

There's More to Policy Than Alignment

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Introduction and Overview¹

Governments across Canada downsized and restructured their public service institutions in the 1990s, and, against this backdrop, policy analysis units' capabilities were neglected or downsized as ministers and officials focused on reducing expenditures and introducing alternative service delivery arrangements. With government deficits being brought under control, however, governments have taken greater interest in policy, and many have delineated detailed policy agendas to guide their mandates, often informed by advisors from outside the public service. As well, governments often institute performance regimes to guide implementation of top policy priorities.

It is in this context that, after years of cuts, departments have begun rebuilding capacity or contracting for policy analysis and research. There has emerged greater awareness among ministers and officials that tackling many of the existing challenges, horizontal strategies are requires horizontal strategies. Complementing this new mentality is a burgeoning interest in evidence-based policy. The number of think tanks, university research centres, and consulting entities advising governments continues to expand. At the same time, the availability of policy analysis and research has never been greater, with online access to academic and professional journals, reports from other jurisdictions, and to the work of think tanks, universities, and small and large consulting firms alike.

However, several stresses have arisen. First, many policy analysts in public service institutions complain that there is less demand for what they consider to be genuine policy analysis. Second, many governments more actively seek to control the flow of information from officials to external stakeholders and audiences. Third, and perhaps surprisingly, ministers and deputy ministers often lament a lack of high-quality policy advice. Fourth, many non-governmental research organizations find it difficult to secure funds for longer-term policy research projects, particularly in more tightly controlled and elaborate procurement environments that allow for flexibility for only the smallest of projects. These dynamics, gaps, and tensions have been compounded by an increase in contracting out for policy advice, and the effects of the demographic rollover so clearly underway. This state of affairs is intriguing when juxtaposed against the promise of the Government of Canada's Policy Research Initiative of the late 1990s: to build and renew capacity inside the federal public service and to cultivate external linkages with interested stakeholders such as universities, think tanks, and the provinces.

¹ Evert Lindquist is Director and Professor of the School of Public Administration, University of Victoria. This discussion paper was commissioned by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to frame and stimulate dialogue among government executives and key stakeholders from outside government. It initially benefited from useful, interesting, and detailed comments from three anonymous reviewers, and was presented to a CPRN roundtable on "The Future of Policy Capacity Roundtable in Canada" in Toronto on December 1, 2008. The roundtable was a spirited and wide-ranging dialogue on how to build better capabilities and bridges inside and outside government, and more effective strategies for leveraging policy-relevant insights across the country. This paper has been updated to acknowledge more recent publications but could not possibly pursue all of the issues, and themes emerging from the roundtable (see CPRN 2009 for an overview).

This paper seeks to lay a foundation for a discussion and debate on whether Canada is realizing its potential for building policy capability and tapping into policy-relevant research. To begin, the paper explores two seeming paradoxes. The first revolves around my sense of quite different perspectives of policy-making in Canada: “bottom-up” and “outside-looking-in” (those held by policy analysts and observers) versus “top-down” and “forward-looking” (perceptions held by ministers and executives, or, perspectives which can be found in other jurisdictions). The second paradox is related. In many regards, Canada seems an exemplar, having made significant strides in building policy analysis and research capabilities, but many observers see these capabilities as thin, fraying, unsustainable, or unconnected.

With these paradoxes in mind, the paper then explores different ways to think about and frame the challenges associated with building and linking policy capabilities. It reviews concepts from the literature on policy-making, policy analysis, and information and organizational decision-making. To have productive discussions about the state of the linkages between policy analysis and research and decision-making, and to develop workable strategies to improve them, participants must have a better sense of how policy research and analysis as “information” typically relates to policy and decision-making processes in organizations, and of the conditions under which innovative work flourishes. To this end, I highlight the following concepts and observations:

- The linkages between policy research and analysis and policy decision-making are inherently loosely coupled and serendipitous, notwithstanding efforts to “align” the provision of policy advice.
- Policy-makers seek out policy analysis and research for diverse purposes, and do so under different decision circumstances (this is to be distinguished from different policy priorities), and thus their needs constantly evolve and are highly situational.
- Most policy-makers and top advisors seek information and experts in “exploitation” mode to deal with policy challenges; this is very different from an “exploration” posture that seeks out new insight, alternative expertise, and diverse perspectives.
- Much has been made of the contestable advice given by public service institutions (considering the availability of solid external expertise), but this pales in comparison to the other streams of information and noise that clutters policy-makers’ bandwidth.
- The growing interest in improving policy capacity stems from perceived needs for innovation, but innovation requires new, often unaligned strategic thinking and capabilities, which flies in the face of significant pressures for “alignment.”
- Innovation requires insight, sufficient capacity, and organizational “slack,” which suggests that public service institutions and broader networks might be too lean for grappling with the policy challenges at hand in a results-oriented environment.
- Networks tend to be overrated, their pitfalls overlooked. In addition to capacity issues, they can rapidly get captured or ossified as linkages to new perspectives. Public service institutions must therefore carefully engage and constantly broaden their networks.

These points suggest that a broader perspective is warranted on how policy analysis and research intersects with policy-making. Fostering more exploratory and unaligned research and analysis – with sufficient capacity, slack, and more open networks – should improve the more aligned and necessary exploitation repertoires.

The next section of the paper introduces several “topographical” frameworks that provide an overview of the roles and interconnections of different stakeholders involved in funding, brokering, generating, and using policy research and analysis. As these high-level frameworks cannot capture key dynamics and complexities, capability assessments and strategic directions are best done in specific policy domains.

The last part poses several questions to stimulate dialogue among public service, think tank, and university leaders. This paper is meant to provoke discussion of the issues rather define them. I hope that it, along with several other useful explorations and reflections,² leads to fruitful exchange on the current state of affairs, realistic exploration of strategic possibilities, and new directions for inquiry.

² Kevin Lynch, then Clerk of the Privy Council, Government of Canada, used the occasion of a conference organized by McGill University’s Centre for the Study of Canada on “Public Policy in Crisis? Understanding Policy Making in Canada” to reflect on the state and conduct of policy research and analysis in extenuating and time-constrained circumstances (Lynch, 2009). A scenario-building exercise undertaken for the Government of Canada’s Policy Research Initiative resulted in a thought-provoking paper on what might constitute dominant strategies for developing better capacity and repertoires with regard to eliciting high-quality policy research inside and outside the Canadian Public Service (Townsend and Kunimoto, 2009). Though focused on implications for the Canadian Public Service, this document could provide a basis for strategic planning by any institution seeking to position itself to make contributions over the next 10 to 20 years.

1. The Paradox of Policy Analysis: Alignment and Innovation

Academics often have the opportunity to exchange ideas with public service executives, senior managers, and front-line staff through research, for-credit teaching, and the design and delivery of professional development. Where policy analysis is concerned, I commonly hear two opposing messages. One is that policy analysis inside public service institutions has become impoverished, with a strong focus on “alignment” to government priorities, frustrating officials seeking to think more broadly and critically about policies, issues, and programs. Conversely, ministers and deputy ministers seek creative and out-of-the-box thinking, but express disappointment when they do not get the sort of advice they are looking for.

1.1 Analysts and Observers: Bottom-Up, Outside-Looking-In Perspectives

When one chats with policy managers and analysts, there is often a palpable sense of unease about the quality of policy analysis they are proffering. There is a sense that the size and staffing of policy shops are insufficient for the demands placed on them – an understandable view following the government restructuring of the 1990s. Policy units, like many other corporate services, were downsized; the primary focus of the restructuring was downsizing or reorienting programs, with policies to fit.

Following this upheaval of the early 1990s, the leaders of many political parties sought to develop, promulgate, and define policy agendas as a branding strategy. Then, as new governments, they attempted to build confidence with electorates by steadily checking off a list of undertakings. These developments created a top-down dynamic – one in which elected governments have been more likely to assert priorities and solutions to the public service – and has created a powerful expectation that policies and programs should be “aligned” with government intentions.

The focus on achieving results led to the adoption of performance regimes. Consequently, policy shops and analysts have devoted considerable time and energy to designing performance and reporting systems, providing input on service plans, adopting project management techniques, developing performance indicators, and monitoring alternative service delivery arrangements. Some jurisdictions have created sophisticated central tracking capabilities (Lindquist, 2006c). This focus on implementation, project management, and performance reporting has been compounded by internal and external audit regimes that are fixated on promised outputs and outcomes, with little tolerance for how programs should evolve in the face of new circumstances or the realization that programs, as designed, were not workable. A management track of this nature promotes “alignment” with announced policy directions, both with respect to policy analysis and programs. However, establishing and furthering performance-oriented reporting is *not* the same as good policy analysis, which questions assumptions about policy objectives and preferred solutions.

The consequences of the “performance” track can be seen from the outside, through the lenses of consultants and academics. Good analysis – in the sense of asking different questions, challenging premises, and offering “frank and fearless” advice – is often not demanded or easily carried out by in-house staff. I want to avoid the trite notion that this is due to excessive reliance on “PowerPoint” communication, or, more interestingly, insufficient use of data or rigorous statistical analysis, as advocates of evidence-based policy would argue. Rather, I would like to suggest that this is attributable, more likely, to an insufficient critical appraisal in the face of new incentives, leaner policy shops, and an institutionalized inability to work fulsomely through problems and potential solutions. (The latter involves developing practical and robust frameworks for understanding problems and potential policy destinations; looking for and thoroughly evaluating research, data and best practices; anticipating implementation challenges; and developing strategic alternatives.)

