

# MODERNISING THE POLICY PROCESS

## Making policy research more significant?

**Paul Burton**

*In an increasingly complex world of interrelated problems many governments have tried to modernise their institutional structures and the ways in which they go about making policy. In the UK and elsewhere this has been most apparent in the growing emphasis given to evidence-based policy making in contrast to faith-based approaches and the conviction politics of earlier periods. Much of the debate about the impact and indeed value of this apparently new approach has focussed on the supply side of the equation: on the utilisation of research evidence and how researchers might make their work more relevant and useful to policy makers. Less attention has been paid in these debates to the different ways in which the nature of policy and policy making is conceptualised and how this might affect the relationship between research and policy.*

*This article takes forward this debate by critically reviewing the theorisation of the policy/research relationship under three different conceptions of policy making: the stages model, the advocacy coalition framework and the argumentative turn. It considers the future of policy research via two questions: who should carry out policy research in which settings; and what skills do they need to do so more effectively?*

### **Introduction**

Policy is made in and is clearly part of a world that is changing rapidly. These changes are driven by many things including technological developments accessible to an increasing proportion of the people of the world, large scale population movements within and between countries and the emergence of new social, political, economic and religious movements. For many analysts these changes are having profound effects on the nature of policy and on processes of policy making. An increasingly complex world of interrelated problems needs better connected policy responses based on more sophisticated and robust analyses of underlying causes and possible solutions.

To some extent this suggests two rather different prospects. On the one hand the desire for greater connectedness tends to increase the range of people with a legitimate right to be involved in the policy process, thereby adding to the overall complexity of the process whilst at the same time making it more inclusive; on the other hand the belief that greater analytical rigour might simplify the political choices facing decision makers suggests a more exclusive and technocratic future. Of course these different prospects are not new and since the emergence of the discipline in the 1950s theorists of policy making have been grappling with questions about the overall role and scope of government and whether the main responsibility of the policy analysts should be to narrow down or open up the options or terrain of policy debate (Hammond, 1996; Pielke, 2004). But more

recently there has been a renewed interest in the potential of policy making to meet the new social and political challenges described above, a return to what Adams (1994) describes as being 'enthralled with modernity'. In the USA the Clinton and Gore administration's attempt at 'the reinvention of government' under the influence of Osborne & Gaebler (1992) reflected this interest, while in the UK the new Labour government elected in 1997 gave a fillip to ongoing efforts to 'modernise government' and improve the process of policy making.

An important strand of these attempts to reinvent government and modernise policy making has been the growing emphasis given to the evidence base of policy making and hence to the quality of evidence available. Again there is a long tradition of students of public policy and administration drawing on and contributing to wider epistemological debates about the methods and claims to truth of the social sciences (Hawkesworth, 1992) and the relevance of scientific or mathematical techniques in policy analysis (Arrow, 1951). But in the last decade the rise of evidence-based policy making has prompted a burgeoning sub-field concerned specifically with the relationship between research and policy. Much of this work focuses on the utilisation of different types of evidence in different policy settings and on the consequences of following different research traditions within the social sciences. Likewise, in the field of policy evaluation a fierce debate has raged for over a decade around the relative merits of experimental designs, realist approaches and constructivist methodologies in establishing what works and for whom (Davies *et al.*, 2000). In all of these sub-fields, the usefulness and utilisation of research evidence in policy making is seen mainly as a product of its epistemological and methodological foundations, although some regard is paid also to the more prosaic factors of presentation, quality, timeliness and relevance. But *in these debates*, less attention has been paid to how we conceptualise the demand side of the equation – the nature of policy making – and there is a tendency to take for granted conceptualisations of policy making as a sequence of stages. This is not to deny the existence of an extensive and growing literature on the nature of policy and policy making, simply to suggest that in contemporary debates about evidence-based policy making and the modernisation of government this literature has not been as prominent as we might expect (Burton, 2001).

Of course, the relationship between social science research and policy making in a more general sense has been subject to scrutiny and debate for many years, often building on the pioneering work of Lasswell (1936, 1948, 1951) and Merton (1949). In his seminal work on the relationship social science and public policy, Rein observes, 'Social science does contribute to policy and practice but the link is neither consensual, graceful nor self-evident' (1976, p. 12). Nor is there any clear normative consensus about what the relationship should be. There are some like Wacquant (2004) who decry the pernicious influence of academic policy research in contributing to the broader project of neo-liberalism, while others complain of the irrelevance to contemporary policy debates of much social science research carried out within universities (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003; Davies, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Wiles, 2004). But even here, and with some exceptions (Coleman, 1991) less attention has been given to the theory and practice of policy making and more to the nature and foundations of research.

However, almost a quarter of a century after Rein's observation, the Secretary of State for Education in the UK stated categorically that 'Social science should be at the heart of policy making' (Blunkett, 2000). This heralded one of the more interesting periods in the history of public policy making in the UK as the relatively new Labour government embarked on a concerted effort to improve the very processes of policy making as well as its substance (Amann, 2000; Bichard, 1999). It appeared, therefore, that alongside a strong commitment to evidence-based policy making and a closer and more productive relationship than Rein had envisaged, new approaches to policy making as a generic activity would also be developed and that together the whole enterprise would become more modern and fit to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

This article takes this episode in the history of UK policy making as its starting point in order to explore the significance of different conceptions of policy making for our understanding of the relationship between research and policy. It considers the success of this attempt to transcend the dominant conception of policy making and reviews the ways in which alternative conceptions theorize the relationship. The article concludes by reflecting on who is best placed to carry out policy research and what skills they need to do so to most effect.

### **The Modernisation of Policy Making in British Government**

Modernisation is often used as little more than a rhetorical device to denote a belief in the possibility of improvement and the onward march of progress, however it is also used to signify a commitment to improve as well as belief in its possibility. The modernisation of government in the UK might sound like a contemporary phenomenon, but ever since Northcote and Trevelyan proposed major reforms of the Civil Service in the mid-nineteenth century, the policy making capacity of government has been subject to a process of almost continuous change. Of course this process has not been evenly paced and a recent head of the home Civil Service has suggested (Wilson, 2003) that we are now in a period of greater than usual change in the organisation of government because of the major social and political developments described in the introduction to this article.

