

RESOLVED: THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR HAS NOT CAUGHT UP WITH THE WAY PUBLIC POLICY IS NOW MADE

POINT : **BOB WYATT**

As I reflected on the theme of this issue of *The Philanthropist* – the sector’s involvement in public policy – I tried to think about why we are rarely as successful as we would like to be. After all, groups that aren’t as broadly based, that aren’t as engaged with citizens, and that are not as significant on either an economic or social basis, seem to be more successful than we are. Their voices are heard, and their desires met, more often than ours.

There are probably many reasons for this. Part of it, as we’ve discussed before, is that we’re not good at acting like a sector or at telling the story of the sector. We allow ourselves to be seen as individual groups or small coalitions rather than a sector of 170,000 organizations that have a presence in literally every community in this nation. Another reason may be that we have traditionally spent too much time talking only to the government of the day rather than to all parliamentarians; we haven’t been well positioned when governments have changed. Finally, it may also be that we’re not sure what we want in terms of public policy.

But I’m wondering if there’s another, more fundamental, reason.

I’m not sure that we’ve come to understand that the way policy is being made has changed – and not necessarily for the better.

It seems to me that the changes started in the mid-1990s, when “program review” (also known as slash-and-burn cuts) started being practised with a vengeance theretofore unseen. There were, of course, serious cuts in sector funding, particularly to national umbrella groups. But there were other cuts, internal cuts. Those cuts started decimating the departmental policy shops in federal government departments.

Those cuts continued every time government (of whatever political stripe) was looking to trim spending. In any government department – federal or provincial – where one can find a policy shop, that shop is now a mere shadow of what it once was. There have been at least three significant results from this.

First, many departments have lost the capacity for broad, big-picture thinking and analysis. Policy shops used to be above the day-to-day fray; they had the luxury of being able to analyze disparate information from many sources and consider broad-based policy

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issues. While those who propose policy changes now are attempting to be responsive, they are also juggling policy work together with other duties; they have neither the time nor the distance necessary to look at longer-term or even systemic issues. What passes for “policy development” these days often seems to respond only to the latest headline.

Second, we in the sector have lost a point of entry. In the past, we could often forge relationships with people in policy shops. We could be a source of information for them, and we could suggest areas for them to explore. We could talk with them about what might make a difference for those we serve. We were sometimes invited to comment on their ideas. We could have influence – sometimes slight, sometimes more.

But the third result is probably the most troublesome: Public policy seems more and more to be developed based on the latest public-opinion polls and less and less on data. We in the sector spend lots of time doing policy development the “old” way – gathering data, analyzing options, and coming up with a conclusion. And we’re faced with people saying that Canadians are worried about crime and feel their taxes are too high. Well, as my teenagers would say: “Duh!”

This is not to say that public opinion is unimportant. But policy needs to be built on more, or at least on *informed* public opinion. Long-term decisions that are going to have an impact on people and the way we live can’t be made on the basis of polling questions that telegraph the “right” answer.

That takes me back to my first point: We as a sector have not been as good as we need to be at telling our story about the sector and about the causes we champion. We have not done a good job of demonstrating that the millions of Canadians who work with us as volunteers are entitled to have their voices heard, too. Nor have we done a good job of working with government to find ways that their needs and ours can mesh.

If we want to continue to be relevant and meaningful and to provide optimal service to Canadians, we have to learn to do better.

COUNTERPOINT : DON BOURGEOIS

I have thought about this topic off and on for a few years – from two perspectives: (1) as a person who receives policy recommendations from the sector and (2) as one who attempts to provide or advance certain policy recommendations. The resolution prompted me to come back to this issue. I agree that the sector has not caught-up with the way public policy is now made. Where we differ is whether the sector can do so.

Over the years, as a public servant, I have seen the changes in how public policy is or can be made. There is no uniformity or universality on this point. Nearing the end of a career allows one to reflect back on the “good old days” and compare them to the current state of affairs. Allow me to digress for a moment or two to develop the comparison.

There are a number of excellent studies on public policy-making in Canada and at the provincial and municipal levels. Arguably, the 1960s to 1980s were a golden age of

rational policy-making – by which I mean a problem was identified, public servants were assigned to define the problem and provide options to resolve it (assuming it was a problem for government to resolve through public policy, which is and always will be a political question), and Cabinet would review the options and make a decision.

