

If the Minister is the client, where is the public?

*Reflecting on policy work, the public interest and
ethical behaviour*

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Paper to Ethical Foundations of Public Policy Conference

Victoria University of Wellington

10 December 2009

Four insights Schon

- There is:
 - the high ground of manageable problems
 - and the swamp of messy confused problems that defy technical solution
- “The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or to society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern.”

Donald Schon 1971

Caygill

Ministers must be clear when they are:

- seeking advice about what to do; or
- having decided what to do, asking for assistance to achieve it.

David Caygill

circa 2000 reflecting on
experience with policy advisors

Social work academic

Policy in the personal social services is:

- where the money goes, and
- what workers do without thinking (or looking up the policy guidelines)

Unknown social work academic

circa 1982

Schulman

“If the Minister is the client, where is the public interest?”

Putting the Minister so centrally in the frame as New Zealand arrangements do crowds out a policy focus on the public interest

Sarah Schulman

Study of coordination mechanisms in youth advice in UK, USA and New Zealand, 2007

Schon's swamps

- Rings true - I agree with Bob Gregory
- The search for rationality and a positivist holy grail
 - economic rationalism
 - the intervention logic movement
 - evidence based policy
- Ethical behaviour in such conditions
 - use a variety of paradigms
 - inspect through different lenses
 - less haste more speed
 - first do no harm and be humble

Caygill's dictum

- Policy work is non-linear and often iterative
- Policy as post hoc rationalisation
- Ethical behaviour in such conditions
 - recognize constitutional positions
 - honesty and directness in communications (avoid second guessing)
 - if tortured, move out

Social work academic's gloss on policy

- Policy to implementation - a tortured path
- Beyond the rhetoric - government policy, agency policy, site policy
- Ethical behaviour in such conditions:
 - Transparency in allocation
 - Strong feedback loops
 - Transparency in expenditure

Schulman's conclusions

- “The Minister is the client” - a mantra from the state sector reforms
- Accompanied by:
 - Policy operations separation
 - A deep suspicion of provider capture
 - An emphasis on the merits of competition
 - A belief in rational and technical decision making

Crowding out the public interest?

- Defining the public interest as an esoteric space above the mess of politics
- Depowering sectoral interests - from Seamen's Unions to Mother's Unions
- Denigrating advocacy

Consequences 1

- Concentrating power 2000-2008
 - The new super agencies
 - Being nannied - the ninth floor minders
- Concentrating power 1989-1999
 - The rhetoric of community
 - The reality of contracting

Consequences 2

- Risk aversion
- Policy advice as “what the Minister wants”
- Exclusive processes
- Holding power to Wellington

Why we should be worried

- The cost
 - Appropriations have gone up across Votes: Social Development, Health, Education, Justice and Finance
- The price
 - Silos legitimated
 - Information flows impeded
 - Perspectives limited
- Quality of decision making put at risk

What is the ethical response?

- Assume that:
 - information is dispersed
 - knowledge is contested and widely held
 - wisdom resides outside as well as inside the circle of policy making
- Find ways for public involvement:
 - as taxpayers
 - as users of services
 - as stakeholders with a vital interest in wellbeing
- Policy work as inclusive - not exclusive