PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY – A TEACHABLE ART?

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Challenge and opportunity for nonprofits doing public policy advocacy

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It is a treat that this edition of *The Philanthropist* is dedicated to public policy. The creation, evolution, and adoption of public policy affect every person in this country in ways large and small. Whether we are driving our cars, choosing how to heat our homes, selecting schools for our children, or deciding on our grocery purchases for the week, public policy touches us all.

We tend to think of public policy as something that government does – or does to us! But as this edition emphasizes, the development of sound public policy requires the efforts of stakeholders from the nonprofit and corporate sectors as well. Canadians have long benefited from public policy entrepreneurs and advocates from outside of government bringing invaluable expertise, evidence, and perspective to the policy table.

In this expansive and complex network of interrelationships, not-for-profit organizations have an enormous role to play. As we know, there are thousands of nonprofit organizations in Canada. They involve millions of people and they provide services to almost all of us in one form or another.

Inevitably, our not-for-profit organizations are so busy trying to stay afloat, or are so focused on their key services, that it can be challenging for them to find the time, energy, and support to contribute to the public policy debate.

Perhaps an even bigger challenge is that determining how to affect public policy does not come naturally to many of us. Complex policy issues involve data, options, and analysis. Multiple stakeholders bring diverse opinions on direction and priorities; information and misinformation vie for supremacy in the public consciousness; and the process for bringing this all together is anything but clear.

But who better to weigh in on these conversations than those most familiar with service delivery? Who better than those who know what actually happens on the ground, and who see the second- and third-order effects and unintended consequences of the public policy decisions we as a society make?

Governments need to build and maintain policy capacity in their own realm. But in addition, as Robert Thompson, former Clerk of the Executive Council and Secretary to Cabinet in Newfoundland and Labrador, notes:

> Governments need access to policy inputs from citizens, stakeholders, media, think tanks, academia and other sectors. The democratic process demands, and good sense dictates, that the best ideas and information should make their way to decision makers. Moreover, the best decision makers will establish means of avoiding over-reliance on a single dominant source of advice, including the public service. Policy professionals outside government have powerful and sophisticated tools for producing policy analysis and advice, and they make an extraordinarily valuable contribution to policy development. (Thompson, 2013, n.p.)

Recognizing the value of policy advice from nonprofits raises a number of questions. How can we assist them in taking up this challenge to be involved? How could one organization possibly have any impact? Can public policy advocacy be learned? Such dilemmas loom large. But there are lessons to be learned. And there are some tools that can be shared.

Do we under invest?

There are some training opportunities focused on the not-for-profit sector, but most of these courses are designed to build specific skills in a particular area of expertise, be it financial literacy, case management, IT basics, or human resource management. These are valuable to be sure. But are they enough? Likely not, if nonprofit organizations are to play a meaningful role in public policy advocacy.

More must be invested in developing management skills. Leadership opportunities must be created. And skills must be built that will help nonprofits deal with complex policy issues. In short, we must build the capacity of nonprofits to participate in public policy debates. There is very little data to tell us how much we do in this area, but what data there is shows there is a significant gap. As Susan Carter (2011) summarizes:

> Hard numbers are difficult to come by. Anecdotally and in dialogue within the sector, it appears that only a small percentage – certainly a minority – of organizations engage directly in public policy.
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> This is confirmed by the Survey of the Voluntary Sector conducted in 2007 as part of the Evaluation of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (Human Resources and Skills Development, 2007), which found that 22% of the organizations surveyed said that their organization's mission and operations included contributing to public policy at the federal level (the VSI having been a federal initiative). Presumably another possibly larger percentage would have contributed to provincial or municipal public policy.
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> The fact that involvement in public policy is carried out by less than 25% of all organizations does not signify a lack of interest by the majority of other organizations. Repeatedly, small and medium organizations providing direct service say that they do not have the capacity (time or expertise) to engage in public policy, but they think it is very important that others do on their behalf; they are ready to contribute to the effort and want to remain connected to policy work in their field. (pp. 430–431)

At a symposium on public policy and the voluntary sector held in April of 2011, 45 of Canada's leaders on this issue agreed that training to build the public policy advocacy capacity of nonprofits was both essential and lacking (Northcott, 2011).

An experiment – the Public Policy Training Institute

There are some initiatives on the landscape that help to meet the need for learning and training in the area of public policy development and advocacy. This journal is one of them. There are courses such as those offered by Sean Moore (advocacyschool.org) and John Stapleton (openpolicyontario.com). And there are a variety of postsecondary programs and schools in public policy and public administration, growing in reach and depth, which are helping to fill the void. There is also an interesting experiment happening in pockets of the country. The seed started with the Maytree Foundation in Toronto, which launched the Maytree Public Policy Training Institute (PPTI) in late 2005. The Maytree PPTI was a series of training sessions for Toronto area individuals and organizations designed to help them learn the ropes of the complex public policy dynamic. The model was picked up by Max Bell Foundation, which launched a sister program in Alberta in 2008. It has since also been reproduced by the United Way of the Lower Mainland.

