CAN PUBLIC-POLICY ADVOCACY BE TAUGHT? OR LEARNED?

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BACKGROUND

IN THE JUNE EDITION OF *The Philanthropist*, ELIZABETH MULHOLLAND WROTE "New Ways to Keep Up Our End of the Policy Conversation" (Mulholland, 2010).

> Voluntary organizations are the organized expression of our civic desires and one of the main ways that Canadians communicate their values, hopes and ideas to each other and to the world. Policy advocacy is an important thread in this broader conversation and why we need to do everything we can to maintain the voluntary sector's policy voice.

She recommended, among other things, that there should be

> more policy and advocacy skills training programs for voluntary sector staff – frontline and management. Basic skills training in policy and advocacy should be part of all nonprofit management programs.

The Philanthropist asked me to pen my thoughts on advocacy training for the community nonprofit sector.

INTRODUCTION

The room was packed with bright, committed young people and a sprinkling of hardened veterans, all members of a coalition vitally interested and engaged in issues of social justice and environmental responsibility. They were there that cold Saturday morning to hear me speak about what was termed "the essentials of effective public-policy advocacy." The session was called "How the System Works and How to Work the System," a title I often use when delivering my standard GR (Government Relations) 101 pitch.

In a 30-minute presentation and another 45 minutes of Q&A, I offered numerous conceptual definitions, summarized several real-life case studies, suggested an array of principles, approaches, and tactical and strategic options which, I argued, were part and parcel of being effective in one's lobbying.

The usual emphasis was placed on the need to undertake a process of "strategic inquiry" before launching into an advocacy effort. "First," I warned, "make sure you get your 'ask' right," by doing at least a brief analysis of the political and public-policy environment that surrounds your issue.

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At the conclusion, several participants professed to be leaving with some new ideas and a new energy on how to advance their cause. But as the crowd was breaking for lunch, one irrepressible young woman stood up on a chair to bellow that her advocacy committee would be meeting after lunch *"to draw up our demands to government."*

It was yet another sobering lesson for me – observed many times before – that people learn and absorb in different ways. And, of course, a good many don't learn much of anything at all, especially if they're having information and ideas just thrown at them, rather than having an opportunity to live and experience what the "learnings" are supposed to be all about.

When it comes to advocacy, there are several types and layers of knowledge and know-how that are valuable, indeed often necessary, for success.

Does mastery of this knowledge and related skills guarantee success? Undoubtedly, no! But surely it enhances the *prospects* for success, not to mention one's individual or institutional credibility in the universe that is the world of politics and government.

POLICY ENGAGEMENT, POLICY ADVOCACY, AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Some clarification of terms is in order. In most discussions about the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness in advocacy of Canadian civil society, the narrative frequently involves the interchangeable use of such terms as "policy-development capacity," "policy engagement," or "public-policy advocacy." For the purposes of this analysis, a clear distinction will be made between "public-policy *develop*ment" and "public-policy *advocacy*."

PUBLIC-POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In this discussion, public-policy development relates to the process and substance of exploring, designing, and creating options for government action or policy. Often included is consideration of the means of policy engagement by stakeholders.

Public-policy advocacy is about the approach, strategies, and tactics employed by external interests to influence decisions of government, including the adoption, modification, or rejection) of specific policy-policy options. It, too, often involves means of policy engagement by stakeholders. "Lobbying," meaning direct representation to public officials in an attempt to influence a decision of government, is but one dimension – albeit a central one – of public-policy advocacy.

Policy development and policy advocacy are distinct but closely related functions, and there are certain skills associated with each. For example, an individual experienced in *policy development* would probably have a more refined analytical capacity with respect to both qualitative and quantitative research, thinking through, conjuring, writing about, and explaining critical economic and social data, along with the details of a particular measure and how it can be implemented. *A public-policy advocate* is usually more concerned with how the idea or measure created by policy-development specialists (be they clients, employers, or colleagues) might be most effectively promoted, advanced, or sold to policy advisors and decision-makers in government. Nonetheless, sophisticated

understanding of the policy and decision-making processes of government is an essential feature of any effective advocacy or lobbying effort.