This latest programme of modernisation in government certainly encompassed a wide range of public sector reforms (Stern, 2003) and in its 1999 White Paper 'Modernising Government', the government set out five commitments that were to underpin its distinctive programme of reform (Cabinet Office, 1999). These included more responsiveness to popular concerns, higher quality public services and greater use of new technologies as well as a promise to value and not to denigrate the public service. But first on the list was a commitment to improve or modernise the very process of policy making. This was to be achieved through a number of different approaches: policy was to focus more on the delivery of outcomes; it was to be more forward looking, joined-up and strategic; and in the future it was to be based more on good quality evidence than on ideological predisposition or political whim. As in the past (Hall *et al.*, 1975), new institutional arrangements were put in place at the heart of government in an attempt to drive forward these changes and help spread emerging good practice more widely throughout the civil service and other institutions of governance. The Centre for

Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) was created in 1999 within the Cabinet Office to act as the focal point of this work and one of its earliest programmes of work involved 'identifying new, interesting and professional approaches to policymaking around Government' (CMPS, 2000, p. 1).

In line with a greater openness in government and in recognition of the benefits of an outside perspective this new Centre was headed by Professor Ron Amann, previously Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK and a prominent advocate of what was then the emerging approach of evidence-based policy making (Amann, 2000). At about the same time as the CMPS was born, an existing group within the Cabinet Office, the Strategic Policy Making Team (SPMT), was preparing to publish its own report on 'professional policy making for the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (Cabinet Office – Strategic Policy Making Team, 1999). This report set out, '... to describe what an ideal policy making process would look like ...' (p. 70) and included a clear statement of why policy had to be made differently,

The need for change is clear. The world for which policy makers have to develop policies is becoming increasingly complex, uncertain and unpredictable ... Policy makers must adapt to this new, fast-moving, challenging environment if public policy is to remain credible and effective. (para 2.3)

The authors of the report went on to consider what a 'modernised' policy process might look like in practice. They began by acknowledging the dominance of the stages conception of policy making,

Traditionally, the policy making process has been regarded as a sequence of closely inter-related and inter-dependent activities, which together, form a cycle geared towards the progressive improvement of outcomes. (para 2.6)

But they also noted that, '... in our discussions with policy makers ... policy making rarely proceeds as neatly as the model suggests ...' (para 2.7) and thereby acknowledged the long-standing tension between the theory and the practice of policy making in many attempts to develop a general account of the process. The SPMT tried to overcome this tension by developing a new descriptive model that stopped short of being explicitly prescriptive. What they actually produced was not so much a descriptive model as a loosely connected set of principles and prescriptions for 'professional policy makers'. The three main components of this 'model' were a series of high level features to produce fully effective polices, three themes to be encompassed by effective policy making and a set of nine core competencies needed by professional policy makers. The report also noted that:

The model began life as a *theoretical representation* of the 'modernised' policy process. When we came to test it with policy makers, we found that it was accepted by them as a challenging and yet *realistic representation* of the policy process they experience in their day to day working lives ... Because it is descriptive rather than prescriptive, the model recognises that on occasions policy makers will not have the luxury of being able to carry through all the elements as thoroughly as they might wish. (para 2.11) [emphasis added]

However, the team failed to distinguish properly between the descriptive and the prescriptive. For example, their list of nine core competencies is clearly prescriptive, saying in effect: 'if you wish to be a professional or modern policy maker, then you should have the following competencies'. Nevertheless, they were unwilling to relinquish the descriptive status of their model and claimed instead to be describing an ideal rather than an actual situation, indeed an annex to the report said, 'The model is intended to describe what an ideal policy making process would be like' (para 3).

So, although the descriptive status of the 'model' is questionable, by describing the qualities or competencies required of good policy makers, the SPMT report in fact reflected an important facet of a major theoretical debate among advocates of different conceptions of policy making to which we return later in the article.

But what of the role and position of robust evidence and policy research in this modernised policy process? Another significant institutional development in the early years of the new Labour government saw the creation of the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), reporting directly to the Prime Minister with the aim of improving capacity at the centre of government to address strategic and cross-cutting issues. Like the CMPS, the PIU was a small unit which managed strategic projects carried out by teams selected from within and beyond government and one of their early reports looked at the role of analysis and modelling within central government (Cabinet Office – Performance and Innovation Unit 2000). This set out, '... a comprehensive and coherent programme for creating the conditions in which rigorous analysis is routinely demanded and delivered ...' (para 1.1) and spoke of the need for, 'a fundamental change of culture to place good analysis at the heart of policy making' (para 1.2). 'Good analysis' in this view did not, however, extend much beyond the application of a relatively narrow range of quantitative techniques.

The PIU report endorsed the principles articulated in both the 1999 White Paper on Modernising Government and the SPMT report but aimed to take these further forward by considering in detail the actual practice of policy analysis throughout Whitehall. It highlighted some of the reasons why the demand for analytical input to policy was not always as great as it might be: external pressures constraining demand; political timetables not matching the timetables of research; a reluctance to collect and analyse data, borne of a lack of skill; and departmentalism standing in the way of the analysis of broader and possibly cross-cutting issues (Cabinet Office – Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p. 12).

The report also included a chapter entitled 'Analysis in an ideal world' in which a vision of analysis and modelling in central government was presented. In this somewhat utopian world, civil servants see the supply of good analysis as a key aspect of their job – re-emphasising the Northcote-Trevelyan principles of integrity, impartiality and analytical rigour – Ministers publish the models they use and the data used to support them and policy makers and analysts work closely together. These are reminiscent of Hogwood and Gunn's ten conditions for perfect implementation and other explicitly idealised descriptions of the policy making environment (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984).