The approach

The Max Bell Public Policy Training Institute (PPTI) is heading into its sixth year. The program brings seasoned veterans of the public policy process together with leaders from nonprofit organizations. The goal is to impart lessons from practical experience and the "school of hard knocks" to those leaders in the not-for-profit world who are in a position, and have a desire, to influence public policy.

The program has three objectives. The first is to enhance participants' understanding of how federal, provincial, and municipal governments make policy decisions, so that they can participate more effectively in the public policy process. The second objective is to provide participants with training in how to develop practical and workable policy alternatives through both formal and informal learning formats, which include lectures, case studies, readings, panel discussions, group work, and one-on-one discussions with the faculty. The third objective is to have each participant make significant progress on a public policy issue that would improve his or her organization's ability to accomplish its mission.

A broad array of nonprofit organizations has participated in the Max Bell PPTI. Their missions are focused on social services, health, agriculture, environment, volunteerism, housing, and many other public issues. As an added element of diversity, the PPTI also tries to involve people from all parts of Alberta – the urban centres of Calgary and Edmonton, the smaller cities, more rural areas, and in some cases from out of the province.

The group meets in six two-day sessions over a six or eight month period, alternating between Calgary and Edmonton. The faculty are practitioners from diverse corners of the public policy arena. The common thread is that they all have extensive first-hand experience in the mysterious ways of public policy development. Equally important,

they are all advocates for a robust public policy process. The faculty includes:

- a former Alberta cabinet minister,
- the head of a regional think tank,
- the head of a research organization and former assistant deputy minister,
- the CEO of a large nonprofit organization active in public policy development, and
- a former deputy minister to a Canadian premier.

The faculty are assisted by guest speakers, including researchers, government relations experts, municipal politicians, and current civil servants.

Before the course begins, and as part of the selection process, each participant must identify a public policy issue he or she wishes to pursue. This must be a substantive issue, as distinct from a request for more funding or resources for their organization. It may or may not be something that is actually "in play"; what matters is that it be a proposal that can be used as a case study and learning tool for the duration of the course.

Course content

The curriculum follows what is, in theory at least, the public policy process, and is delivered in five modules.

Introduction and Civics 101

The first module introduces the course, the participants, their policy proposals, and the basic structure of government, setting the foundation for later sessions. Topics covered include:

- The realm of public policy and policy development in Alberta as it relates to nonprofits.
- Current events of importance to planners and strategists.
- The orders of government, and operational and political cycles in government.
- The current environment for developing and advancing policy alternatives.
- A range of approaches to advocating for change.
- The policy aspirations of each participant.

Research

Thousands of academic and social entities produce information and research that could or should inform both participants' work and public policy. This session asks (and answers):

- How do you assess the quality and usefulness of evidence?
- Where can you find it?
- To what extent does evidence matter?
- Is the work of your nonprofit based on current best practice?
- Is the focus of your organization appropriate to the identified need and supported by research in the field?
- How does your knowledge of the field inform your policy project?
- What role does your organization have in the translation of research (knowledge) for its staff and volunteers, clients, the public, or government?
- Who does government listen to?

- How does the non-governmental sector take the information generated in formal and informal ways and use it to influence how government makes decisions?

Policy Options

All complex public policy issues have many dimensions, affected people have many differing views, and there is no "single best solution." This session covers:

- The environment in which policy issues are discussed.
- How to frame an issue.
- Deciding how to use research evidence.
- Getting input into policy alternatives.
- Assessing the views of other interested parties.
- The role of public opinion.
- The conditions that will lead to policy advocacy success.

Influencing Decision Makers

Engaging decision makers is more of an art than a science. But it is an art that requires an understanding of what activities are legal, who should be engaged, when to engage, as well as how to do it. This session includes:

- Why engage decision makers? What can you hope to achieve?
- How to set realistic and useful objectives for influencing decision makers.
- Understanding the objectives of decision-makers and how to align your objectives with theirs.
- The most effective methods of engagement: who to engage, when, how to create a compelling message, how to use third parties effectively, and pitfalls to avoid.
- Legal restrictions and ethical considerations.

Implementation and Alternatives

What if a decision maker says "yes" to your proposal? Or what if he or she says, "Okay, sort of ..."? This session covers:

- The key issues, challenges, and critical success factors for successful implementation of a new policy idea or program.
- Assessing whether you are ready to roll – because government and funders both want to know that you are.
- Responding to acceptance of your proposal on a smaller or larger scale or with other significant changes.