But how accessible is information, insight, and advice on policy or advocacy to the average Canadian NGO or charity? Much has been written about policy formulation and decision-making in government at all levels, but most of it is presented to impart a theoretical or academic understanding of decision-making process. A number of handbooks and other material have been produced by various groups over the years, designed to serve as guides for activists and advocates. Maytree Foundation ran a program for several years (the Maytree Public-Policy Training Institute – in which I served as an instructor on the advocacy component) that involved seven modules over six months for approximately two-dozen participants at a time from a wide variety of GTA nonprofits. Calgary-based Max Bell Foundation and United Way of Vancouver are sponsoring similar programs in their areas.

Across Canada, there are dozens – actually, probably about a hundred – government relations (GR) consulting companies and law firms that provide guidance and representation services on a commercial basis to their paying clients. Some even provide training services, but they are most often oriented toward how the client can best use the consultants' services rather than fostering the client's in-house capacity to do much of the work themselves.

But there is, at present, nothing quite along the lines of what Elizabeth Mulholland called for in her essay – a way to give future and aspiring policy staff in the sector the skills they need to do the job.

A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE: POLICY MATTERS AND OTHER DECISIONS OF GOVERNMENT

Most of my 30-year career has involved advising on initiatives of commercial and professional clients along with frequent involvement in the work of community nonprofits, charities, and even other levels of government.

Across the spectrum, it is not just "policy matters" that are of concern to most clients. Transactional, administrative, and allocative decisions are also typically top of mind. Among nonprofits, whether a specific grant or contribution or a procurement contract is at issue, the organization is still left the challenge of how to meet its objectives in a manner that is both legitimate, effective and, in their own way, influential.

In today's world of fiscal restraint, complex decision-making, and media and public skepticism of anything considered "lobbying" – not to mention the intense rivalry even within the nonprofit sector for the attention and respect of decision-makers – dealing with "influencing a decision of government" involves hazardous terrain.

The range of issues and decisions that attract the attention of sector organizations is enormously varied. This is further reflected in the myriad decision-making protocols and dynamics that attend each issue. Certain means of effectively influencing a particular type of decision – for example, a funding application – may have only slight relevance for how one goes about trying to influence a regulatory change.

Experience shows that, in most cases, success in an organization's ongoing ability to influence decisions of government is often a consequence of several years of doing a good many things that contribute to the overall effectiveness (i.e., influence) of the organization. And "influence" can take one or more of several forms. It can involve:

- motivating or successfully encouraging government to initiate, modify, sustain/continue, or terminate/limit something by way of law, regulation, policy, program, or other expenditure;
- being "at the table" when important consultations are being held and opinions canvassed and being asked – and listened to – by government for suggestions and comments on matters of state and public policy;
- being recognized by media, government, and other organizations as a "player" – as evidenced in news coverage, etc., and by involvement in stakeholder consultations;
- successfully gaining funding, franchise, or mandate from government;
- gaining benefit not only by *meeting* government criteria but also by *influencing* the definition of the criteria themselves; and/or
- increasing understanding (i.e., awareness) among decision-makers about a particular organization or the sector at large.

THE CHALLENGE OF DEALING WITH DECISION-MAKERS

There is seldom much advantage to be gained by those in government in talking frankly about those who petition them. The enormous diversity of experience, the broad range of issues, and the inherent uniqueness of so many situations often makes it difficult to articulate relevant generalities.

But there are some common complaints and observations by elected and non-elected officials that can be enumerated. (I've drawn the following from work undertaken for a client five years ago. I have no reason to believe circumstances have changed much.) They include:

- a myopia of sorts by petitioners who fail to see their issue or demand in a larger context (for example, the precedent their proposition would create that would be difficult for government to deal with);
- a lack of appreciation by many interest groups for the range of political and public-policy variables that those in government must consider;
- failure of proponents to be aware of or actively link their idea to government's existing priorities or concerns;
- lack of appropriate preparation of an advocate's proposition (e.g., not massaging it in response to administrative, public-policy, and political imperatives);
- lack of patience and perseverance – the tendency by many petitioners to give up and go on to something else before adequately following up on their initial initiative;
- failure to understand the nature, "rhythms," and timeframes of government decision-making;
- submission of written advocacy material that is usually too voluminous, too narrowly self-serving, and in a form often unusable by those in government; and
- unnecessary politicization of issues by proponents "going political" prematurely.