When such “real” policy analysis *is* demanded, the reflex is often to retain experienced policy consultants, or a handful of “go-to” people in the public service. Indeed, a crop of top-flight analysts left public services for these reasons, opting to work as consultants. Many consulting and academic observers fear that public service institutions have lost “rare” analytic talent and capabilities, and worry about the sustainability of relying on consultants for “on-demand” and high-level work (Lindquist and Desveaux, 2007).

Finally, many policy shops remain lean in comparison to the work they are expected to do, contributing to a frequent sense of demand outstripping capacity. They rely on consultants to deal with peak demands, and stories circulate about consultants doing the heavy lifting on strategic policy analysis and cabinet documents, although no policy assistant deputy minister would admit this happens. Coupled with an increase in the sources of external policy advice, the consultant situation has crossed the boundaries that guide government policy advisors – a common trend among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Boston, 1994; Halligan, 1996; Shergold, 2007) – putting internal policy capabilities at risk. These developments are worrisome, in that the component in jeopardy is so basic to the concept of governance. Even the proponents of a strong New Public Management vision of public sector governance presumed strong policy capabilities inside public service institutions.

In short, even for those long familiar with the hurly burly of the policy process and its “hurry-up or move-on-to-something-else” qualities, policy analysis in the early 21st century feels qualitatively different: analysis follows announcements, solutions are demanded by governments without considering other options, assumptions and premises are not to be questioned, consultations are more constrained, the time lines for dealing with huge problems are short, and the expertise required to grapple with and formulate positions on behalf of governments often rests outside the public service. It should come as no surprise that contemporary policy analysis seems impoverished in the new governance environment.

1.2 Ministers and Executives: Top-Down, Forward-Looking Perspectives

On several occasions, I have bumped into public service executives in airports and other locales. After felicitations, a candid discussion often follows about issues looming on their horizons rather than about their in-the-moment portfolio of challenges about which they will soon have to advise ministers. A common question posed to me is, “Why is it that more of you academics aren’t doing more work on ‘x’?” The fact is that while few public administration scholars may be working on “x,” usually there are many *other* scholars working in that area, perhaps without an acute policy or public management sensibility but with considerable substantive knowledge. This anecdote is important for two reasons: most public service executives are curious and forward-looking, and there is considerable untapped knowledge to help them sort through challenging issues.

Some observers might find this anecdote surprising since executive compensation packages include performance or “at-risk” pay linked to achieving targets or key deliverables desired by the first minister and their governments, including horizontal initiatives. Indeed, governments and ministers are performance-oriented and risk-averse, yet they demand new approaches to emerging challenges. This focus on realizing government commitments puts a premium on “aligning” policies and programs with government objectives within and across departments and ministries. Those charged with the task of finding policy solutions to problems – which are typically thorny and complex – must rely on instruments, authorities, and capabilities dispersed across departments or ministries and levels of governments. Moreover, deputy ministers have a responsibility to prepare their organizations to address and advise on medium-term and longer-term policy and operational challenges, including preparing for the possible decisions and mandates of the next government. In short, most deputy ministers are functioning in over-determined situations with new priorities steadily emerging in fluid, rapidly changing, and uncertain environments, yet they must implement and monitor programs associated with previously adopted policies.

It is against this backdrop that deputy ministers can be perplexed about the advice they receive not only from their officials, but also from think tanks and academics. Often simple questions cannot be answered – usually those related to horizontal issues or the efficacy of existing policies and programs. Most deputy ministers want good advice and challenging thinking; they have ready access to good inside-the-box thinking but need value-added strategic insight. They see tremendous opportunities for enterprising staff and external experts to address emerging challenges, yet they tend to receive advice that is not challenging, sufficiently contextualized, or strategic. They would be surprised to learn from staff that “outside-the-box” thinking is not valued, perhaps not realizing the extent to which interactions with staff focus on transactions and aligned issues. Moreover, many deputy ministers believe that governments have made big investments and contributions to universities, granting councils, and other research organizations, but surmise that most academics are pre-occupied with research and publishing in journals that public servants are unlikely to read. Disappointed or hardened, and certainly busy, executives learn to rely on insight from a handful of trusted minds, a handful of officials, consultants, or academics.

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Juxtaposing these “bottom-up, inside-looking-out” and “top-down, forward-looking” perspectives may seem overdrawn. No doubt they are expressed in varying degrees ranging from minor tension to outright disjuncture. At the very least, the emphasis differs on achieving alignment and encouraging innovative thinking across organizations and over time. Stepping back, it is intriguing that these tensions exist at all given the more recent attention that has been given to strengthening policy capability in Canada. We now turn to this second apparent paradox.

2. Another Paradox: Reinvestment in Policy Research or Investment at Risk?

“There has never been more policy-related information available to policy-makers” is a common refrain of observers of government. Canada – despite the significant restructuring of public service institutions during the 1990s – has been seen as an exemplar for renewing interest and reinvesting in policy-related research and analysis inside and outside government. But one can also look over the same policy landscape and perceive difficulties with the scale, matching, leveraging, and use of external policy-relevant research and analysis that governments tap into. Moreover, what appear to be more open network approaches for generating and sharing information may be, in fact, relatively closed and perhaps not sustainable over the longer term.

This section consists of two parts: the first sets out the case that a significantly improved policy research and analysis capability has emerged in Canada since the 1990s, while the second part presents the counter-arguments, suggesting that despite a resurgence of interest in policy, complete with contestability and brokering, it may amount to little more than a surfeit of thin policy research capabilities.

2.1 Canada: Exemplar for Reinvesting in Policy-Relevant Research?

The policy landscape with respect to analytic capabilities inside and outside government institutions has been transformed since the 1970s. There has been a great expansion in the capabilities outside government dedicated to providing policy-related services and insight, including think tanks, universities, and consulting firms (Pross, 1986; Halligan, 1996; Lindquist and Desveaux, 1998). However, following the deficit reduction and public sector downsizing initiatives in the early 1990s, concern emerged about the state of policy capability in the federal and other governments in Canada. Policy units, along with other corporate functions, were either targeted for closure in order to reduce overhead (particularly when departments were consolidated) or devalued since governments and deputy ministers focused on alternative service delivery and meeting downsizing and restructuring milestones. At that time, governments were not concerned with initiating new policies and programs. This approach was not unique to Canada: the state and direction of the policy function inside governments emerged as part of a broader concern in many OECD countries as to how they should relate to the emergence of external capabilities (Boston, 1994; Government of Canada, 1996; Rasmussen, 1998).

Out of the crucible of downsizing in Canada came renewed interest in the health of the policy function. At the national level, the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) was announced in 1997, arising from several deputy minister task forces appointed in 1996 after the Program Review (Bakvis, 2000; Voyer, 2007). The PRI was also seen as a way to inform transition planning, particularly as the government began to shift its focus away from downsizing and restructuring to “post-deficit” challenges. This led to modest institutionalization with the Policy Research Secretariat and other projects, such as the Trends Project in collaboration with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The PRI had an early client in the planning function in Privy Council Office (PCO) (Lindquist, 2001; Voyer 2007). Although there was a consensus that many departments and agencies had allowed policy capabilities to wither, others had well-established research programs and visiting academic chairs, and cultivated external networks of expertise. Other departments developed external linkages to rationalize resources to meet Program Review targets. It bears noting that, with sustained leadership, Statistics Canada, along with many provincial counterparts, enhanced its reputation as one of the world’s best data-collection and analysis agencies.

Following the Program Review, the federal government also “invested” in promoting world-class research at universities by increasing support for the federal granting councils and by directly establishing research chairs at universities. The three granting councils – the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), National Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and Medical Research Council – have long been important elements of the country’s policy research capabilities. However, a greater premium has recently been placed on sponsoring research that addresses governance challenges. Not only was the Medical Research Council re-profiled as the Canadian Institutes for Health Research in 2000, but SSHRC developed thematic programs in response to government priorities and with assorted funding partners inside and outside government. Programs included the Trends Project, Major Collaborative Research Initiatives (MCRIs), Strategic Knowledge Clusters, Community-University Research Alliances, and the Metropolis Project (Voyer, 2007). The latter involved several federal departments supporting policy research on immigration and diversity and disseminating that work widely to researchers and policy-makers.

The granting councils now encourage scholars to budget for communications in grant proposals and devote more attention to this function at the corporate level – SSHRC, for example, calls itself the “knowledge council” (SSHRC, 2005). In 2000, the Canadian government announced that it would establish 2,000 Canada research chairs in universities across the country by 2008 to retain and attract to research talent, many of them ostensibly interdisciplinary and in policy-relevant areas.³ In Ontario, the Ontario Council of Universities established several Ontario research chairs in public policy. These initiatives, combined with an increase in private and corporate philanthropy, led to Canada becoming an exemplar for supporting university research.

³ See www.chairs.gc.ca/web/home_e.asp.

In addition, there has been a parallel profusion of applied research centres and policy-oriented capabilities in universities across Canada. These have deepened in three directions.