The top tip list

There are many lessons that the Max Bell PPTI faculty hope participants will take away with them. In addition to the background readings, lessons learned from colleagues, takeaways from guest speakers, and personal "aha moments," the PPTI faculty shares its top tips with the participants for an effective approach to decision-maker partners. While somewhat intuitive, they are good reminders:

- Think big, but focus your comments and your efforts.
- Be specific and be clear.

- Be positive.
- Offer solutions that decision makers can say "yes" to.
- Recognize most policy issues are complex; decisions usually take time, and there is no single "right" answer.
- Recognize the need for trade-offs and compromise; be prepared to take something more modest or a step in the right direction.
- Be ready when the time is right for government to address your issue and consider your proposal.
- Offer to run pilots and grow from successes.
- Be a champion.
- Put yourself in the decision maker's shoes.
- Be appreciative.
- Have a sustained effort.
- Build coalitions.
- Become the go-to organization on your issue.
- Remember it is all about relationships.
- A small initiative can make a huge difference – go for it!

Of course, beyond these top tips, the PPTI faculty really hope that at the end of the program, participants feel motivated to contribute to the public policy process, have some practical knowledge and skills to do so, and have the confidence to play a leadership role in public policy development.

How the Max Bell PPTI goes about it

While the PPTI curriculum has a deceptively logical flow to it, those involved know that the process of public policy development and adoption is never straightforward or linear. Public policy often starts in the middle and works back before going forward, or it travels in increasingly tighter or broader circles. The course seeks to recognize this reality and so the individual modules often overlap.

As in many learning situations, the wealth of knowledge in the room resides in the participants as much as in the faculty. Therefore the course as much as possible relies on interactive sessions, the sharing of participant experiences, group exercises, some case studies, and individual work on each participant's project. In addition, at each session there is an oral presentation by each member of the group – a description of their project, an explanation of their goal, or a practice pitch to a decision maker.

At the end of each session, there is a short assignment that requires the participants to draw on the content of the just-concluded session or to prepare for the upcoming session, using their individual project as the case study. The assignments are designed to keep the session's work grounded and to cement the teachings in a tangible way.

From its inception, the program has matched each participant with one of the faculty members in a mentor relationship. During and between session dates, participants can draw on the expertise of their mentors for guidance and coaching.

The final two-day session of the program belongs to the participants. Each must make a presentation to the rest of the group: 20 minutes to outline his or her public policy proposal to a mock group of decision makers, encompassing the key elements of the course. A checklist for a successful presentation has been crafted by Elizabeth Cull for a similar PPTI program sponsored by the United Way of the Lower Mainland in British Columbia. Participants in both programs report that Cull's checklist is extremely helpful to them, so it is reproduced below:

Does my presentation …

- Introduce me and my organization briefly?
- Frame the issue/problem briefly and state what public policy change we propose as a solution to address this issue?
- Help the audience understand how this change would work and how it would address the issue?
- Indicate the consequences of doing nothing?
- Refer to evidence that helps indicate why our proposed public policy change is the right solution?
- Identify alternative policy options we could live with and that would allow for some progress if we cannot quite get the policy change we are seeking?
- Indicate which decision makers we need to engage for this policy change to be implemented?
- Indicate which stakeholders we need to mobilize to help us make our case, and give a brief idea of how we plan to mobilize them?
- Indicate whether or not we need to convince or "neutralize" opponents to our proposed policy change, and how we would go about accomplishing this if needed?
- Provide some sense of scope in terms of cost, necessary resources, people affected, location, and timeline to implement this policy change?
- Indicate how progress should be tracked or measured once implementation starts, and what role we will play to ensure accountability to the stakeholders, even if others are responsible for implementation?
- Conclude by stating again what policy change we are proposing to address what issue?
- Generally strike a good balance between facts/figures/logic and emotive narrative?

Lessons learned

After the third group of participants completed the PPTI in spring of 2011, Max Bell Foundation contracted an evaluator to assess the program's success. The evaluation, consisting of an online survey and telephone interviews, revealed that participants had an overwhelmingly positive view of the PPTI. They particularly valued one-on-one feedback from faculty and discussions with colleagues. Some participants were challenged by the knowledge of civics required to fully engage with the course content, but overall reported being highly satisfied by their PPTI experience. The Foundation conducts online surveys of participants after each PPTI session, and those results generally confirm the findings of the external evaluation.

Throughout its five years, Max Bell's PPTI course has maintained a basic structure modelled on the original Maytree offering. However, several elements of the delivery have been adapted based on feedback.

The diversity of participant backgrounds, both in terms of sectors and geography, adds tremendously to the experience. However, this diversity also creates challenges for participants, especially in the program's early stages. To create better synergies, the faculty experimented with putting people from like organizations together in working groups. On balance, however, co-mingling offered greater richness of discussion and interaction, as people came to appreciate the differences across various sectors and to spot the many similarities in public policy issues. Participants report that this exposure to diverse perspectives is one of the most striking elements of the course.

