

PUBLIC POLICY IN A DIFFERENT SCOTLAND

Speech presented by Professor Jim Gallagher, University of Glasgow
at the seminar

'Using evidence in the Scottish polity: progress made and opportunities not yet realised'

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Glad to have the opportunity to open this seminar. The use of evidence in policy is a subject of importance and great interest to me. And after a while I intend to talk about it.

Want to start however by asking you to lift up your eyes, not in this case to the heavens, but to the context in which public policy in Scotland gets made. I want to persuade you that that context demands change in how we go about the policy business, and that many of you have some responsibilities there. The political context is changing as we speak, which could change the landscape dramatically, but what I have to say would I think be relevant even if we had had continuity rather than change in St Andrew's House.

But to understand where we are we need to reflect on where we have been. Go back to the period before devolution (long time ago, not so long). Was I think David McCrone of this University who coined the phrase "stateless nation". Meant that Scotland had the characteristics of a nation, but not the institutions of a State to go along with them.

You can see what he meant, but it was not wholly true. We did have some state institutions, but shared others. Had a legal system, but a small share in a parliament; had no distinctive government, but a territorial share in one, and so on.

An interesting question is whether we were also a nation without a "polity" a functioning political or policy making system. The picture is actually quite similar: we had some of the characteristics that make up a polity, but not all of them. For many of them we had a small share, a Barnett share if you like, in wider UK institutions. The result of this was I reckon that there was in fact no especially distinctive Scottish way of policy making and latterly no especially distinctive Scottish policy. So far as public policy in concerned there is no "Scottish way".

You might be saying - This proposition can't be right, Scotland was, and is, different. Scotland is more left leaning, more social democratic. You might even be saying that Scotland resisted Mrs Thatcher and you can't get more distinctive than that.

Well up to a point: overall Scotland is more left leaning than England, but that is something it shares with the north of England and indeed with post industrial regions

generally. And no doubt there is something in the idea that Scottish political discourse is more egalitarian, concerned with justice. (Though I do wonder if at times that has the characteristics of a comforting national myth: myths of course can have a basis in fact, but they are stories we tell ourselves to bolster our identities). What Scottish public discourse certainly is, is more statist, public sector oriented, and more corporatist.

This may be connected with what we have always seen as one of Scotland's great strengths as a policy system: the way we can exploit the advantages of size. If corporatism is the answer, then Scotland is a manageably small corporation. Networks are easy to make comprehensive. It's beyond doubt a great strength to be able as I have been to be on first name terms with every local authority CE, or every senior police officer.

We always say that this enables Scotland to be more joined up, better coordinated. There is some truth in that: But does that very scope for coordination and consultation lead to lead to more consensualism, more conservatism and less change.

I wonder therefore if what has been distinctive about Scottish Policy making is that it is UK policy diluted a bit, with the edges taken off, or the painful parts of the picture airbrushed out.

Let me give you some examples. Some of you may remember the late great George Younger, Secretary of State. Lovely man. George's way of dealing with delegations of irate trade unionists, or labour councillors, involved tea and chocolate biscuits in NSAH punctuated by "absolutely". It was usually a while after they left that they realised they had got nothing. You might say that was just political skill, but in fact what George was doing was maintaining as best he could a Scottish consensus, perhaps shifted a bit rightwards. So this Thatcherite secretary of state fought tooth and nail to sustain Ravenscraig – and succeeded for a while at least.

Or think of Donald Dewar and the introduction of best value to local government. The same UK policy – but without quite the same taking powers of intervention in failing councils, because it was done by consensus.

My proposition is not to say so much that Scotland tends to shift things a bit to the left, as it were, but whatever policy there is we tends to get in diluted, less radical, form: and given the number of right wing policies we have had in recent memory that will come out as a tendency to the left. The only exception I can think of here is the poll tax, which we got largely undiluted. What we do not have is a different policy dialogue that produced over that period distinctive, alternative, Scottish policy ideas. I think that you have it go as far back as 1968 to find one of those in the form of the Children's Hearing system.

So much for history. You might say that is if there is anything at all in my thesis – that Scottish public policy is a kind of gelded or domesticated subset of English – it's just about history? The Scottish Parliament was place for - in DD's words - Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. So interesting, but in the past.