- There are more research centres that foster cross-disciplinary or applied research, hold significant grants and contracts, and typically focus on non-teaching activities such as conferences and liaising with stakeholders and interested publics. Many of these centres have strong aspirations of policy relevance and assiduously cultivate linkages with government, the private sector, and the media.
- There has been a profusion of schools of public policy and public administration with interests in policy analysis and research. Newer programs have emerged at Simon Fraser, Toronto, Ottawa, York, Regina/Saskatchewan, and Ryerson, joining the established ones at Carleton, Dalhousie, Manitoba/Winnipeg, Queen's, and Victoria. In varying degrees, these programs and schools provide focal points at universities for policy research, although law, business, and other professional programs also play similar roles, and so do many professors as consultants.⁴
- Universities have grown more interested and adept at fostering relations with government and communities, promoting and sharing intellectual property, and identifying and communicating research and relevance to stakeholders. For example, York University and the University of Victoria obtained a SSHRC grant to create knowledge mobilization units to foster the exchange of information between researchers and potential users in government, industry, and community sectors.⁵ Other universities have made similar connections through government relations offices and other communications initiatives.

In short, Canadian universities have improved their capabilities to produce, link, and communicate policy research to government and others in policy-making.

The number of policy think tanks has increased dramatically over the last three decades in Canada (Lindquist, 2004), working in every conceivable policy domain and reflecting a range of methodological and normative approaches. Some specialize in certain policy areas, while others have broader mandates. Think tanks are adept at developing a public presence and, in varying degrees, provide linkages between researchers, supporters, and the various publics they seek to engage. There is a regular meeting of the heads of think tanks to discuss common challenges and occasionally foster collaboration. From time to time, governments call on think tanks to assist with consultations with citizens and groups.

The consulting sector has also grown substantially over the years to serve federal, provincial, local, and First Nations governments. It has developed considerable expertise in policy research and analysis, citizen and stakeholder engagement, and other related public management disciplines (Perl and White, 2002; Speers, 2007). The sector includes larger management consulting and lobbying firms, boutique firms specializing in policy analysis and research, and small entities such as individual or pairs of consultants, including many academics. Providing policy-related services can be very competitive, but often the most highly regarded talent is in great demand. Indeed, one concern is that public service departments and ministries have come to rely too heavily on consultants, particularly for key strategic deliverables.

⁴ The Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration has been strengthened, to foster relationships with federal government central agencies and departments.

⁵ See www.researchimpact.ca/home/index.html.

Despite the restructuring of the early 1990s, Canada has arguably emerged with a robust distribution of policy research capabilities inside and outside government. These developments must be considered alongside the rapidly accelerating access to journals, databases, and studies via the Web; arguably, there has never been more policy-relevant information available to policy-makers, analysts, and researchers. Universities continue to function as important sources of expertise, supplying analysts and researchers for academic and research positions at universities, and for positions in the “third community” – the many organizations inside and outside government providing policy-relevant data, research, and analysis to decision-makers (Lindquist, 1990). Once away from universities, analysts and researchers acquire and deepen applied skills and knowledge in different organizational contexts. The loop is completed when scholars and universities are contracted by these organizations to provide advice, analysis, and research, thereby informing their own research agendas. At the highest level, then, it appears that Canada has a rich, diverse, and interlocking set of policy capabilities.

2.2 A Different View: The Thinness of Distributed Policy Expertise

At one level, the progress that Canada has made since the 1970s with respect to building policy capability is impressive; it has been further bolstered by more recent Canadian government initiatives dedicated to building capability inside and outside government. But we must step back and consider other vantage points. First, compared to those in the United States, our capabilities are not nearly as substantial or deep. This is in part due to scale, to the role played by American private and corporate philanthropy in sponsoring policy research, and to a more permeable Congressional governance system that increases demand for policy analysis and research outside the executive branch. Second, Canada’s policy capabilities may not be as robust as they appear.

As for philanthropy, few, if any, Canadian foundations make significant financial contributions to universities for applied policy research. While there has been a greater willingness to fund named programs, endowed chairs, and buildings, there have been relatively few examples of significant funding for sustained research programs at universities and think tanks.⁶ Unlike their US counterparts, most Canadian foundations do not believe they have a mandate to support research beyond the pilot phase (Lindquist, 2006b). Think tanks therefore rely heavily on relatively small contributions from foundations, corporate and member supporters, and governments, while university researchers rely heavily on granting-council funding, particularly for projects-of-scale.

The extent of government commitment to policy research also seems at risk on a variety of fronts. For example, some government and external think tanks lost multi-year funding under the Harper government, including the Law Reform Commission of Canada and Canadian Policy Research Networks.

⁶ A clear exception is the donation of Jim Balsillie to support the Centre for International Governance Innovation and, more recently, a \$50 million contribution for a school of international affairs, at the Universities of Waterloo and Wilfred Laurier. Other exceptions include the Donner and Mannix Foundations (Lindquist, 2006b).

More generally, the biggest shift in commitment since the early 1990s has been the reluctance of governments to provide sustaining or operating funding to most organizations as a point of principle. Instead, governments much prefer to provide project funding to think tanks and research centres, treating them more like consultants. Some think tanks are sufficiently large that they have the infrastructure to support a rolling portfolio of projects, but think tank leaders will tell you that this requires a much greater focus on fundraising at the expense of overseeing research activities. The costs of applying for and administering grants and contracts from government by university, think tank, and other researcher organizations have increased significantly as a result of close monitoring of federal grants and contributions (Government of Canada, 2006). Simply put, with greater overhead expenses, there is less money to undertake research.

Another example of limited commitment involves the Canada Research Chair program. Although it was renewed at previous funding levels, universities were on the hook to absorb the costs of retaining the top international researchers they were encouraged to attract a few years earlier. As well, over time, the federal government's Policy Research Initiative steadily drifted away from the ambit of the Privy Council Office and the Planning and Consultation Branch, losing much of its funding, secretariat support, and flagship publications. It eventually landed under the auspices of Human Resources and Social Development, where it has a narrower focus on evidence-based policy research on certain social policy themes.

The early interest in exploring emerging governance challenges across the sweep of government and fostering better linkages with external research organizations such as think tanks and universities seems to wane. For example, the Trends Project came and went, along with Izuma. As a result, there was a lapse in the wide-ranging scanning and engagement initiatives with policy analysts and researchers of the kind that animated the original initiative (Voyer, 2007). Indeed, there has been a renewal of interest in re-establishing internal horizontal capabilities and more systematic scanning and roundtables, and a reconnection to the planning capabilities of the priorities and planning function of the Privy Council Office (Canada, Policy Research Initiative, 2009).⁷ But the ebb in the early 2000s shows that such arrangements are precarious even within the upper echelons of the public service and that they require active encouragement and support to thrive and inform.⁸

The proliferation of think tanks and policy and public administration schools does not translate into large-scale research in many policy fields – although more funding-of-scale has gravitated in the areas of health, climate change, and security – nor does it imply more policy research or higher quality research.

⁷ The PRI is now overseen by a committee of deputy ministers, including the Deputy Secretary, Plans and Communications, and chairs of the three deputy minister-level policy committees. Scanning now proceeds under the auspices of the Canada 150 initiative. Research and exploratory events are now co-sponsored with several Canadian research organizations and US think tanks. (See Canada, Policy Research Initiative, 2009.)

⁸ An interesting question to explore is whether ministers see such capabilities as an asset; top public servants, on the other hand, have a vested interest in ensuring that they have first-rate intelligence to inform the advice they provide to the government of the day.

One question, too difficult to be answered in aggregate, is whether such funding has the potential to effect breakthrough research in specific areas or interdisciplinary work that provides better insight. Many think tank leaders, even well known ones, acknowledge that they struggle to survive or maintain activities at current thresholds. Moreover, Rich (2004) argues that the very ubiquity of think tanks – many with overt ideological orientations – and a host of pundits on news and talk shows have corroded respect for policy think tanks. The public often cannot distinguish between think tanks and scholars speaking only from values and shallow knowledge on a topic from those who have undertaken systematic research, regardless of their value orientations.⁹ Think tank staff and associated researchers may be able to contextualize, comment, and refine thinking on issues and quandaries (often in highly predictable ways) but produce few studies that shift the terms of the debate or develop breakthrough perspectives. Supporting such work requires sufficient, and probably significant, funding.

Another concern stems from the heavy reliance of many governments on consultants and external advisory networks (including think tanks, university research centres, and scholars) to handle spikes in workload, to advise on sensitive cases, and to provide alternative perspectives. There is no doubting the competence of many consultants: most are former government officials with considerable experience, specialized knowledge, and extensive networks inside and outside government. And governments have certainly revealed their willingness to pay handsomely for accessing expertise formerly housed inside the public service.¹⁰ However, is this regime for supporting high-end policy work sustainable?

Looking forward 10 or 20 years, it is not clear that public service institutions can continue to supply seasoned expertise for the consulting sector at current levels *and* retain sufficient “rare talent” to enable the government to effectively tap into and benefit from external expertise. Moreover, external advisory networks tend to be small and relatively closed, suggesting that there may be less canvassing of perspectives and expertise at universities, think tanks, and other organizations than rhetoric and the possibilities suggest.