In short, this PIU report provided a wealth of detail about the variety of analytical services used by government and made a powerful case for placing systematic analysis at the heart of policy development. But its conception of the nature of policy making

remained stubbornly rooted in a stages model and an assumption that the utilization of policy research is determined mainly by judgements about its quality – if policy research becomes more rigorous and the evidence it generates becomes more robust then policy makers will have no good reason for not using it. With the benefit of hindsight these views seem to reflect a degree of optimism and naiveté that is now less evident, perhaps as a degree of third-term scepticism takes hold about the government's continued commitment to its programme of modernisation and in the light of policies that fly in the face of the available evidence.

Finally in 2001 the CMPS produced another relevant report presenting the results of a major survey of 'innovative and professional approaches to policy making' from across Whitehall (Bullock *et al.*, 2001). This survey found that 'many policy makers report that the policy making process was informed by evidence' (p. 8) and that 'policy makers identified a wide range of benefits in adopting new, professional and innovative approaches to policy making' although many considered '... that new approaches to policy making are making much heavier demands upon resources than traditional methods ...' (p. 9).

This report returned to the SMPT's framework for professional policy making and suggested that its most valuable contribution was the taxonomy of key features of modern policy making and especially its advocacy of the nine core competencies of effective policy makers. It described many interesting cases of new approaches to policy making throughout government, but also acknowledged that systematic evidence of the impact of these new approaches on delivering better policy outcomes was not available,

By and large the processes and approaches adopted remain unevaluated and it is difficult to quantify at this stage what difference a particular approach brought to a particular policy outcome. (p. 17)

So, during the first term of the new Labour government a concerted effort was made to develop a more modern approach to policy making in government. From the published reports of this effort there appeared to be numerous examples of relatively novel practices in policy making: with greater use made of outside experts; greater public involvement; more use of rigorous analytical techniques and new methods of project management. However, these cannot be said to add up to a comprehensive new approach to policy making or to a new conception of the policy process itself.

The traditional conception of policy making as a series of stages proved difficult to transcend, as did the long-standing confusion between positive and normative approaches. However, in beginning to pay attention to the competencies and skills needed by professional or 'modern' policy makers, the ground was prepared for a rather different conception of policy making, even if this was not the main aim of those concerned. In short, the focus of attention began to shift from a concern with systems and idealised processes to the skills needed by successful performers within these systems.

But if policy practitioners in government struggled to move beyond the stages conception and to distinguish clearly between explanations of how policy is made and prescriptions about how it should be made in an ideal world, was this a reflection of the state of the academic discipline of policy studies? Have those engaged in academic policy studies been any more successful in reframing our conception of policy making? In the

next section we turn to two major challenges to the stages conception, the advocacy coalition framework of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith and the argumentative turn associated with the work of Fischer and Forester.

### **Academic Conceptions of Policy Making**

Any attempt at developing even the most rudimentary comparison of different conceptions of policy making faces a major difficulty: ensuring that like is being compared with like to an acceptable degree. There are two aspects to this difficulty. First, although straightforward in principle, in practice there is as much confusion within the literature of policy studies between normative and positive approaches as we saw in the more practical discourses of would-be policy modernisers in government. In some cases we are offered descriptive accounts of how policy is made in practice, in others we get explanatory models of why policy is made in the way it is and which factors cause it to be as such. In others though we are presented with a normative case for how policy should be made, sometimes allied to higher principles so that if we want to be more democratic we should make policy in this way, if we want to be more fair and just we should work like this and so on. In others still we are offered detailed descriptions of ideal typical situations, although again there is often confusion between the conventional Weberian ideal type and a normatively ideal situation.

The second aspect of difficulty relates to the difference between conceptual frameworks, theories and models. Ostrom (1999) and Schlager (1999) both present useful schema of these differences in terms of the type of actors involved, the variables used, the units of analysis and their scope. They argue that frameworks organise subsequent inquiry but do not in themselves provide explanations; that is the province of theories and models which by definition are narrower in scope and more specific in setting out the logical connections between variables and propositions in a testable manner.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, I develop below an initial comparison of some competing conceptions of policy making. To be sure, any number of different conceptions of policy making can be articulated, depending mainly on the level of detail chosen. John's important work on policy analysis describes five (John, 1998), while many prefer the starker dichotomy between positivist and constructivist conceptions. At the other extreme in a recent report from the theory sub-committee of the Policy Studies Organisation a list of some 22 different theoretical positions were identified as having some potential relevance to improving our understanding of policy making (Policy Studies Organization Theory Sub-Committee, 2004). Three are presented here in order to capture what I believe to be two major developments of the basic stages model: the stages model itself, the advocacy coalition framework and argumentative turn. While work associated with the argumentative turn entails an outright rejection of what is seen as the fundamental positivism of the stages model, the ACF represents something of a bridge between the two, recognising the fact of advocacy and trying to account empirically for why some succeed and others fails in advancing their policy preferences.

The basic description of each conception is necessarily brief as it is assumed that most readers are familiar with their main elements, but much of their richness and subtlety is inevitably left out in the process.

### *The Stages Model*

The policy making process has traditionally been conceptualised and explained as a series of stages in which ideas and policy proposals are compared systematically against clear value criteria and progress is made rationally towards a political goal. Half a century ago Lasswell was clear that an important role for the policy scientist was to improve the rationality of the process by achieving a better integration of 'authentic information and responsible judgement' (Lasswell, 1951, p. 4). This conceptualisation has dominated both theory and practice since the emergence of policy studies as an academic discipline and policy making as a professional activity (de Leon, 1999). While the precise number of stages may vary, along with their labels, and while the sequence may be portrayed as linear or cyclical, for our purpose there are four significant features. First, there is the possibility that policy making proceeds as a sequence of analytically if not practically distinct stages. Secondly, there is an assumption that every policy has a clear beginning, middle and end. Thirdly, values are treated as exogenous – they are determined and given by politicians of some legitimacy and then used in the appraisal of alternative options by professionally objective policy analysts. Finally, rationality comes from using these political values as the basis for comparing alternative solutions to a problem and choosing the solution that best fits these values.