The process was an iterative one that included consultation with affected persons. In the 1980s, the definition of who was considered affected or a stakeholder expanded considerably, both for purposes of public policy and in legislation. Across Canada and in other jurisdictions, either by common law or in statutes, consultation with those affected by public policy became ingrained in the process. One has only to look at the statutory and common law principles for land-use planning and environmental assessments to see a process that embeds consultation.

The difficulty that existed then and, I suggest, still exists now is one of capacity and competence. The sector, frankly, has neither when it comes to public policy. Or, if it does, it is not generally available. This lack of capacity and competence, combined with the changes to the process of public policy-making over the last 20 years, has left the sector even further behind and further out of the loop. While substantial and material developments occurred to institutionalize consultation and the legal ability of the sector and its participants to influence public policy, the sector has failed to make appropriate use of these opportunities.

And there have been changes. One colleague noted the influence of email – it has given everyone direct or close to direct access to ministers and ministerial aides. Indeed, arguably, public policy-making is more responsive to the “public” than it ever has been. You want to email a minister with your views? Go ahead. Most ministers have email addresses, albeit ones that are monitored. Years ago, access to a minister was much more controlled than it is now – one needed to go through a ministerial bureaucracy to get an idea before a minister.

Ministerial offices are much more important across Canada than they used to be for this purpose and for subsequent policy-making or recommendations. In the “good old days,” ministerial offices were usually small and without policy advisors. Now, most ministerial offices at the federal level, and some provincial governments, have a significant number of policy advisors. We can moan about this change, but it is one that exists and that the sector has not taken into account – and by the way, as you also note above, it has occurred regardless of the spectrum of political parties.

You also identify – correctly (and I am big enough to acknowledge that you can be correct on occasion) – that big-thinking and analysis is disappearing or has disappeared in government. Public policy was always reactive in that it attempted to identify and solve problems. But if the development of public policy is initially in the hands of those who have timelines marked in decades rather than in years or even months, the focus is substantially different. The motivations are necessarily different. In all my years as a public servant, I have never come across a public servant, minister, or ministerial aide who wanted to do bad public policy – but what was considered a benchmark for good public policy has differed.

The sector does not understand the public policy process. It does not invest the time, money, or other resources to do so. Rather, in my experience, the sector largely views public policy-making as a single focussed attempt to get a decision made one way or the other. It does not look at the broader context in which that decision is being made; it does not attempt to understand the societal dynamics at play and the economic, social, environmental, cultural, or other factors that have bearing. The sector has and will continue to have a dismal record because it is not competent and does not have the capacity to do or influence public policy. I am sure that this broad generalization is overly stated, but, nonetheless, I challenge our readers to identify more than a dozen significant public policy initiatives that have been successfully led by the sector.

Public policy is not about purity; it is about finding a solution to a problem or acting to prevent a problem. It is about compromise because, by its nature, public policy usually affects many in society. We have all heard the phrase “politics is about the art of the possible,” and that is equally true of public policy-making. Good participants in public policy-making understand that part of the art is moving the markers as to what is or is not possible. Those who are Trekkies will no doubt recall what a young James Tiberius Kirk did with the Kobayashi Maru test. Skilled participants in public policy know how to change the markers.

Interestingly, as with James T. Kirk, changing the markers is not done in the newspapers, on television or radio, or on Facebook or Twitter. It is done through a thorough understanding of the issues, the views of others relevant to the process, the legal and political context, and so forth. Adding a hockey analogy, skilled practitioners know how to “play the man, not the puck.” To do so takes an investment in time, money, and other resources to ensure that the sector has the competence and capacity, but I see no substantial and sustainable interest in the sector to do so.

Successful public policy-making entails hard work, not jawing at conferences and meetings. It requires understanding the views and perspectives of others – and accepting that those views and perspectives have legitimacy to those who hold them. It means working to find areas of commonality, putting together a coalition of not just “friends” but also of “enemies” as required or on an ongoing basis. Most importantly, it requires a strategy.

So where do we differ on this topic? I think in the potential. Learning to do better is not enough. What is required is a cultural change, one that is sustainable and sustained. And I am far from believing the sector has the willingness, desire, capacity, or interest to do so.