In short, the proliferation of external policy research and the wonders of modern technology may not have led to more capacity or to a broader range of research and analysis.

Despite the surfeit of research and analysis that gets to the doors of ministers, executives, and their advisors, important barriers and hurdles remain. First, even the most relevant and rigorous research may not focus on, or have direct implications for, the levers controlled by policy-makers. Second, much good analysis sheds new light on problems and previous approaches, and may even suggest new directions to consider, but it falls short by not working through specific policy designs, thorough implementation analysis, and organization and capacity issues. Third, many policy shops in our public service institutions are lean and expected to firefight on issues-of-the-day and respond to the latest whims of ministers and central agencies. All of these

⁹ These dynamics have not precluded several observers from arguing for a new class of think tanks in Canada – think tanks affiliated with political parties – based on the German party foundation model (see, for example, Baier and Bakvis, 2001; Studin, 2008). Their arguments tend to focus on providing a better brokerage function to inform developing party platforms and countervailing advice from the public service.

¹⁰ However, the business case for doing so depends heavily on the nature and flow of policy work in departments and ministries (Lindquist and Desveaux, 2007).

factors – along with incessant BlackBerry communication, abiding concern about alignment and implementing previous initiatives, and meeting the panoply of reporting and audit demands in the name of accountability – contribute to the considerable erosion of time available for generating policy research and analysis, or carefully managing or digesting the work from outsiders.

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Our second paradox involves the proliferation and abundance of policy expertise outside government. However, we see limitations, risks, and barriers in the policy-advising system. This, of course, is not unrelated to the first paradox we broached: public servants believe there are increasingly strong expectations to “align” the advice they dispense to top executives and ministers and, conversely, the latter feel there is insufficient creativity and research behind the advice they are given, and that advisors do not anticipate their needs.

Perhaps the problem is not the politicization and contestability of policy research and analysis, nor a lack of social science and other research of potential relevance to policy deliberations. Indeed, perhaps collectively, governments, universities, think tanks, consultants, and other sources are better at producing potentially relevant research and analysis than we think, and yet simultaneously there could be the thinness we have observed. Like the first paradox, perhaps there are elements of truth in both lines of argument, and the empirical validity of one argument over the other depends on the specific vantage points of observers and the particular and immediate contexts in which they work (e.g. at different levels of governance, in qualitatively different substantive policy domains). There could be wide variation in capacity and perspectives, for example, as one moves across provinces and territories in Canada.

These perspectives also open up the possibility that the problem may not be a matter of insufficient expertise, but rather how we conceive of the policy-making, distributed capabilities, and their links with university research, whether policy-focused or curiosity-driven. This suggests that a challenge stems from how we think about the ways in which policy-relevant research achieves influence, its links to policy analysis, the conditions under which analysis is demanded and sought, and the expectations of actors involved in decision-making and advising processes. With better lenses, we might more shrewdly nurture and tap into the “market” for policy-relevant research, and make investments and assessments with more realistic expectations.¹¹

¹¹ Another perspective is that there might be inadequate focus on existing policy capabilities. The implication is that performance-management logic should be applied to policy analysis and research activities; more research entities are expected to demonstrate “results,” “impact,” “success,” which often translates into policy relevance and direct influence. So, for example, not only have the granting councils been under pressure to demonstrate their “relevance” to government (hence SSHRC’s Knowledge Council concept). Entities like IDRC have explored the policy relevance of its own research over the years.

3. Perspectives to Frame and Animate Strategic Dialogue

Even when sophisticated producers and consumers of policy analysis and research discuss its availability, quality, and relevance, they often rely on concepts and metaphors that limit definition of the problem and the search for workable solutions. For example, it is common to depict “research-into-policy” issues as if there were a spot or on-demand market, or that research should be “ready-to-go” for specific policy decisions. The former presumes a well-functioning market without considering the relationships and capacities necessary to achieve such perfection; the latter hearkens to the “engineering” model of research use – pursuing research only under certain conditions (e.g. well-specified needs for input, routines, a good match between decisions and available information). Such limited perspectives do not capture the complexity and nuances of policy-making, nor how policy research and analysis might achieve influence in those contexts.

An extensive literature on research and information utilization by organizations and governments has developed over three decades. There is not the space here to review it (but see Nutley et al., 2007; Landry et al., 2001, 2003; Carden, 2009), but a few themes and concepts are drawn out below to facilitate discussion. Some may be surprised at the use of terms like “loose-coupling,” “garbage-can decision-making,” “gossip,” and “organizational slack,” but these ideas are staples of the literature on organizational dynamics and on knowledge utilization, which capture the realities of policy processes. They provide a bridge to more encompassing institutional frameworks discussed later in this paper.

Loose-coupling and serendipity.

Policy research is rarely tightly connected to policy decisions. To a lesser extent, the same could be said for policy analysis. There may be instances when research or analytic findings or insight drives decision, or when policy-makers seek and find relevant work – using it to inform, frame, or justify decisions. However, research and analysis typically have influence indirectly and over much longer time periods through “enlightenment” processes, shaping the language, understandings, and sensibilities of actors (Weiss, 1977, 1980, 1983). This suggests that much research and analysis may be commissioned well before it is used and that, in some instances, research is undertaken without intention of policy influence.

The well-known garbage-can model of policy-making and organizational decision-making (Kingdon, 1986; Cohen and March, 1972) acknowledges the importance of serendipity, the ongoing advocacy and debate over problems and solutions among experts before ideas are taken up by policy-makers, and the critical role of policy entrepreneurs who see opportunities to inject ideas with currency into decision arenas as open “windows.” In short, the progenitors of key ideas may not be those who achieve influence – this is often done by others and typically with a time lag. Finally, astute observers have noted the continuous overproduction and overconsumption of information and advice by organizations. Most is not decision-specific or cannot be said to influence decisions. Rather, it is often shared for no direct and immediate purpose, and has been characterized as “gossip.” Such unaligned information is functional over the longer term because those involved in such activity further develop relationships, keep channels of communications open, signal to others that information is valued, and continually broaden their awareness of needs, arguments, and experts that can be tapped at other times (Feldman and

March, 1981; March and Sevon, 1988). All of this suggests that policy inquiry and decision-making are best understood as *loosely coupled* to each other (Orton and Weick, 1990).

Shifting needs of policy-makers.

We tend to think that the value of policy analysis and research derives from how it informs decisions. However, like the engineering model of information utilization, this presumes a certain role and fit for analysis and research. As noted above, information can be used for and to influence decision-making in myriad ways, and for many purposes. Two perspectives shed light on these purposes. First, Mayer et al. (2004) suggests that policy analysis can have very different orientations: “design and recommend,” “advise strategically,” “mediate,” “democratize,” “clarify values and arguments,” and “research and analyze.” While Mayer et al. sought to identify different styles and traditions in policy analysis, we note that the reasons policy-makers seek out analysis shifts from moment to moment and issue to issue, making it difficult to anticipate and calibrate research and even analysis for their use. Second, the extent to which a policy regime and the associated community of actors is in routine, incremental, or fundamental decision mode affects the extent to which policy-makers and key interests are open to research, analysis, and data (Lindquist, 1988). The more a policy regime is under challenge or in crisis (see Lynch, 2009), the more likely the “sub-government” policy-makers (government, lead departments, influential external groups and experts, and perhaps other governments) will actively seek out analysis and research, particularly from the attentive observers (think tanks, interest groups, associations, etc.), with alternative perspectives (Pross, 1986; Sabatier, 1987; Lindquist, 1992). In short, the needs of policy-makers for policy analysis and research constantly evolve and are highly situational.

Exploration versus exploitation.

While there are many potentially different linkages between decision-making and policy analysis and research, March (1991) provides a higher-level, but very pertinent, distinction about the associated postures. On the one hand, he essentially takes the notion of “information *for* decision” and reverses it to ask, how do decision-makers exploit information? This does not presume that information is decision-ready, but rather suggests that the focus of decision-makers and advisors is often on what needs to be harvested, harnessed, or worked into shape. It presumes a well-defined problem or need, an appreciation of the insight required, and where the “right” experts can be identified and mobilized to address a problem and build a solution.

On the other hand, March argues that an equally important mode is “exploration.” This involves decision-makers and advisors searching for insight on thorny and emerging problems that require illumination and multiple perspectives in order to better define them, to ascertain their character, nuances, scope, and boundaries, and to identify gaps. This is similar to mixed-scanning information-seeking modes anticipating or in the wake of fundamental decisions (Etzioni, 1967; Lindquist, 1988). In today’s context, this mode implies seeking out new kinds of expertise and networks inside and outside public service institutions. March suggests that exploration is relatively undervalued compared with exploitation. This distinction is consistent with loose-coupling and, as discussed later, has profound implications for how governments should approach fostering policy-relevant research and analysis.

Beyond contestability in analysis.