The main criticisms of this approach are also well known: it does not identify any causal mechanisms for policy development and neglects the historical and temporal dimensions of change; it is descriptively inaccurate; and it fails to properly theorise the significance of the wider world outside the immediate policy system (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993). Some have argued that these criticisms are misplaced, not least because it is held to be an heuristic device and as such is not itself directly concerned with explanation or with descriptive accuracy but with providing a broad picture and facilitating the generation of more specific testable hypotheses (de Leon, 1999). And of course for some the notion of generating testable hypotheses is itself symptomatic of a more general epistemological weakness associated with positivism and empiricism (Bernstein, 1982).

### *The Advocacy Coalition Framework*

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith was first developed in the 1980s in part as an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of the stages model (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). The ACF built on existing conceptions of policy making, most notably the multiple streams framework of Kingdon (1984), the 'garbage can' model of Cohen *et al.* (1972) and the punctuated equilibrium theory of Baumgartner and Jones (1993) to bring a more explicit historical and contextualised dimension to the explanation of policy change.

In their initial version of the ACF, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith emphasised the need to take a long term view (ten years or more) of policy change and to treat policy sub-systems or domains as the main unit of analysis. Within these policy sub-systems coalitions of various actors (policy researchers, advocates and lobbyists, decision makers, journalist and so on) advocate their own conception of policy problems, explanations of cause and preferred solutions. The rules of the game to be played out within these sub-systems are relatively stable and are only occasionally subject to external shocks or perturbations. These rules or system parameters include constitutional structures, basic socio-cultural values and a given distribution of natural resources and are relatively impervious to most short term or immediate pressures for change. However, when looked at over the course of a decade or more various external events are likely to occur that serve as a 'critical prerequisite to major policy change' (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 120). These might include the influence of social movements, changes to the party of government or the constitution or some overarching policy decisions, for example a move to monetarism, a strong emphasis on homeland security or new commitment to social justice.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999, p. 123) argue that policy change comes about through a combination of policy-oriented learning and longer term changes in this relatively stable 'external world' and although the former tends only to affect the secondary belief systems of policy actors, their core beliefs only change in the face of external shocks or 'necognition factors external to the sub-system'.

The ACF has been subject to extensive criticism both from those hostile and those sympathetic to its basic premises and has also been modified by its own architects in the light of these criticisms. Indeed Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith themselves claim that over the last two decades they, along with numerous researchers using the framework to carry out empirical research in settings all over the world, have succeeded in transforming it from a framework to something approaching a theory in the sense used above by Ostrom and Schlager.

The framework has clearly enabled a growing body of empirical work with the potential to accumulate and provide a reasonably consistent explanation of policy change in different settings. For our purposes it also has the merit of describing a clear role for policy research and for policy researchers. However, although the ACF takes us beyond the limitations of the stages model and some of its questionable assumptions of political neutrality and rational behaviour, for some it still does not go far enough in acknowledging the social construction of reality in policy processes and the epistemological impossibility of objective knowledge.

### *The Argumentative Turn and the Deliberative Practitioner Perspective*

From the late 1980s, influenced especially by the writings of Habermas, academic conceptions of policy analysis took something of an 'argumentative turn' in which the importance of rhetoric and debate in the development of policy was resurrected. Although Vickers (1965) had described a similar position in his classic work on the art of decision making, this later articulation marked a more widespread adoption among policy scholars. According to Fischer, a leading advocate of this conception, the importance of

argument is driven as much by epistemological uncertainty as it is by value differences and derives from diverse theoretical perspectives, including British linguistic philosophy, French poststructuralism, contemporary American pragmatism and German critical theory (Fischer & Forrester, 1993).

In his latest book Fischer (2003) presents a comprehensive critique of what he describes as the rational, technocratic and empiricist notion of policy making. He sets out an alternative rooted in 'postempiricist' principles of constructivism, discursive analysis and participatory deliberative practices. Much of Fischer's work offers a familiar critique of the promise of Lasswell's policy sciences, but of greater interest to us here is his conclusion that the underlying problem with 'scientific' or technocratic conceptions of policy making lies in its poor analysis of the relationship between knowledge and policy making. In Fischer's view this poorly theorised relationship is compounded by a growing awareness that empiricist policy research is actually not much used in practice. In other words, there is a shared misconception among adherents to the rational model of policy making and positivist social scientists that the value and use of policy research in practice is determined mainly by its methodological rigour and epistemological foundations (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980).

Fischer proposes a new approach to policy analysis that combines an epistemological preference for constructivism with a very clear ideological stance about the purpose of policy analysis. To him it should not serve 'intentionally or unintentionally to facilitate and bolster bureaucratic governance' or to 'serve as an ideology that masks elite political and bureaucratic interests' (2003, p. 14) but should instead 'provide access and explanation of data to all parties, to empower the public to understand analyses, and to promote serious public discourse' (2003, p. 15). Under this approach, the postempiricist policy analyst serves as a democratic facilitator, although one with no privileged position from which to define the significance of policy issues or help forge a political consensus. We should note that Fischer is talking about the 'policy analyst' rather than the 'civil servant' and we must, therefore, consider the extent to which the subject of our analysis is wholly detached from or inextricably part of the policy making apparatus of the state and all that that implies.

Fischer argues that policy analysts should work in a number of different ways under this rubric. Not only should they strive to create the conditions for effective public deliberation (moving towards a Habermasian ideal speech situation), they should also work to overcome any structural inequalities among participants in this process. This is because, 'the planner's task is to equalize communicative forces of power by establishing rational communicative counteractions' (2003, p. 224) so that a consensus around policy is achieved more by the inherent power of argument than by the status of the person advancing it. Clearly this is not so much an explanatory model of the process of policy making as it is practiced in most settings, as a passionate call for a new set of principles and practices to underpin the work of policy analysts. However, it is rooted in its own view of the nature of the policy making and it is one that succeeds in capturing the messy realities of the process more effectively than the artificial orderliness of the more simplistic versions of the stages conception.