In the minds of many public officials, this comes down to a general failure by organizations (in both the private *and* nonprofit sectors, it should be emphasized) to understand how government, politics and public-policy really work.
So what to do about it?

THE MARKET, MODES OF LEARNING, AND PEDAGOGY

As with most every other field of knowledge and learning, the acquiring of essential understandings of, and facility in, advocacy and policy development can involve a broad range of approaches and experiences. These will undoubtedly vary according to multiple factors: the learner's age and depth of experience, physical or virtual access to the source of learning opportunities, and specific needs and focus of interest; skills and tools available to instructors; and the economics of learning/training programs (i.e., the cost of providing the learning opportunity and the market's ability or willingness to pay.)

Let's consider the market for professional development training in advocacy. In the real world, it doesn't fall into neat categories, but let's try to do that anyway:

First, there is the population at large. Here it is postulated that there is, in relative terms, a very small proportion of the total citizenry that is motivated to go out of their way to personally develop or hone advocacy skills. However, though small in relative terms, even .005% (half of 1% of 33-million) of the citizenry would amount to some 165,000 Canadians. These are the local aspiring community leaders and activists charged up and committed about an issue – education, health, criminal justice, economic development, social justice, environmental degradation, or any one of countless other "moral" or "values" issues that drive people to "want to do something."

As I wrote in *The Philanthropist* last spring:

> Among most academics and journalists, "lobbying" is generally seen as sort of perverse, morally indistinguishable from influence peddling or other corrupt practice. Rarely is lobbying viewed – as I believe, it should be … as a vitally important dimension of our civic life and a key factor in sound policy development, decision-making, and public administration. It's a subject that deserves much more scrutiny and exploration by media and the academy, not because it's inherently bad, but rather, because – if practiced honourably and legally, as it usually is by most – it is the daily dynamics of democratic process between elections.
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> Discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian democracy traditionally focus on the mechanics of elections and the machinations of parliament, an independent judiciary, rule of law and a free press – all important elements, to be sure. But isn't the nature of our democratic practice *between* elections, the exercise of our right to petition government and to participate in policy and decision-making, the human effort and creativity to forge consensus on important questions – aren't these all also important features of our civic life?

While there are undoubtedly many thousands of activists across Canada – from left to right and everywhere in between – who are already veterans of advocacy campaigns, the vast majority of their followers, colleagues, and other aspiring advocates probably have few skills and little training when it comes to effective advocacy.

Substantial in overall size as individual, personal advocacy might be, where it is more commonly witnessed is in group behaviour. Whether it is the workplace, a faith-based organization, or a community of interest, the bulk of organized advocacy in our society is undertaken through organizations, both formal and informal, in the private sector, the nonprofit sector, and even in the public sector.

Lynne Toupin, executive director of the HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, said earlier this year:

> We have been told about the need to improve the advocacy and policy skills of board members, management, and staff within the community nonprofit sector. Though we have not yet explored in detail the level and scope of demand for skills development of employees in various occupations in the sector– something we hope to do within the year – skills related to public policy development are one of many that may require further development within organizations. (Personal correspondence with author, May 2010)

And it is not just training that is needed, says Toupin.

> It's partly a generational thing. Among the younger cohort of emerging leaders in the sector, there is a particularly acute desire to not only have access to training opportunities but also to have some on-going coaching and mentoring available as well." (Personal correspondence with author in May 2010)

Thus, while difficult to quantify, there is reason to believe that there is a sufficient market for advocacy training services to sustain at least a limited number of reasonable-cost learning opportunities, offered by universities, associations, and social enterprises, providing they are able to keep both participant and service-delivery costs low.