Many have observed the increasing contestability of advice and research from bureaucratic policy shops to ministers and governments from individuals and organizations outside public service institutions. However, what is often not fully appreciated is the extent to which “internal” information crowds out such advice and research. I am not referring to the competing analyses and research from other departments and agencies, but rather to the broader flows of information and noise that function as oxygen to ministers and executives. They can dilute the impact of potentially relevant internal and external analysis and research, and distract policy-makers. Beyond incessant BlackBerry chatter, competing information includes program monitoring reports, customer service indicators, media monitoring, polling of citizens, environmental scans, federal/provincial/territorial reports and negotiations, international reporting, performance reports, evaluation reports, internal and external audit reports, financial and budgetary reporting, and risk assessments (Lindquist, 2006a).

It also includes the regular reporting “down” from meetings of cabinet, central agencies, and departmental executives, and the quick responses inevitably required of officials on action items. This dynamic may be obvious and unavoidable but important to acknowledge, particularly if the overarching goal is to secure larger portions of available informational bandwidth to ministers and executives in order to inject new insight and perspectives into policy deliberations. Given the dramatic initiatives to expand performance reporting and audit ostensibly to increase accountability, quick responses may be an uphill battle. Potentially, this situation also raises important questions about whether good work ought to be commissioned internally or externally, and whether either path can better secure necessary bandwidth of ministers and officials.

Non-alignment and creativity.

Bureaucracy, by design, resists innovation. It has long been understood that innovation in private and public sector organizations often comes about by creating new or “off-line” capacity to develop and apply new perspectives or expertise (Wilson, 1989; Desveaux, 1995; Albury, 2005). The same holds for much good policy analysis and research, which asks different questions, critically appraises the performance of existing policies and programs, or looks for different solutions. In this sense, an important function of such policy analysis and research is to recognize and anticipate new or emerging challenges; by intent and definition, it should *not* align with prevailing policies and programs.¹² Paradoxically, the focus of governments on demonstrating results and implementing policies as announced lessens the scope for policy-makers to consume new, challenging analysis and research – a characteristic of routine and incremental decision regimes.

¹² During the CPRN roundtable on the future of policy capacity, one participant asserted that I was arguing only for unaligned and explorative policy analysis and research. Not so. While such activity is essential, it can and should co-exist with decision-focused analysis and research in “exploitation” mode. Exploitation and exploration are two distinct and essential modes of engagement that affect not only what research and analysis gets commissioned, but also what expectations get attached to such, and how networks should be construed, animated, and managed.

In such circumstances, generating analysis and research requires supporting internal and external “off-line” capability not vested in the routines of public service organizations. This approach fosters encouraging genuine strategic thinking (looking forward to the next government and beyond), recognizing and appraising bottom-up innovation and emergent strategy, and setting aside sufficient time for leaders, managers, and analysts to step outside of fast-paced operating environments to digest such information and to engage in genuine strategic thinking (Mintzberg, 1994).

The focus on results and the crowding out of non-aligned activity will not disappear. Nor will resistance to alternative ways of looking at policies and programs. Consequently, policy advising and research will proceed under these conditions for the foreseeable future.

The importance of capacity and “slack.”

One way to foster innovation, adaptation, and new perspectives is through “organizational slack” (Cyert and March, 1963; Cheng and Kesner, 1997). The argument for “slack” flies in the face of the directions that ministers and executives have taken public sector bureaucracies over the last decade. “Leanness” has been touted as contributing to increased efficiency, productivity, and “alignment.” Further, “spinning out” service delivery and some policy functions would increase the focus and competence with providers working under new incentives. In this view, if internal capacity was lost, it could be replaced with distributed capacity in networks (think tanks, consultants, universities, firms, nonprofit and voluntary organizations, etc.).

While leanness may have arrived in the face of ever-increasing demands on public service institutions, it does not mean that requisite capacities have been supported outside public service institutions, nor that officials inside have the time to perform “inside” vertical duties *and* to properly manage contracts and partnerships, *and* cultivate networks, particularly for non-aligned purposes.

It is true that innovation and a search for new approaches to policy and service delivery can be stimulated by threat of (or real) expenditure reductions, but unless “magic-bullet” technology is waiting in the wings, the short- and long-term costs of change can be significant. As sometimes happens, change is mandated yet occurs without proper forethought, likely due to aggressive timelines and a lack of resources and capacity. This puts the quality and reliability of services at risk. Without question, true innovation comes only when the policy, program, or technology platform has been stabilized and supported properly.

Are networks a panacea?

Networks have come to be viewed as an important alternative to hierarchies and markets for mobilizing expertise and effort, some in pursuit of service delivery and others in pursuit of innovation (Powell, 1990; Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004). Unless networks are closed and stable, and designed or tapped into for specific purposes, they should be constantly evolving. Moreover, from the vantage point of seeking insight for policy advising, as the issues and problems in question take on different character, so too should the associated networks.

Networks at their purest (and presumably their best) are non-hierarchical and fluid in the sense of pursuing new information and opportunities, but this does not mean that agency and self-interest are not at play (Lindquist, 1998). Properly engaged, networks are best suited for exploration and identifying the best experts for exploitation. With this in mind, relying on and institutionalizing a particular network can lead to ossification and capture (White, 1992). An ongoing challenge for government is to resist using policy networks solely for “exploitation” in a policy domain, and to resist the tendency towards institutionalization, scanning and expanding networks (i.e. discover new expertise or cognate networks) only as needs arise. Networks function best with repeated interactions over time, permitting shared expectations (even trust) and tacit knowledge to develop. However, networks do not magically create capacity. They can serve to liberate, lever, or mobilize existing capacities to pursue new directions in different ways.¹³

Each perspective reviewed above challenges, in different ways, stated and unstated presumptions that government decisions, policy analysis and research are (and should be) tightly coupled and aligned. Together, they suggest that policy analysis and research can be seen as informational prospecting and inherently risky investments, potentially yielding insight in the future, and often building on other investments made months, years, and sometimes decades earlier. They suggest that rather than focusing only on perfecting “spot-markets” and fostering more work for exploitation, forward-looking policy-makers and top officials should also find ways to increase scanning, broaden networks, generate or protect organization slack, and create requisite capacity to address emerging policy challenges *in parallel* with more “aligned” advice and research in support of current and emerging decisions. The next section explores how these ideas link to more complex renderings of the institutional environments of policy-making.

¹³ Section 5, “Conclusion: Some Suggestions to Consider (and Debate)” below considers the potential for specific partnerships to build capacity as well as limitations.

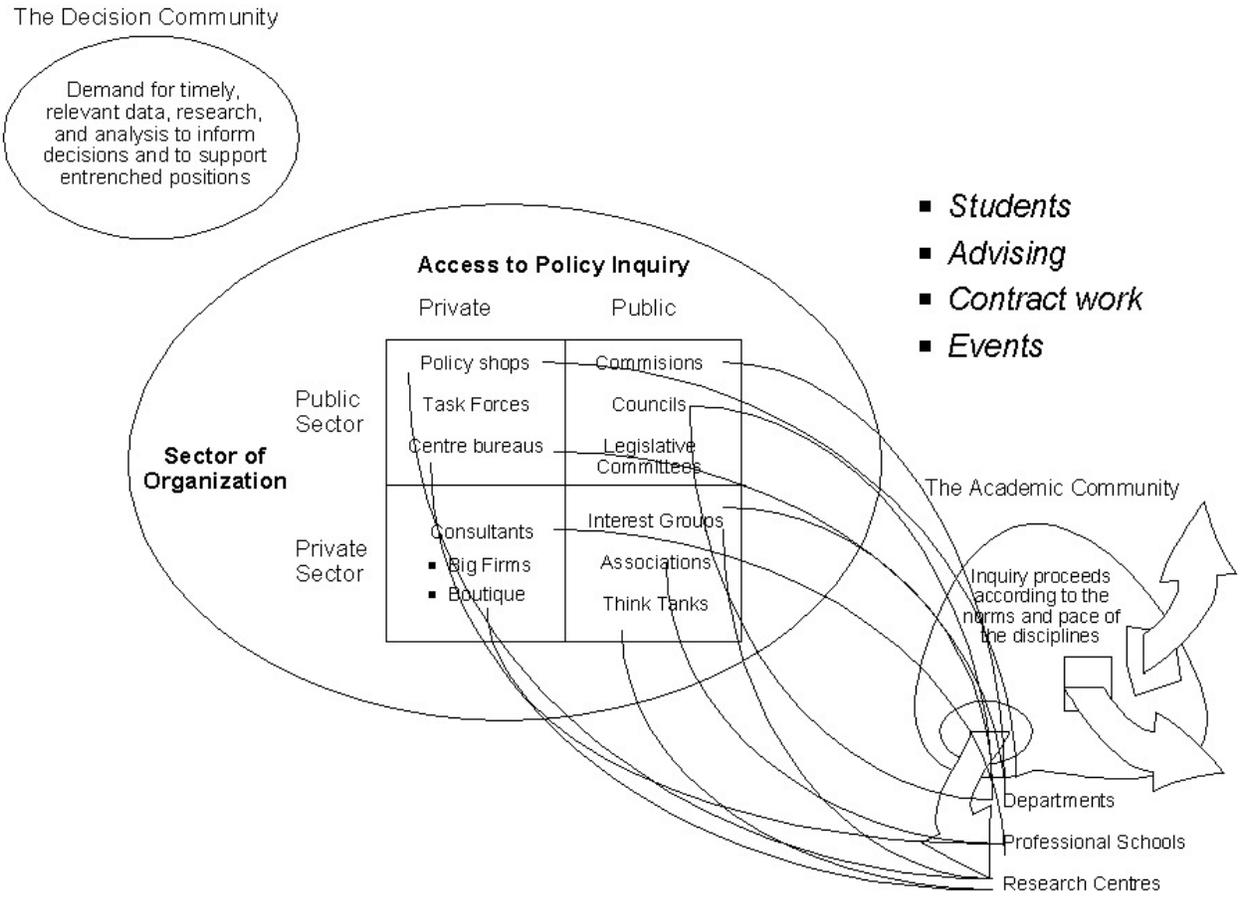
4. Capturing the Policy Research Topography: Some Frameworks to Consider

Section 3 introduced ideas that capture, in some measure, the pathways and limits of how policy analysis and research can inform decision-making. This section seeks to join up those concepts with renderings of the distributed capabilities and institutional complexity discussed in sections 1 and 2 in order to stimulate debate on the smartest ways to foster linkages between decision-makers, policy analysts, and researchers.