But actually do you not still recognise the description ? We get the same NHS modernisation as England, but without the market bits that are so painful. We get the same focus on crime and ASB, and the same growth in prison population – though thankfully not *quite* as much. We get the same hugely increased resources into education, but not directly from government to the schools. We get the same performance management culture in local government, but no failing council departments taken over by contractors.

Of course I am caricaturing to make the point – but I think that there is one.

Why is this? To some extent it represents the realities of living in a substantially integrated UK: this is not an independent country, and even if it were we'd still be part of a cultural, social and economic union that would be deeply influential in our public life.

Some of it is down to institutional continuity – not so much I reckon in the formal institutions of government like the Executive, which is less like the SO that it might have been but in the political parties, notably but not only the labour party. Divergence remains problematic for UK parties, even though the purpose of devolution is to allow for it, because they are asked to explain why they support different policies in different places.

And we have had 8 years of “programmatically government” where the political parties have been intent on delivering lists of manifesto promises set out in 4 year programmes: so the detail of manifestos and hence of party conformity has been more important than at any time in the past. That at least looks set to change.

So is this tendency to uniformity simply a political fact that might now change ?

I think there are two more profound reasons for our paucity of policy distinctiveness than party positions. First of all, there is the institutional conservatism of a small country, the ease of a negotiated corporatist consensus that I have already referred to.

Secondly, we may no longer be a stateless nation, but we are still one or two apples short of the picnic that would be a fully functioning polity. That is because legislation can set up new formal institutions, but it cannot set up the less formal para-statal institutions and mechanisms that are needed in a well-functioning political and policy system. And in the absence of those, we will default to the kind of gelded UK consensualism that we have inherited.

What do I mean by these institutions and mechanisms ? I mean the think tanks, forums of debate, and, critically, the well-developed ideas, options and arguments that give content to a political conversation. And that is why I am rambling on to you today.

The Scottish polity is short of content – ideas, analysis, and reasoned argument. We have of necessity historically been a subset of the UK conversation – and will always be a bit

like that - but we need to up our collective game. A lot of things will need to be done to ensure that: we will need to create some new institutions, change our processes of policy making, and involve a wider and different range of people in the policy conversation: and critically today I think that we need more from the academic and research community.

Of course my caricature was deliberately unkind: we have seen some scope for genuinely interesting Scottish developments, and some have need been informed by policy analysis and research evidence. And maybe these good examples should encourage us – examples like health promotion policy, or maybe mental health legislation.

This afternoon we have to look at this in the immediate as well as the longer political context. We are set for a new administration and because it is not one of the established parties, maybe it will be more open to new ideas, or maybe more in need of them as it has no UK political hinterland? And clearly a minority administration will have to be less committed to manifesto delivery and so maybe parliament will be more open to evidence based arguments.

So – in this sense at least – things can only get better ? Well no, or at least not automatically: because if anything, a minority administration will be more in danger of being gelded back to a comfortable consensus – comfortable that is for those interests that are at the table and wielding power or influence. A powerful corporatist culture and a politically weak administration could be a recipe for gridlock – where rationality and evidence have to fight even harder to be heard or heeded.

So that takes me at last to evidence – because it is the contribution of knowledge and understanding to policy making that we discuss today and which is covered in the excellent book that I am sure you have all by now read. I wouldn't want to steal the authors' thunder – even if I could - but there are two quite important points I would want to make. Both follow I think from the analysis I have given you of where the Scottish political and policy system has reached.

The first you can think of as a question of language. As Sandra and her colleagues say in the book we can talk about evidence based policy or evidence led or even evidence inspired policy – and each of them seems to carry a slightly different expectation or interpretation about the way in which the interaction we want to happen does or should take place. And that is certainly true.

My own view is that that is also true about the word evidence itself: it's not exactly a loaded word, but may carry something of an expectation of rather a technocratic or consensual approach: there are shared goals or policy aims and evidence is sought as to the best means of achieving them.