So should advocacy training be focused on the neophyte or the veteran? I believe any credible initiative must include provision for both – Advocacy 101, so to speak, for those who want to start from the beginning and master the essentials, but also a recognition that when one is involved in politics, government, advocacy, social change, and public policy, learning how to think about it and how to do it effectively must be a life-long (or at least a career-long) preoccupation. New technologies, new economic exigencies, certainly new personalities, processes, and public-policy challenges require of effective advocates a nimble mind and an openness to new realities and approaches – not to mention the humility to admit such needs.

WHAT'S TO BE LEARNED

Can advocacy be *taught*? Maybe not taught in the traditional teaching mode of readings and lectures, but it certainly can be learned. I believe people can learn important things about advocacy and acquire and fine-tune key advocacy skills.

Based on my previous experience in informally canvassing and responding to the training needs of professional and trade association clients, effective programs of learning opportunities would:

- rigourously employ the approach and pedagogies of *adult education*, namely minimization of traditional lectures, emphasizing instead extensive participant involvement and interactivity and an accent on "learning by doing";
- provide a mix of "classroom-in-person, live" sessions, typically half a day or a whole day in length, along with "on-line, live webinar" sessions that are narrower in focus and shorter (60-90 minutes); this would enable some measure of access to training by organizations and individuals across Canada and not just those based in major urban centres;
- ensure that virtually all content, whether conceptual (e.g., on "strategy") or practical (e.g., how to write an effective briefing note), for both in-person and on-line settings includes practical tools (templates, strategic frameworks, check-lists, samples and examples) and that participants are pressed to apply their own organization's particulars to the approaches and skills they're learning;
- maintain an integrated approach to the overall learning opportunities offered by encouraging cross-referencing among instructors to what's being dealt with in other sessions (this can be greatly assisted by the existence of a community of practice in the field of public-policy advocacy, currently being formed); and
- provide access to a cadre of mentors and coaches to advise and guide the learning and practice of "student" advocates, ideally remaining in place to provide ongoing counsel while leaving the "doing" to the learners.

The last point is especially important as research, particularly in the field of adult education and professional development, points towards the substantial benefits to be gained by learners who have access to mentors or coaches in addition to training opportunities employing more traditional methods (i.e., lectures, readings, workshops etc.).

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

In considering the *content* of professional development training in advocacy, it is perhaps helpful to think of it in terms of both an art and a science.

So what, pray tell, would constitute the "science" of lobbying? For starters, an accurate and insightful understanding of the physical shape and dynamics of government; its organization, structure, processes, and standard operating procedures; its rules and regulations – the world as it is, not as one might want it to be. While most of the aforementioned phenomena are well-established and often well understood by those in government and those outside who closely monitor its activities, they are not immutable. An important part of knowledge about government and politics is understanding how and why it changes and the implications of such change. But the point is that there are objective, verifiable facts about how any government or ministry operates.

Thus, the "science" of public-policy advocacy is in knowing how the system really works – for example, how procurement is conducted, how the legislative process works, the dynamics of cabinet government, or how budget consultations are undertaken. Knowing "how the system works" is an essential part of knowing "how to work the system." And it is the working of the system that is more art than science.

Even the "art" of effective advocacy is often rooted in a knowledge base. The art of creat-

ing effective briefing notes or other written material for use in lobbying is in large part a function of the experiences the drafter has had along with their exposure to persuasive narrative over the years. For most, it's typically been a matter of learning by doing.

Some argue that effective advocacy is more about "relationship building and maintenance" than anything else. While its primacy is debatable, its significance is not. But how do you teach it?

There is a science dimension to it. In a workshop or webinar on relationship building, you start with considering the work of such theorists as social psychologist Robert Cialdini, who has spent his career assessing the pyscho-social dynamics behind persuasion and influence. You go from there to a discussion of a few case studies of how various individuals and organizations go about establishing and sustaining key contacts relevant to their public-policy objectives, then participants are asked to start imagining and plotting what this all means to their organization and its issues.