There have been many efforts to capture how the research-into-policy (and the reverse) process works (Nutley et al., 2007). Here, we briefly review three such frameworks in the form of diagrams, which build on the work of many other authors. None of the diagrams fully capture all aspects or issues discussed thus far in this paper, but they do provide useful points of departure for debate and dialogue.

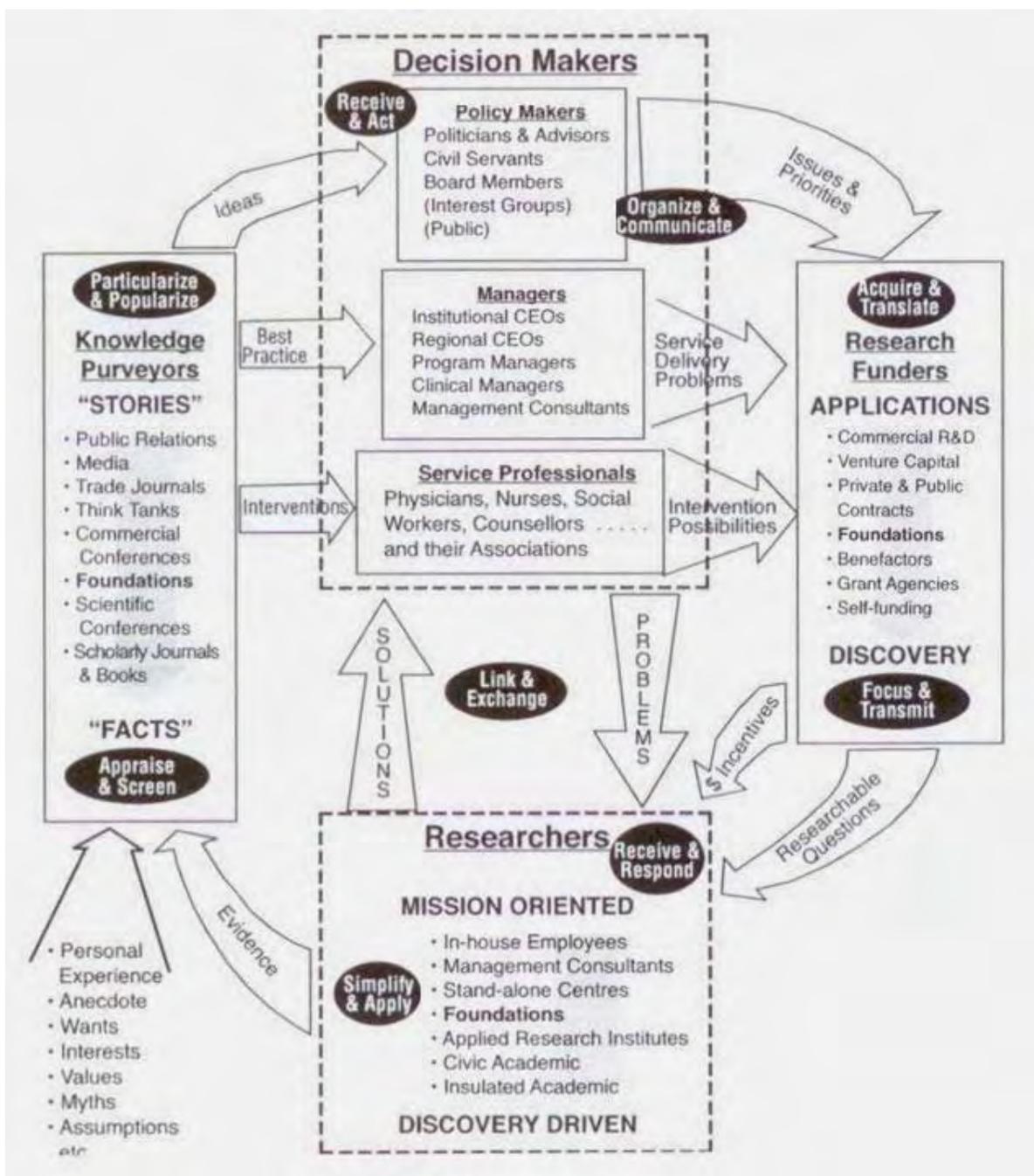
- Figure 1 from Lindquist (2000) shows: (a) the multiplicity of actors involved in providing policy advice and knowledge to policy-makers; (b) the direct and indirect role of universities in training future analysts and policy-makers distributed across any policy community; and (c) direct contributions by scholars contributing to think tanks, commissions of inquiry, expert panels, boards, legislative committees, and associations, and as consultants. Although the diagram shows the connections from universities to other institutional actors, often over long periods of time, the connection is only a “supply” perspective. The processes of funding, brokering, and digesting policy research and analysis are not addressed. Moreover, the diagram depicts only a partial perspective on supply because “mature” policy researchers and analysts typically have formative experiences and build knowledge in subsequent organizational contexts.
- Figure 2 provides a roll-up of diagrams from an important Canadian Health Services Foundation for Research (2000) study. Its focus was on fostering health-related research, hence the emphasis on venture and commercial investments for pharmaceuticals, technological, and other medicine-related innovations. This framework more directly addresses the funding and brokering aspects of policy communities. It identifies four different clusters of actors: funders, researchers, knowledge purveyors, and decision-makers. It clearly shows the diversity of actors in each category and identifies the roles (see the dark ovals) and contributions (in terms of information and resources) of the actors in each cluster to actors in the other clusters (see the big arrows).
- Figure 3, derived from Canadian Policy Research Networks (2007), is similar to Figure 2 but uses different labels to capture crucial roles: investors, producers, brokers, and users of research. This figure provides a high-level view of multiple-feedback loops but acknowledges that knowledge producers are not likely to be engaged on strategic priorities. It also provides more detail than Figure 2 and arrays the “internal” and “external” inputs into each phase of the “investment-producer-broker-user” chain, showing that government agencies can either have considerable in-house capacity in each phase or shape the quality of policy work, or both. Finally, it illustrates the connections between investors, producers, brokers, and users, and identifies specific mechanisms for fostering the connections and linkages. Figure 3 suggests that funded research often might not have influence for some time, if any.

Figure 1. Academic Influence Pervasive and Subtle in the Third Community



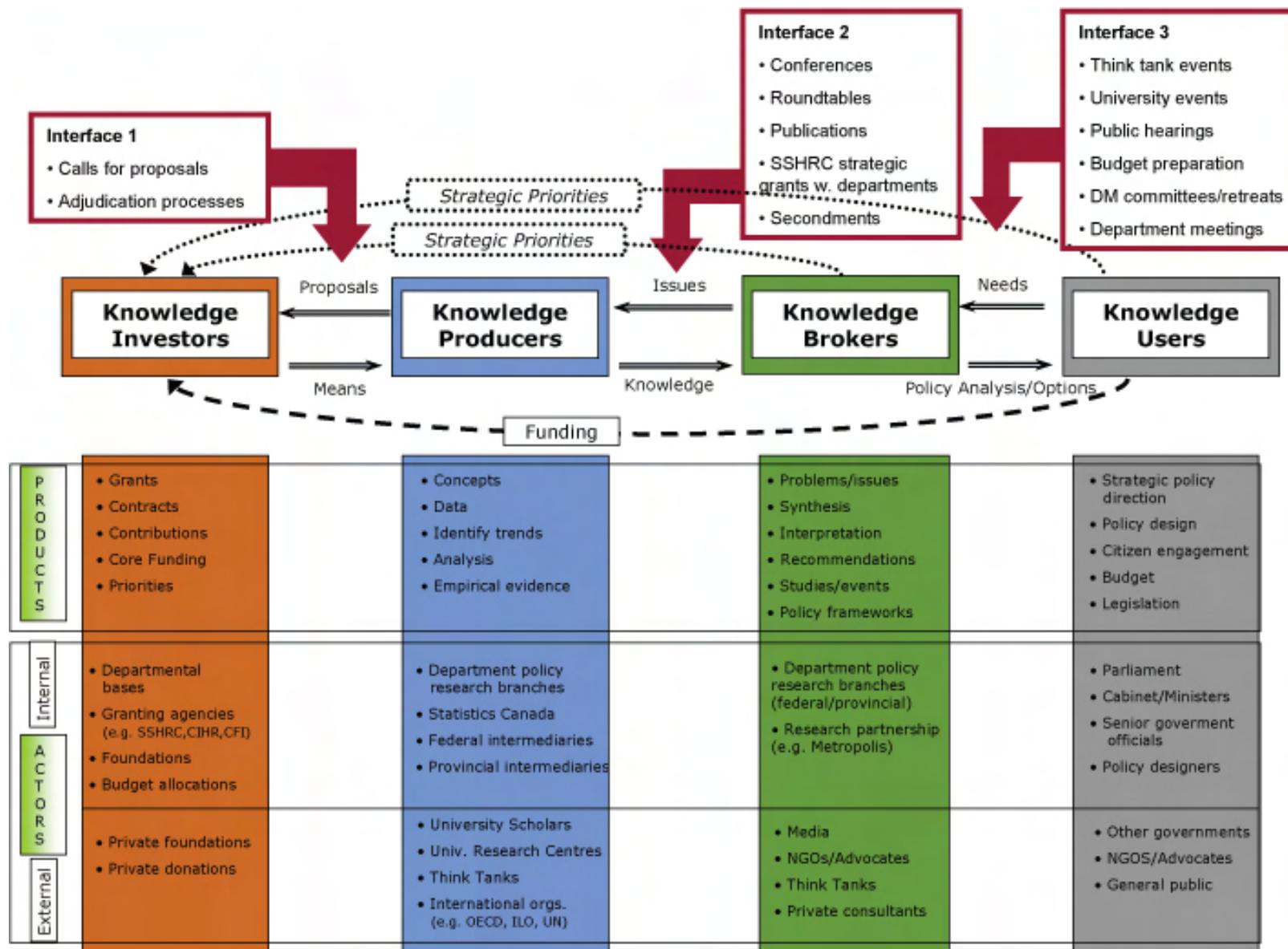
Source: Lindquist (2000: 230).