In coming to an interim conclusion on the relative merits of these three approaches, we need to remember that they differ in some important ways. The stages model describes the logical sequence that should be followed by policy makers in an environment where instrumental rationality is possible; the ACF approach offers an explanation of how and why policy changes over relatively long periods of time; while the argumentative turn or discursive approach advocates a new approach to policy making so that it can better realise its democratic potential. In this respect they do not share a set of common criteria by which they might be judged, apart perhaps from their internal or logical consistency.

However, this also allows us to indulge in a degree of cherry picking, taking some aspects of each that are attractive and not inconsistent to develop a better understanding of the nature of policy, policy making and processes of policy change. The stages model is attractive to those looking for ways of passing on the detailed techniques involved in policy making. It follows the same format as many instructional texts (car repair manuals or cookery books for example) and while we might take issue with the content of the proposed stages, we are likely to be comfortable with the pedagogic device of the logical sequence of tasks.

The ACF approach is attractive because of the emphasis it gives to the wide range of players involved in policy making and to the influence of external factors and systemic shocks. It does not treat the policy process as a discrete phenomenon with a clear beginning, middle and end and it ascribes some causal power to a combination of the intrinsic value of ideas, the power relations apparent in any battle of ideas and the broader factors that help shape those power relations. In this sense it embodies Giddens' notion of structuration as a theoretical reconciliation of the competing significance of agency and structure in social relations.

Finally, the discursive approach has the attraction of emphasising the socially constructed nature of knowledge and of advocating a more inclusive and democratic approach to policy making. It makes explicit the political role of the policy analyst and stresses the need to be aware of one's values and to employ them consciously in the policy process.

### **The Role and Position of Policy Research and Evidence in Policy Making**

We can now consider the role of policy research and evidence under each of these three conceptions and along five analytical dimensions. These relate to the basic premise of the conception, the role that evidence and policy research is held to play, the main problems envisaged with this role, potential solutions to them and any outstanding issues.

Table 1 outlines the overall position and we can sum up the stance of each as follows. Under the stages model policy research plays an important role at every stage of the process: in helping to frame and understand problems that demand policy interventions; in comparing the likely impact of alternative policy solutions to these problems and in evaluating the ultimate impact of any measure that is put into effect. The value of this research is based primarily on the rigour with which it is undertaken and hence the robustness of its findings and conclusions, although the significance of

**TABLE 1**

The role of policy research and evidence under three conceptions of the policy process

<b>Element</b>	<b>Rational stages model</b>	<b>Advocacy Coalition Framework</b>	<b>Argumentative turn</b>
Key feature	Policy is made through a logical series of stages in which policy analysts serve legitimately elected decision makers.	Policies are the product of competition among advocacy coalitions in which the rules of the game are determined by relatively stable political, social and economic structures.	Policies should be the product of democratic deliberation, facilitated by deliberative practitioners.
Role of evidence and policy research	Enters at every stage, from problem framing, through solution generation and alternative testing, to retrospective evaluation. Scientific quality of evidence is crucial – stronger truth claims are more likely to be used by policy makers.	Evidence and ideas are associated with Advocacy Coalitions and carry weight accordingly.	Development of shared understanding of issues, problems and ways of solving them, facilitated by deliberative practitioners.
Main problems with role	Research utilization: policy makers ignore research even when its truth is accepted.	Finding an appropriate coalition to join or form that will promote your evidence. Intellectual standards of research quality are less significant than status associated with coalition.	Unequal power relations continue to allow the privileging of some positions and perspectives. The ideal speech situation is not realised.
Solutions to problems	Bridge the gap between research and policy by harmonising cycles, improving specification of research, clearer presentation of findings. Improving the quality of research and its dissemination.	Striving to maintain objective quality standards of evidence. Becoming more entrepreneurial and aware of political realities.	Policy analysts continue to strive to create more equitable discursive spaces in which every viewpoint is given some respect.
Outstanding issues	Evidence continues to be used selectively and politically by policy makers.	Difficult to maintain commitment to quality standards in face of political realities.	Non-judgemental stance can also apply to methodologies considered redundant. Relativism.

timeliness and presentation is also acknowledged. However, the demonstrable and persistent failure to use much of the evidence generated by policy research presents a problem under this conception as the inherent quality of the research cannot account

adequately for this lack of utilisation. The solution seems to lie in a number of developments. First, policy research should be driven more by the needs and requirements of policy makers than by the inquisitive preferences of researchers. The 'Rothschild principle' that all policy research in government should have an identifiable policy customer was intended to meet this requirement (Rothschild, 1976) and remains a dominant principle in the commissioning of policy research within government. Second, forward planning and greater dialogue between researchers and policy makers can harmonise the cycles of research and policy making so that research evidence is more likely to be available when policy makers need it. In this respect, seminars for policy makers, practitioners and policy researchers organised by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have helped in achieving greater harmonisation (if not harmony) in local government policy research in the UK (Solesbury *et al.*, 1999). Third, policy researchers are encouraged to present their findings more clearly, concisely and coherently and to avoid an overly 'academic' style of writing in which a highly specialised language is used, definitive conclusions are often eschewed and there is a preoccupation with methodology and citation of the work of others (Wiles, 2004). The ESRC has for example published a pamphlet which profiles of a number of social scientists who are described as 'heroes of dissemination' (Walker, 2001) and provides significant support now for those it sponsors to enable them to engage more effectively with policy makers (McGrath, 2001). Finally, policy researchers are urged to pay more attention to the quality of their research. This is seen to lie mainly in the design of research as well as the application of relevant methods and is manifest most clearly in ongoing debates about the value of experimental and other methods in outcome evaluations (Oakley, 2000). However, there is also a perceived need to improve standards in the conduct of qualitative research (Spencer *et al.*, 2003) and to develop more widespread competence in quantitative analytical techniques in public policy analysis (Cabinet Office – Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000).