And of course there is a place for this. But of course as the authors well know, life, and public policy, is not always like that: Goals are disputable and variable, and might change in the light of new knowledge and understanding. That involves choices about values as well as facts and the process of gathering information, developing knowledge and

understanding, creating the insights and knowledge that policy needs inevitable is anything but a neat, calm, technocratic, rational process – and not just the authors today but those of you who have engaged in the policy process well known.

So I do not think – and I am sure that the authors of this book do not think – that adding evidence, knowledge or insight to the public policy process is just a kind of bloodless technocratic business. Far from it: it gets quite messy: and that has implications for how best to go about it.

The second point I want to make about the use of evidence follows from that, but it is not I think the conventional one. Conventionally at this point, one normally exhorts policy makers – whoever they are - to help create or seek out more knowledge, to base policy proposals more on the evidence, and to build rationality of this sort more deeply into policy processes. Hard to disagree with: but maybe something of a conventional piety.

Rather however I'd like to reflect briefly instead on the obligations of the witnesses: those who think that they have evidence to give. And it seems to me that the nature of the obligations that fall on them follow from some of the analysis I have just given.

To see why, I want you to consider a wonderful, relatively new, Scots word. For me it was the word of the election campaign – maybe unfairly, but that is politics. And that of course is the word numpty. It's a good word – short, demotic, vaguely onomatopoeic. But it's conventionally applied to rather too many of our politicals. Some may deserve it no doubt but I wonder if it fair to think that we live in a numptocracy? And if we do whose fault is that?

Because it takes two to tango here and if our political class suffers from numptiness, out academic and intellectual classes – out evidence generating class - seem to me to suffer as much from cowardice. Not so much numpties as wimps. Happy all too often to stay in the academic closet, and timid about engaging in the messy, irrational process of speaking truth to power.

As a matter of fact academics in particular have it seems to me substantial ethical obligation to participate in relevant public debate, not just as citizens but as custodians of particular expertise. And that means taking some risks, and possibly getting ones hands a bit dirty – or worse still being publicly criticised by one of the numpties (and believe me if you think that the numpties don't do policy debate well, try it – it's not al all easy)

This it seems to me is a professional obligation – sometimes described as part of knowledge transfer; but to put it more bluntly it is also a reasonable expectation on the part of the taxpayer.

A lot needs to be done to make this rather vague aspiration a reality. The taxpayer needs to do her bit, in that the present public funding system of the universities does not support such activity – indeed it would be done at the expense of other revenue generating activity like churning out RAE-able papers, that a few other academics might read. As we

see in the book the least likely place for a busy policymaker - still less a working politicians - to seek out evidence is in a peer reviewed academic journal. And there are lots of good reasons for that. But for our policy relevant academics this is the measure of quality and success, and public funding just as it is for our pure mathematicians. This is just plain crazy. It is itself a duff piece of public policy and urgently needs to be changed.

But there is more. And we need some new institutional frameworks for the right quality of interaction to take place in. All the evidence says that knowledge transfers effectively through pretty complex interactions, and we do not in Scotland have the institutional framework to make those interactions as good as they should be.

One mechanism which has been proposed is that of a Scottish School of Government. The UK Government has turned what was the old Civil Service College at Sunningdale into a National School of Government. The jury is out still on how successful that is, but it at least addresses the problem.

A Scottish School however might be a bit different, not least because it can make use of those advantages of scale that I referred to earlier. That scale should allow it integrate work on both public policy and public management. In the very olden days, people talked about politics and administration, or later more sophisticatedly about policy and implementation. Nowadays we talk strategy and delivery. But the message is consistently the same: disconnect between them is a recipe for poor outcomes.

It might address it self to issues relevant to both national and local government. Here too more rather than less integration is needed and it makes little sense to have an Improvement Service aimed at in local government only. Similarly a School might integrate both policy and leadership development for the public sector - all the evidence tells us that those two march best together,

I could spend much longer than we have just now on te options for such a body : perhaps we can discuss that over questions. What is clear to me is that we need some new institutional framework to help get a step change in engagement with the policy and political process . without that we will still have an etiolated policy dialogue, and maybe a gridlocked policy process when we deserve a rich one.

Today's seminar therefore seems to me to be addressing an issue of real importance and the authors of this book have - by judgement of course rather than luck - made a contribution to an important debate whose time most certainly ahs come.