Figure 2. CHSFR Evidence-Based Decision-Making Map



Source: Adapted from Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (2000).

Figure 3. The Research/Policy Web: Investment, Brokerage, and Deliberation



Source: Adapted from Manson Singer (2007).

Each diagram serves as a map and point of departure for dialogue about how potentially relevant research and analysis can be identified, how it can be steered towards policy-makers and advisors, whether additional front-end investments are needed for knowledge producers to undertake more research, and what the expectations might be for influence.

However, while the diagrams are topographical and provide some direction, they do not capture the dynamics flagged in Section 3:

- the fluid, serendipitous, and loosely coupled links between decision-making and policy analysis and research;
- the longer-term and subtle process of influence of research on the perceptions of actors;
- the shifting needs of policy-makers and how different decision regimes constrain and foster the demand and use of information;
- the parallel processes of exploitation and exploration;
- the information and noise flowing towards policy-makers that competes with analysis and research;
- the levels of capacity and slack required to produce high-quality analysis and research and
- the role and dynamics of networks.

In other words, the diagrams – though complex – do not capture the weather systems, prevailing winds and currents, or tidal action at work among the existing institutional islands. It is these dynamics that make it difficult for research and analysis to find their way to policy-makers. These conditions raise the matter of risk and funding for policy research and analysis. While Canadian funding for policy research and analysis might not compare to US and European investments for specific projects, investment is non-trivial.¹⁴ But such investment rarely stimulates or directly shapes given decisions; “success” might involve moving an issue up the agenda¹⁵ or influencing options considered.

Policy research funding is better understood using the metaphors of venture capital for firms or pharmaceutical company financing of drug research and trials, where few “investments” succeed. This could be depicted by overlaying a big wedge moving across Figure 3 that narrows to the right on a select group of “priority” knowledge needs of policy-makers (say, 30 out of 500) in the future (5 or 10 years). These needs may be considerably different from what policy-makers and knowledge investors thought would be the critical issues when funding decisions were made.¹⁶ When we look at granting council and foundation funding in Canada for policy research, it appears uneven, scattered, and risky in aggregate. But this view must be balanced with the other functions of research in public service organizations, think tanks, universities, and consulting firms, which include the development of knowledge and skills, the development of ideas and language to foster discussion, and opportunities to recognize and stream talent.

¹⁴ For an effort to measure the economic impact of policy-relevant research, see The Impact Group (2008).

¹⁵ Even if it does, it may happen following an unexpected event, or a shift in public opinion or government priorities, allowing certain frameworks and findings to be “selected” by the new environment.

¹⁶ There is, of course, curiosity-driven research that may not require early investments, but this too has to be found and has its own *de facto* risk profile and likelihoods of influence.

With these considerations in mind, it quickly becomes apparent that figures 1, 2, and 3 mask a daunting amount of complexity. It is difficult, if not impossible, to fathom all of the linkages between policy-making and policy-relevant research and analysis in aggregate, let alone to ascertain the best strategic directions for improving linkages.

Rather than seeking solutions at the macro level, it would be more productive to work at the meso or policy network level – taking stock, identifying knowledge gaps and investment priorities, and developing networks and brokering capabilities for specific policy domains.

5. Conclusion: Some Suggestions to Consider (and Debate)

This paper has attempted to provide a foundation for discussion about the state of policy capability in Canada and the strategic directions for improving those capabilities. We began by noting several stresses on the policy function in a results-oriented environment and then identified two paradoxes: policy analysts in public service institutions feel increasingly compelled to produce “aligned” work even as ministers and executives express concerns about the lack of innovative thinking; and despite a significant increase in the amount of distributed policy capability outside governments, it might be thinner and more precarious than it seems. Following that, we reviewed several concepts for framing how analysis and research might relate to decision-making, and the circumstances under which innovation might be fostered. We also looked at several broad frameworks that capture the range of actors involved in the funding, production, brokering, and use of policy analysis and research. This final section seeks to join up these threads.

Let’s begin by noting what appears to be working well, with some caveats at the federal level. (This paper could not provide snapshots of practices and progress at the provincial and territorial levels).

Generally, the Policy Research Initiative appears to have recovered some of its earlier ingredients for success. The granting councils have been moving in the right direction by seeking out partnership opportunities for funding of new themes, supporting programs of research for the established disciplines and professions, and, more generally, encouraging better communication and dissemination by researchers. Increased government funding can facilitate a judicious balance among these strategic directions. Foundations, think tanks, and universities have generally done well given the levels of funding at their disposal. That said, more applied and systematic research-of-scale (multi-year projects) – as opposed to positional and value-promulgation activities – needs to be funded. Although governments and the granting councils have important roles in supporting such work, it will be interesting to see how the recent changes in the *Income Tax Act* will cumulatively stimulate foundations and private philanthropists to take more interest in and responsibility for this type of work, along the lines of US counterparts (Lindquist, 2006b).

Lastly, in finer-grained ways, Canada has increased its “brokerage” capabilities due to many think tanks, universities, and granting councils assiduously emphasizing communications and linking research to current and emerging policy priorities. There are also examples of visiting fellow and research linkages. However, because these capabilities tend to be “local” (i.e. associated with specific institutions), they do not generate sufficient relationship building and exploration among policy-makers, analysts, and researchers.

There is a need for more relationship building and richer exchanges of perspectives among policy-makers, analysts, and researchers inside and outside public service institutions. This will produce better assessment of needs and capabilities; and, exploration at higher levels than provided by current brokering. Indeed, I suggested just above that many brokering capabilities are too distributed, particular, and focused on exploitation. And yes, I argued at the close of Section 4 that remedying this challenge at the national level might be too difficult. The fostering of these relationships and exchanges will best occur by regular interaction at the sector or policy-community level, but there is also scope for government-wide scanning as part of transition planning. This approach could be broadened to include think tanks, universities, and other researchers and analysts, would provide an opportunity to discern how challenges and issues work across policy domains at different levels of government. Granting councils, foundations, and think tanks do not have the breadth for this role, and, neither does the federal Policy Research Initiative.¹⁷

In my view, if these activities were properly funded and sustained, it would lead to better appreciation of the perspectives and advice that outsiders proffer to government; ensure that more individuals inside and outside government know where to find expertise; and influence the research of scholars and the development of the next generation of researchers and analysts moving into the “third” community. None of this more exploratory activity would preclude “exploitation” and should serve to enhance it.

Another likely result would be higher levels of funding for external policy analysis and research from granting councils. Governments, foundations, and private philanthropists would better appreciate the roles and capabilities of the “knowledge-generators,” while the latter would better appreciate the needs of policy-makers, regardless of the specific “relevance” of their research.

¹⁷ The greatest achievement of the Policy Research Initiative was the original scanning exercise across the federal public service that sought to identify not only issues but also the state of internal and external knowledge. The Initiative also contributed to transition planning for the forthcoming election. The missed opportunity – though envisioned under the “common space” concept articulated by Judith Maxwell – was to expand the scanning and broaden interaction to include academics, think tanks, and foundations. Some networks did emerge from PRI – such as the Trends Project and other selected areas of interest – but this quickly came to be dominated by a handful of individuals and did not loop out widely and continuously to explore issues and reach out to new areas. PRI quickly relinquished its broader exploration role and moved more into selected exploitation. It will be interesting to see if the renewed PRI – with better wiring into the priorities and planning process – also begins to make significant progress in this other regard. Note that, as was broached in the CPRN roundtable, seeking better engagement with university and think tank researchers is not the same as increasing citizen engagement, and there will be considerable demand for governments to raise its game on this related front (CPRN, 2009).