An outstanding problem remains though: despite improvements to its focus, quality, timeliness and presentation and in the face of protestations to the contrary (Mulgan, 2003), research utilization remains poor (Nutley *et al.*, 2003). There are various responses to this, perhaps the easiest being to treat it as confirmation of Keynes' maxim that there is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed. Another is to adopt a more sophisticated conception of utilization and accept a less direct but perhaps more pervasive relationship, as Hammersley (1995) has suggested in his development of Janowitz's distinction between enlightenment and engineering models of the policy-research relationship. Another still is to accept the rather pessimistic conclusion that while policy analysts may well speak truth to power, the powerful are not obliged to listen and will usually only do so when it best suits them (Haas, 2004).

Under the ACF, policy research and evidence are associated with competing coalitions, even if they are conducted by independent policy researchers. The weight or value of research is therefore dependent to some extent on the position of the coalition with which it is associated and its intrinsic quality is likely to be affected (positively or negatively) by this association. This in itself presents a problem to researchers wedded to the notion that quality counts more than institutional location and status in intellectual debate. But even for the pragmatic researcher there remains the problem of finding an

appropriate coalition with which to be associated. The solution to these problems is two-fold: first, a continued insistence on objective quality standards for research and second, the development of a more entrepreneurial and politically aware stance among researchers that will help in finding a suitable coalition home. The outstanding problem remains, however, one of objective research quality and the need to maintain professional standards and integrity in the face of pressure to accept that presentation and marketing might be more important than content. Having opened the door to the possibility of a variety of socially constructed realities and to the conclusion that the value of policy research depends on the political clout of its adoptive coalition, it is difficult to retain the strong notion of objective policy researchers uncovering universal truths, revealing these to policy makers and seeing them incorporated in the process of making policy.

Under the argumentative turn, policy research gives up its outdated claims to analytical objectivity and political neutrality as well as its belief in positivist scientific method. Instead, policy analysts become deliberative practitioners operating within a clear value framework that promotes greater social and political equity. Policy researchers are no longer outside experts granting access to a store of objective knowledge, but instead are insider facilitators of participatory or emancipatory research: they are guardians of a process as much as of any distinctive content. The problem facing policy researchers under this conception lies in the continued existence of systematic power inequalities that stand in the way of genuinely collaborative processes of research. It becomes increasingly difficult for policy researchers to work in and if necessary against the state, when the state itself embodies these systemic inequalities. The solution is to continue to use the opportunities provided by a notionally democratic political system to create and exploit spaces for critical discourse in which shared understandings and awareness of inequalities can be created, even by those oppressed by them (Jennings, 1987). A longer-term solution according to Fischer is also seen in the training of future generations of deliberative practitioners on the basis of a 'post-empiricist curriculum' in which greater emphasis is given to exposure to history, novels and poetry than to learning the techniques of regression analysis. Although this may be attractive to some, it has yet to figure prominently in the research training priorities of the ESRC as the pre-eminent sponsor of social science training in the UK. Indeed, many in government bemoan the lack of rigorous analytical rather than interpretive skills amongst recent graduates (Wiles, 2004) although there are also promising signs that methodological advances are now coming from the development of more rigorous multi-method approaches to social research.

The outstanding problem for those committed to the argumentative turn lies in the ever present danger of relativism in which a commitment to avoid the privileging of any one viewpoint becomes a tolerance of anything. Epistemologically this presents itself as the classic problem of using a meta-narrative to deny the logic of meta-narratives. However, the 'danger' of relativism is not necessarily seen as such by those committed to the possibility of 'post-positivistic objectivity' (Bernstein, 1982) and to the argumentative turn. Indeed Fischer describes this concern about relativism as 'an outmoded relic of neopositivist/empiricist epistemology' and suggests that relativism in fact 'serves as a counterweight to those who dress up their political rationalisations in moral language' (Fischer, 2003, p. 137). There is another danger though: in believing that discourse is

everything and that material inequalities can be overcome by discourse alone, it may appear not only that words are deeds but that they are sufficient to change society for the better (for an interesting response to this position, see Edwards, Ashmore and Potter, 1995.)

### **A Future for Policy Research**

The discussion so far has described some practical efforts to move beyond the rationalism of the stages conception of policy making. It has also considered the nature of the relationship between research and policy implied in different conceptions of the policy process. But what might the relationship look like in the future? Two further questions are especially pertinent in trying to shed light on this: who should carry out policy research in which settings and what skills do they need to do it more effectively?

#### *Who Should Do It and Where?*

In many of the models of policy making and explanations of policy change described above, relatively little attention is paid to the variety of actors who work within policy sub-systems, although the ACF does distinguish between administrative agencies and legislative committees at all levels of government; interest groups; journalists; researchers and policy analysts (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 119). If we are concerned more precisely with how research evidence and policy come together, then we need to develop a more detailed understanding of this constellation of relevant actors.

The long-standing distinction between research *for* and research *on* policy (Hogwood & Gunn, 1981) helps here because it corresponds to some degree with the distinction between the domains of government research and academic research. Much research *for* policy, especially option appraisal and policy evaluation is carried out within government while much research *on* the nature of policy and policy making tends to happen within universities. However, it is probably more appropriate to talk here of academic research in the form of reflection on the nature of policy making arising from more focussed studies of policy development in particular settings and to note that studies whose primary focus is the nature of policy making tends to be less common.

Of course these two domains are not separate. There is a substantial overlap and growing connections between them and we might talk of a third domain in which a significant volume of policy research is now undertaken. This third domain contains a rich mix of types of research and of researchers. The types of research include impact evaluations; work on the framing or conceptualisation of policy issues; explanations of particular social and political phenomena and the development of evaluation and appraisal methodologies. Much of this work is carried out by university based-academics, but there is a significant presence of independent research organisations. While commercial research companies are unlikely to engage in more abstract or theoretical work, not-for-profit research organisations and think-tanks are more willing and able to do research *on* as well as *for* policy.