The wisdom of delivering the course over six or eight months has often been debated by the faculty. It can be difficult for people to commit to six two-day sessions, and the option of a more intensive course delivery has been considered. However, one of the benefits of a longer elapsed time has been that the external environment changes, and the course can work with those changes in real time. Elections are held, decision makers take and leave positions, participants' host organizations change, the policy environment shifts, and media attention to issues swings wildly. Occasionally, a participant's policy "ask" is adopted by government during the six-month period, which creates an opportunity for reflection and dissection of a live case study. In addition, stronger bonds seem to be formed by the participants over this extended period.

Participant feedback repeatedly references the value of an eclectic but seasoned faculty who speak from a variety of perspectives based on actual experiences. There is much to be said about policy advocacy in theoretical terms, but it is strengthened and brought to life by real stories from the field.

Creating time and space for networking has proven important. The need to create and accommodate that time cannot be overstated.

Practice makes perfect. Many students say it can be nerve-wracking to be put on the spot throughout the course to practice delivering their policy proposal in short, longer, or tagline form. But without exception, they say that the practice sharpens their focus and refines their proposal to something clear and understandable. Repetition helps.

Policy proposals morph over time. Many participants suffer some angst as they realize in the early days that their initial policy proposal is not realistic, will not contribute in a significant way to the larger goals they may be trying to achieve, or cannot get sufficient support within their organizations. This, of course, is part of the reality of public policy development; policy proposals must be meaningful, appropriately focused, and supported internally. Working through these issues is an opportunity rather than a classroom crisis. It is quite acceptable and usually preferable for a policy proposal to evolve, morph, or even change completely.

Adult learning is the cornerstone of the PPTI course. The content is largely instructor delivered with active learner participation. Even with an emphasis on project-specific time,

group interaction, and workshopping assignments, the faculty are continuously reminded that both one-on-one attention and group interaction are key to adult learning success.

A course that incorporates a final presentation by each student, as in the PPTI program, is not without its challenges. For one thing, it can seem somewhat "back-to-school or exam oriented." Preparation also takes a considerable amount of the participant's out-of-class time. Having tried various alternative approaches, the faculty have concluded that requiring a final presentation is vital. Without a specific example to work through during the term, the participant experience could be educational and even entertaining, but the lessons only really stick when a participant works through a specific advocacy example with sufficient diligence and is prepared to deliver it in front of an audience, capture the audience's attention and goodwill, and defend the content.

There is a dearth of material readily available to support the PPTI's program content. Much of the material that does exist is shared informally among public policy advocates and teachers. There is certainly a need for additional case studies, reading material, video clips, tools, and guides to supplement the modest resources currently available.

Finally, now that 200 students have completed the PPTI course in Alberta, there are many who feel they would benefit from refresher courses and/or opportunities to reunite. Creating the forum for them to do so in a meaningful and cost-effective way is proving to be a challenge. To a certain extent, there is value in the network created among the participants during the program itself, but additional interaction afterwards would undoubtedly add more value.

Where to go from here?

The need for public policy development and advocacy is not going to diminish. In a recent article in this journal, Elizabeth Mulholland suggests several ways the nonprofit sector could improve its capacity to be more effective in influencing public policy, including:

> establish[ing] more policy and advocacy skills training programs for voluntary sector staff – frontline and management. Right now, a variety of volunteers and consultants offer *ad hoc* sessions on demand, but a more systematic approach could quickly raise the skill level across the sector. Basic skills training in policy and advocacy should be part of all nonprofit management programs, but we also need more programs like the Maytree Foundation's Public Policy Training Institute aimed at frontline staff with advocacy and policy responsibilities. Ideally, one of the key foundations active in the sector would lead an initiative to develop a top-notch curriculum and recruit delivery partners across the country, with an adapted online version for learners in remote areas. (2010, p. 144)

Is there potential for more philanthropic organizations to fund policy development schools such as that of the Max Bell PPTI? There appears to be. As noted above, in recent years the United Way of the Lower Mainland in British Columbia, with the generous support of an anonymous donor, has adapted the Max Bell Foundation's PPTI for the B.C. context and is now offering a similar program in that province, with a former premier leading the faculty.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg of possibilities. Are there opportunities for umbrella organizations to contribute to the public policy process in a more direct way? Could more governments proactively invite nonprofit organizations and service providers to play a larger role in the public policy process? Will others contribute to the necessary training? Is there scope to create an alumni network of public policy advocates? Can ideas and teachings be shared more broadly? There surely is opportunity. Only time will tell whether Canadian nonprofits and philanthropic organizations have the collective wisdom to take advantage of it.

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