While I am leery of recommending yet another responsibility and area of accountability for already overburdened deputy ministers, the implication is clear: there is a significant role for deputy ministers at each level of government as “stewards” of policy networks associated with their portfolios (Lindquist, 1992). The best deputy ministers have already taken on this role, which is consistent with their responsibility to provide the best possible policy advice to current and future governments and to create sufficient internal and external capacity to meet those needs. This role coincides with deputy minister–led recruitment, retention, and knowledge management strategies.

I am *not* suggesting that deputy ministers and their departments/ministries should be wholly responsible for funding, coordinating, or brokering relevant policy networks. Rather, they have a superb position from which to serve as convenors, lynchpins, and animateurs of policy networks to foster dialogue, the identification and exploration of emerging needs, and assessments of the state of policy analysis and research in those networks. Doing so might require attendance at dedicated events once or twice a year, and participation in follow-up task forces or providing funding for further exploration or exploitation, perhaps in collaboration with other institutions. Such a role would not be easily taken up by granting councils or foundations, which do have roles to play and need to be involved in these dialogues and assessments. If this scenario is politically delicate, shrewd deputy ministers can ensure that other institutions assume this role.¹⁸ Alternatively, this could be done in concert with deputy ministers’ colleagues across levels of government.

Another level of engagement and modality for investments is in problem-specific research partnerships that aim to bring social science and other research to bear on challenges. Like all other partnerships, applied policy research partnerships can vary tremendously. One reviewer of this paper, for example, pointed to the Metropolis Project (the Canadian Labour Market and Skills Researcher Network centred at the University of British Columbia in collaboration with Human Resources and Social Development Canada),¹⁹ certain national centres of excellence, and the knowledge management units at York University and the University of Victoria (the latter two undoubtedly choosing a handful of more specific projects to concentrate on). However, I suspect that if we conducted an inventory of federal, provincial, local, and First Nation departments and agencies, we would discover that there are many more policy-oriented research collaborations – from small to large, from program level to policy-focused, from local to national in scope, from advisory in nature to more fully focused on systematic research, etc. – in existence than we can fully appreciate.

¹⁸ Although the Social Sciences and Humanities meetings in late Spring are monitored by some officials, and have been used for some cross-sector discussions, they are disciplinary-focused and typically would not provide an opportunity for more systematic and exploratory discussions on emerging policy challenges. To be productive, such discussions would have to include a critical mass of officials and other experts in the field, and there would have to be a rolling dialogue so that scholars can develop a better appreciation of the nature of practical challenges.

¹⁹ See www.clsrn.econ.ubc.ca/_background_en.php.

Several observations are in order here. First, even if many such research partnerships already exist, it should not preclude governments and other organizations from considering more investment to ensure their effectiveness. Second, it would be useful for deputy ministers and the networks they seek to foster to develop a better inventory of research partnerships, no matter how diverse, to get a better sense of the scope and extent of research linkages and to share best practices. Third, establishing partnerships is not the same as cultivating networks, since partnerships are typically more oriented towards “exploitation” (although some partnerships could be designed to foster genuine exploratory networks). Moreover, such partnerships, particularly when engaging academics, will have to contend with many of the same incentive challenges and the need to draw out policy-relevant insight over time. In this regard, appropriate expectations are required about the nature of potential yields from such partnerships.

Internally focused initiatives would include complementing an improved external posture and investing in partnerships. One approach would involve establishing dedicated “receptor capacity” for scanning and digesting external potentially policy-relevant research and analysis. An example of this is British Columbia’s Cross-Government, Office of the Chief Information Officer which undertakes scoping reviews for ministries and in support of cabinet submissions.

Another approach, and quite different in spirit,²⁰ might involve providing staff with sufficient time (“organizational slack”) to “exploit” for current priorities and to “explore” for emerging and possible future priorities, and to shrewdly use professional development opportunities and strategic alliances to build connections with other departments, governments, think tanks, university departments, and research centres. Three key traps are to be avoided. First, governments should resist the temptation to institutionalize around narrow issues, and should not rely on and reify single institutions or small and closed networks of experts for the purposes of exploration (the posture for exploitation, though, should be less playful and more focused). Second, governments should not presume that academics and think tanks are good at working across disciplinary boundaries. The overall ambition should be to continuously facilitate cross-fertilization inside and outside government. And third, when galvanizing their functional communities to look at horizontal issues, governments should find ways to openly include think tanks, academics, foundations, and others. Governments should not see this as a “free” resource, and should find ways to provide funding for acknowledging and underwriting the costs of participating in more exploratory activities, and to reserve specific grants and contracts for exploitation activities.

However, producers and brokers of policy analysis and research are not absolved from finding ways to monitor and assess the performance of these risky and loosely coupled activities. This process is necessary in order to demonstrate to funders and users the value of the analysis and research, both direct and indirect, for governments and citizens. Increased interaction among investors, producers, brokers, and users should lead to greater awareness and respect, and to more appropriate expectations of the likely impact of such work. Setting aside valuable time to seek new perspectives and expertise will be a challenge for policy-makers and experts-in-favour alike, but, given the pace at which new issues and priorities arise, this seems a worthwhile activity.

²⁰ Proponents of “receptor capacity” tend to focus on establishing a dedicated internal department or ministry unit for scanning, filtering, and digesting social science and other research. Ultimately, though, such capability undertakes this type of work for government needs, thus leaning closer to the “alignment” end of the spectrum. This is not the same as encouraging cross-fertilization and debate on issues and policy-information needs inside and outside government. Both need to be cultivated.

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Appendix 1. Discussion Questions

Overview

- Has the availability of policy analysis never been greater?
- Do many policy analysts complain that there is less demand for what they consider to be genuine policy analysis?
- Do ministers and deputy ministers often lament a lack of high quality policy advice?
- Do many non-governmental research organizations find it difficult to secure funds for longer-term policy research projects?

1. The Paradox of Policy Analysis: Alignment and Innovation

- Do you agree that “results” and “alignment” are crowding out the demand for good, more forward-looking policy analysis?
- Do you agree that policy shops are leaner than they used to be?
- Do ministers and public service executives tend to rely on a handful of “go-to” individuals inside and outside their ministries?
- Is there too much reliance on highly paid consultants to do policy work?
- Are ministers and deputy ministers disappointed with much of the policy advice they are getting from their departments and ministries?
- Are they getting sufficient forward-looking and creative policy advice from think tanks and university researchers?

2. Another Paradox: A Surfeit of Thin Policy Capacity?

- In specific policy domains, do ministers and deputy ministers believe that there is more policy analysis and research than ever before?
- Have federal and provincial governments fully re-built the policy capacity from the early 1990s? If so, is it properly geared to the challenges of the 21st century?
- Have SSHRC and other granting programs made a meaningful difference in the advice received by governments? What about research centres, new/existing schools of public policy and administration, and knowledge transfer/communication offices at universities? What about policy think tanks?
- Do you agree that external policy expertise is “thin” when juxtaposed with contemporary policy challenges?
- Do you agree that the reliance on external policy consultants is not sustainable?
- Do you think that foundations should play a greater role in sponsoring policy analysis and research?
- Do you agree that government departments and ministries might not have sufficient capacity, time, or disposition to properly cultivate and absorb external research?

3. Perspectives to Frame and Animate Strategic Dialogue

Do you agree with the following suggestions?

- That policy inquiry and decision-making in government are loosely coupled and serendipitous?
- That the seeking out and purpose of policy analysis and research by policy-makers is highly contextual and depends on the exigencies of particular circumstances, making it difficult to target in advance?
- That, notwithstanding the interest of policy-makers in challenging and innovative insight, the default disposition of policy-makers when engaging external policy analysts and researchers is that of “exploitation” as opposed to less focused “exploration”?
- That the biggest challenge confronting internal and external purveyors of policy analysis and research for decision-makers is not competitors, but rather, the constant stream of other information and noise in the system?
- That there is too much emphasis on “aligned” policy analysis/research and not enough interest in alternative, unaligned, and strategic perspectives?
- That government policy shops are too lean to handle transactions and more creative and forward-looking analysis and research? Do you agree that such capability exists outside government to a sufficient degree?
- That existing policy networks are insufficiently geared to “exploration” activities?

4. Capturing the Policy Research Topography: Some Frameworks to Consider

- Do you think that funding policy research and analysis is better understood using the notions of “venture capital”? Or as a risky activity?
- Do you agree that the frameworks in Section 4 are too broad, and that is better to take stock, identify knowledge gaps, and broker/invest in specific policy domains?

5. Conclusion: Some Suggestions to Consider (and Debate)

- Do you agree that, generally, the granting councils, foundations, and existing brokerage capabilities are working reasonably well?
- Do you agree that more emphasis should be put into promoting “exploration” at the policy network level that would be inclusive of government, granting councils, think tank, university, and other researchers?
- Is it reasonable to expect that deputy ministers could take a leadership role?
- Do you agree that engaging policy networks is a sensitive matter, one that has to be carefully handled in order to avoid capture and ossification?



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