The specific content of an advocacy-training program will ultimately depend on a response to demand in the marketplace, but I suspect (based on experience to date) that what is wanted and needed falls into the following handful of categories.

How the System Works

This is perhaps the most important category. How the system works will, of course, vary according to both jurisdiction and issue area. And, unlike most of the other content areas, it will probably need to involve more of a traditional "information dump" than other areas of instruction. But even here, use of case studies and attention to emerging and current developments (for example, the rapidly expanding role of multi-stakeholder public engagement processes) will play an important role in training. This sort of content will also be most likely in demand on an on-going basis as circumstances (and government, and policy and personalities) change.

Information-Gathering and Analytical Skills

The aphorism "it's *what* you know not *who* you know" is a popular one in some circles. While its validity is at least debatable, there's no doubt one's ability to know what's going on and what it means is a critical advocacy skill. They are among those attributes that are best "learned by doing," but there are still systems to be learned and tricks of the trade to be mastered, all of which should be included in advocacy training. This would include the use of "strategic inquiry" processes in assessing an issue's ambient political and public-policy environment and understanding how the Internet can be used to gather vital data and intelligence.

Communications Skills

There should be recognition here that advocacy is – or should be – considered much more than "lobbying." Communications training should cover the gamut of how to conduct and assess relevant research; develop effective narrative; prepare and get published persuasive op-ed pieces; craft the sort of briefing notes, policy memoranda, and other documentation for government that help to propel an issue; develop a media strategy and write excellent news releases; make best use of social media and other mobilization tools.

Management

While most of the aforementioned is of greatest relevance to staff, there are sessions that also should be provided to members of boards of directors and to executive directors, with an emphasis on the strategic, management, and resource allocation dimensions of an organization's advocacy activities. One can have the most scintillating advocacy strategy imaginable and still have the effort fizzle with poor execution. Management-related training would include everything from how to budget for an advocacy campaign and the human resource requirements to build an effective team, through to NGOs knowing how to plan for and deal with government and other funder program-evaluators. A popular session would undoubtedly be the one that provides advice on how to screen, retain, and manage external lobbyists and other hired-gun consultants.

Rules of the Game

No program in advocacy training can be without some focused content on the ever-spreading body of laws, rules, regulations, disclosure requirements, codes of conduct, and restrictions on various types of advocacy. Lobbyists registration requirements and political finance rules are among the most prominent but also important are a jurisdiction's Access to (or Freedom of) Information regimes and its approach to conflict of interest, post-employment, and gifts and hospitality rules.

Strategic Sensibility and Judgment

Well, doesn't everyone want to upgrade themselves in this regard? Perhaps someone out there can come up with a sort of "(Common) Sense and Sensibility in Advocacy" workshop or webinar. In the meantime, an overall objective of all advocacy training should be to help participants to develop the knowledge, awareness, creativity, and skills to exercise superior judgment in the conduct of their advocacy.

So is any of this really doable? I'll soon find out.

Coming soon – Advocacy School

I'm taking much of what I've written here about advocacy and professional development and taking a run at doing something about it. It is called Advocacy School (www.advocacyschool.org), a social enterprise providing advocacy training and mentoring/coaching services to the community nonprofit and association sectors. To date, more than a dozen active and retired public-policy and advocacy specialists have been recruited to play a role, most with extensive experience as trainers and advisors. The search for additional faculty and mentors, new content, new pedagogies, and new ideas in advocacy continues.

Though Advocacy School's scope and market is deemed to be national, hopefully it will not be the only initiative focused on developing the capacity of individual Canadians and their civil society organizations to be more effective players in public affairs. We are aiming to encourage and assist Canadian universities and community colleges to join the effort both in their academic offerings as well as extension courses aimed at improving the quality of civic engagement. To this end, Advocacy School is also launching and convening a "community of practice" coast-to-coast among those who are interested in developing, presenting and disseminating content and pedagogy related to advocacy.

Clearly, for all of us, there is a whole lot of learning to be done.

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