Research in this domain is also commissioned by a variety of bodies. Government departments and other policy making bodies have in the past been the main sponsors, but more recently some foundations (for example the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the UK and the Aspen Institute, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Institute in the USA) have become more prominent alongside other research funding bodies such as the ESRC in the UK, EU institutions such as the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and global bodies such as the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation.

This mix of different funders, types of research and researchers in the third domain can present a number of problems for policy research. Without the apparent clarity of carrying out option appraisal within government or abstract theorising within the academy, boundary tensions are more common. Academics sometimes struggle to move beyond offering only tentative conclusions and rarely pass up the opportunity to call for further research; commercial researchers remain bound by strict time-management principles and are wary of unfunded contract variations that might allow more theoretical reflection; not-for-profit independent researchers bemoan the hidden subsidies available to academics and the fees commanded by their commercial colleagues. Disputes also arise over ethical and methodological principles: should the research design be simply the best or the best within the budget; should some expensive but unproven methods be rejected even if the sponsor is willing to pay; can data collected for one purpose be used legitimately for another?

Although the range and number of research organisations is expanding, universities remain among the most significant. William Julius Wilson (2002) has written persuasively of the case for expanding the domain of policy-relevant scholarship in the social sciences and in doing so predicted that within universities those social science disciplines that respond most rapidly and widely to the pressure to confront policy relevant issues will do best in attracting funds for research and 'institutional expansion'. Clearly there are those in the academy who see immense dangers in developing closer associations with the world of policy and some who see it simply as a distasteful and unfortunate aspect of modern academic life (Sennett, 2006; Wacquant, 2004). But for those academics interested in the substance of policy and politics, it seems perverse to harbour no aspirations to produce work of any relevance or significance to policy. This is not to say that universities should become the research institutes of the state, totally dependent on it for all sources of income and driven entirely by the state's conception of relevance and standards of quality. Instead it suggests that as policy researchers and policy scholars we should think about who we hope to influence with our work: are we writing mainly for fellow academics, for the funders of research (who may or may not be state policy institutions) or perhaps for society at large? The clear ideological preferences of Lasswell and Fischer are not in fact so far apart in this respect.

Wilson makes a two-pronged case for greater policy-relevant scholarship, one of which at least ought to appeal to those with more traditional notions of scholarly endeavour. First, he suggests that academics will sometimes be asked for their advice, conclusions and evidence even when their research is not yet, in their view, in a definitive state. The academic must then choose between the perils of offering advice laden with

caveats that is then ignored or declining to comment until ready to do so and running the risk of missing the boat. The second prong of his case follows Janowitz (1972), Weiss (1979) and Hammersley (1995) in recognising the enlightenment that can be brought to bear on the general policy environment by social scientific concepts, theories and ideas. There will always be a fine line between what policy makers see as the helpful intervention of the sociologist offering conceptual enlightenment or the historian who can show the antecedents of a problem and the impenetrable critique or politically naïve commentary thrown into the political arena by some academics. But, traditional scholarly research carried out within the academy can be highly influential among policy makers. Who would have thought at the time of its initial publication that a study of social networks in Italian villages would prompt so many governments to adopt the notion of social capital as the basis of much of their social policy?

To sum up, the institutional setting for policy research is significant but not in any simple deterministic sense, whereby only academics are capable of producing theoretical insights or only commercial researchers can deliver policy relevant research on time. However, the political economy of research means that most commercial research organisations will be unable to afford the time to engage in lengthy periods of theoretical reflection. Financial sponsorship of this more reflective work is usually the preserve of academic researchers, although in the UK the increasingly selective distribution of central government funding for academic research may well limit the capacity for high quality work of this nature to a small number of universities. Academic researchers are learning to manage the tensions between carrying out research of direct policy relevance, often sponsored by government, and engaging in the more traditional scholarly research that might provide some enlightenment in the longer run and clearly have more to learn. But what of the other skills needed by policy researchers?

### *What Skills Do Policy Researchers Need?*

The rise of the evidence-based policy 'movement' has focused attention on some of the skills needed by policy researchers. So far these skills tend to be seen of two types – analytical and presentational. For example, the PIU 'Adding it up' report made a strong case for increasing the analytical skills of all those involved in policy making and there may well be substantial gaps in the technical capabilities of many in the field (Cabinet Office – Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000). Similarly, ever since the Joseph Rowntree Foundation began publishing pithy summaries of its research in the form of 'Findings', increasing attention has been paid to the presentation of research findings in the most effective ways to those that might use them. There has even been a certain division of labour as professional journalists have been employed to write digestible summaries of social research for wider consumption.

However, less attention has been paid to date on the wider range of 'people skills' needed by policy analysts and policy researchers (Mintrom, 2003). Some of these are generic and relatively uncontentious – time management, team working, presentational skills and project planning. But some of the conceptions of policy making discussed above suggest that a further set of more political skills are needed by the effective policy

person, whether they are primarily policy makers, policy analysts or policy researchers. The ability to 'sell' research findings and indeed the very need for research is crucial. So is the ability to deal with challenges to one's technical competence, analytical skills and political motivations that sometimes come from those for whom research findings are less than helpful.<sup>1</sup> It is debateable whether skills such as these can be taught or whether they are better acquired through the often-painful lessons of experience. However, as courses in the equally nebulous skills of entrepreneurship are now routinely offered to undergraduate and postgraduate students in universities, there is no obvious reason why, as Mintrom suggests, something similar could not be developed for aspiring policy analysts and entrepreneurs.<sup>2</sup>

Of the three conceptions of policy making used here, only Fischer speaks directly about the training of policy analysts. His advocacy of a 'post-empiricist curriculum' entails a spirited attack on the political assumptions of 'neopositivist empiricism' and the effect they have had on the curriculum of social and policy research training (Fischer, 2003, pp. 232–6). However, he also speaks of the need to confront the egotistical problems faced by deliberative practitioners who must reject the elitist assumptions of professional expertise held by their predecessors. We are perhaps some way from seeing these principles enshrined in a policy research training programme delivered by the new National School of Government, although the methodological and epistemological pluralism contained in the Cabinet Office's Magenta Book represents something of a step in this direction (Cabinet Office, 2003).

