediary stage between a problem and a public policy response – the analysis that should draw on expert knowledge. Specifically, it deals with the relations between

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social science research, the facilitation of informed public opinion and the policy community, and it's intended to show that expert knowledge can shape better futures. Our method is to highlight a range of policy issues, asking where the ideas that provide solutions come from and identifying potential sources of new approaches in the social sciences. Our purpose is not a general review, but a targeted analysis of some of the policy problems of the moment that will reveal the capacities of the social sciences to assist in addressing these. Our broader aim is to demonstrate that a better understanding of the complementary relations between researchers and policymakers will help to release those capacities productively. Inevitably, this involves paying attention to the international movement of ideas, since the practices of social science, and the conversations about the problems of contemporary societies, transcend national boundaries. Yet, as the cases discussed below will show, while some of the most influential ideas driving current policy derive from elsewhere, Australians not only adapt such currents in particular ways, but also have initiated approaches that lead innovation abroad.

When it comes to those collective decisions that determine how we will live together, we rely on leadership – from politicians, business gurus and community figures – to define the problems, filter the options and suggest solutions. This generates public policy: prescribed ways of acting intended to address specific problems or to achieve stated outcomes. Yet in fashioning policy, our leaders and policy activists must make sense of the welter of information, the clamour of expert voices on every side. Political objectives might filter their options, but those options must draw on the work of those who inquire into the nature of things, whose research is reliable and whose analysis promises realistic responses to our problems. Sensible policy will emerge from an effective partnership between policy practitioners and socially responsive yet scientifically rigorous researchers. We must begin by acknowledging that such a partnership will be inherently uneasy.

AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between researchers and policy practitioners is an uneasy fit between complementary but divergent interests, making for a creative but unpredictable dynamic. Although seemingly sharing many common interests, attempts to base policy on this relationship can be a source of frustration for both parties: for the researcher because of the lack of attention accorded to the subtleties and qualifications of the findings; and for the policy-maker because of the emphasis given to theory, to situating the issue within a broader context, and to a lack of timeliness (of both content and delivery). Some have argued that these factors imply that the partnership, though important, will always be a limited one (Weiss 1986), yet the relationship continues because its partners share a desire to understand and influence the course of events. And with the increasing complexity of modern societies, this interface is becoming increasingly important. From a research perspective, the increasing ease of communication, access to information and availability of social data have combined to make policy research not only more feasible, but also more challenging intellectually. From a policy perspective, increased pressure on public resources impels demands that all initiatives pass an 'effectiveness test' that has focused attention on understanding the impact of policy, generating an evidence base of new ideas and a better understandings of old ones.

These developments have driven social science and public policy closer, but in a climate often characterised by mistrust and suspicion. Researchers fear that those driving policy are seeking to justify actions already decided by 'cherry-picking' from among the available evidence with little regard for the robustness or validity of the material selected. Policy advisers see social researchers as pursuing their own political agendas under the guise of scholarship. The enlightened findings of the social scientist often spell trouble for the minister!

The essence of scientific inquiry is an open approach that

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explores the relevance of all possibilities, whereas the policy agenda is often closed to particular ideas or concepts by political determination. Topics that diverge sharply from prevailing ideological proclivities frequently fail to make it on to the radar screen of policy. A current example: reference to poverty has been effectively banned from official discourse despite its ongoing salience to public concerns. Thus, while the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) notes at the beginning of its submission to the recent Senate Inquiry into *Poverty and Financial Hardship* that 'good policy needs a good definition of the problem' (FaCS 2003: 3), and the Submission is critical of a number of existing approaches, it does not propose a quantifiable definition of poverty – presumably because its political masters do not want to see the topic on the policy agenda.

Even while acknowledging that the context within which inquiry is carried out will be decisively shaped by public and political climates, with concomitant effects on the questions asked and the solutions proposed, the social sciences have observed shared protocols of knowledge validation (such as disciplinary ethics, the demand for high levels of professional accreditation, a self-reflexive critique of assumptions and values, and rigorous peer review). The framing of agendas determines which issues are subject to policy determination, and which are ignored. Can social science influence this framing? Should it? At the very least, it is important to recognise that those who set policy have 'busy minds [and] ... strong views about how things are and ought to be', so that 'findings do not fall on blank minds that get made up as a result' (Marmot 2004: 906).

POLITICAL CLIMATES AND THE POLICY SCIENCES

The work of social scientists does not occur in a vacuum. Not only is their curiosity and hence the projects they generate driven by personal values, but the public and political climates in which they operate shape the possibilities of their research. For instance, the

definition of policy options and the interplay between experts and policymakers in the period 1945–1975 assumed a more active role for the State than has been common since. Most Western economies then were protectionist; Keynes provided the template for (limited) intervention in the economy; the Beveridge reports significantly influenced social policy; and there was deference to expert opinion – scientific rationality, it was thought, would solve our collective problems. Technocratic management and ‘brains trusts’ were as popular in market economies (for example, the United States) as in those experimenting with the expansion of welfare (for example, the United Kingdom) (Fischer 1990). In Australia, the characteristic policy pronouncements of the period – the Labor government’s white paper on full employment, as well as the Institute of Public Affairs’ (IPA) rejoinder *Looking Forward*, the Commonwealth’s funding of tertiary education, the heavy public subsidy for industrial sectors and tariff protection – all drew on ‘expert’ advice and assumed a partnership between the public and private sectors: that is, an active role for the State.

The outcome of this project would be social change and a new policy climate, as John Quiggin shows below. The success of post-war economic restructuring within nations meant that eventually business, finance and investment would become trans-national, international competitors would emerge to challenge national heavyweights, new technologies would enormously increase the circulation of capital, and increasing demands for global investment opportunities would outstrip the capacity of governments to control what was happening. This was behind the tectonic changes from the late 1970s on, when the role of the State came into question, market provision (and the outsourcing of both services and knowledge production to private providers) was seen as the path to providing individuals with choice, and policy questions tended to be framed in relation to how market mechanisms and ‘user pays’ could best serve community needs. Thus, approaches taken for granted by both policy actors and researchers in the post-war