## Conclusion

It is still too early to judge the overall impact of the grand project of modernisation of government in the UK. It clearly amounts to more than a set of slogans and rhetorical tropes (Throgmorton, 1991) as there have been substantial and significant shifts in the machinery and institutions of government. It is not so clear that the processes of making policy have been transformed to an equivalent extent, although evidence-based (or evidence-informed) policy making seems to be firmly entrenched as an operating principle for most public policy organisations in the UK.

Despite a series of reports from the Cabinet Office in which the fiction of rationalism is acknowledged, the stages conception of policy making continues to dominate in governmental accounts of how policy is and should be made. For those freed from the responsibilities of office the situation is sometimes different. The diaries of Richard Crossman (1991) and Tony Benn (1996) for example paint a very different picture of policy making in practice to that in most policy making textbooks and Gerald Kaufman's advice on how to be a minister continues to be regarded as extremely valuable for those assuming high office (Kaufman, 1980). All of these shun the simplicity and rationalism of the stages conception. On the other hand, former senior policy officials sometimes find it harder to depart from the orthodoxy of a lifetime. Meredith Edwards' account of policy making in Australia is a case in point – the fascinating extracts from her diary whilst in office describe a very messy world that is not entirely congruent with the orderliness

associated with her advocacy of a 'good policy process' rooted in a stages conception (Edwards, 2001).

The framework put forward in the various Cabinet Office reports was valuable in drawing attention to the skills and competencies needed by professional policy makers, including policy researchers and others generating evidence for policy. These skills will undoubtedly be of great importance in the real world of policy making as all players in the policy game – policy analysts, policy researchers within and beyond government and decision makers – have to cope with messy realities rather than neat and logical sequences.

However, many remain wedded to the assumption, most closely associated with stages conceptions that research utilization depends mainly on the quality of research and the clarity and timing of its presentation. But the most telling contribution of the ACF and even more so of the argumentative turn is that knowledge and expertise are socially constructed and that the utilisation of research-based knowledge is driven as much by political expediency and broader social and political factors as it is by standards of objective truth and epistemological certainty. Policy researchers must become more politically savvy as well as technically skilful if they want their work to be influential, even if they cannot envisage themselves as fully-fledged deliberative practitioners.

The relationship between policy research, the evidence it generates and the policy process remains complex and not well understood. So far, attention has tended to focus on processes of utilisation rather than on the underlying conceptions of policy making. While new conceptions of the policy process may not offer the simplicity of the stages approach, they at least encourage greater attention to be paid to the skills needed by effective policy makers, policy researchers and policy analysts. In addition to the technical skills of research design, data analysis and presentation, future policy makers and policy researchers should and can be helped to develop a wider range of skills related to working effectively and ethically in a complex and turbulent political environment. This broader conception also allows us to consider the demand side of the equation: can the consumers of policy research become more sophisticated and capable in the ways they commission and use research? If these policy making consumers need results quickly, can they learn to avoid asking for research designed to yield results in five years time? If they need complex findings reduced to bullet point summaries, are they willing to accept that valuable contextual material will be lost in the process? Are policy analysts, ultimately, willing to commission research that might, in principle, reveal that a favoured policy is not working as intended and to defend its integrity from disgruntled politicians if this is the case?

In conclusion, the stages conception continues to dominate attempts to describe how policy makers should approach the analytical aspects of their job. There are few signs that it is losing its grip as a heuristic instructional device. But the different focus of the ACF in trying to explain how and why policy changes over time emphasises the contingent relationship between long-term and slow-moving structural developments and shorter term pressures emerging through unpredictable windows of opportunity. If there is any credence in this conception it in turn places greater emphasis on the analytical capacities of those who chart the long-term forces or drivers of change and on the entrepreneurial skills of those who spot and exploit windows of opportunity when promoting particular

policy options. Fischer's notion of the deliberative practitioner has many idealistic aspects that may not appeal to all, but it does force us to think about the discursive and argumentative capacities needed by successful policy makers and policy researchers and warns us of the dangers of hiding behind a façade of political neutrality and spurious epistemological certainty.

In this respect the three conceptions of policy making discussed here are as much complementary as they are competing. They refer to different aspects of the policy process and have different implications for policy researchers as well as for policy makers. If we are able to transcend some of the more sterile debates about the apparent distinctions between pure and applied social research and if we hold any ambitions to carry out research that has some connection with contemporary social concerns, then all three conceptions offer useful insights. If policy makers and policy researchers can be convinced of this then perhaps we will be able to speak of a modernised policy process in which research evidence carries as much weight as political faith and, crucially, to see signs that it is leading to better outcomes in the world at large.

## NOTES

1. At the time of writing, a report from The Identity Project at the London School of Economics had just been published. This offers an assessment of the UK Identity Card Bill and its implications and broadly speaking reaches a number of conclusions critical of the government's proposals. It was reported that a senior civil servant attempted to delay publication of the report until after a Commons debate and the Home Secretary described the research as technically incompetent and factually flawed and one of its authors as partisan and biased. The Director of the LSE, Sir Howard Davies, accused the Home Office of 'bullying and intimidation' in this matter and the Home Secretary offered no evidence of the alleged flaws in the research but was said to be standing by his comments.
2. Indeed, social researchers in government are now able to study for an MSc in Policy Analyses and Evaluation, awarded by the Institute of Education at the University of London and my own School has for some years offered an MSc in Policy Research which combines the teaching of research and analytic skills with the development of an awareness of the organizational and political context in which policy research takes place.

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**Paul Burton**, Senior Lecturer in Policy Studies, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol; 8 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TZ, UK. Tel: +44 17 954 5569; E-mail: Paul.Burton@bristol.ac.uk