
Ten Rules for Policy Advisers

The Hon. Dr. Geoff Gallop

Paper

2007

It's interesting to observe how the fiery battles between left and right in the twentieth-century have been replaced today by more modest debates about public policy options. The grand ideologies associated with capitalism and socialism are still active and relevant as moral and intellectual irritants but they are decreasingly used as benchmarks in political judgement or as stories in the political contest. That role has been taken up by social, economic, environmental and governance outcomes- growth and employment, measures of amenity and global warming, crime rates, health and education standards, and degrees of citizenship. Our new gurus have even been given a name - policy wonks.

Politics today is all about creativity and pragmatism in policy choice. Governments face both short term and long-term pressures and have available a range of options to deal with them - taxes and charges, subsidies and grants, laws and regulations, services and partnerships, information and education, consultation and involvement. .. The list is being expanded all the time.

Policy decisions are rarely made independently of political considerations. Indeed, the world of policy is at the intersection between the world of the natural and social sciences and the world of public opinion. There is research evidence and there is popular understanding. There are some things the public do not want to believe or, as Tony Blair's former policy director Geoff Mulan has reminded us: "The whole point of having a democracy is that you're free to make your own mistakes, and this is quite an upsetting notion for some academics." My late friend and former Senator John Wheel don put it to me this way when I decided on a political career: "Geoff, always remember the first rule of politics - never assume rationality!"

With these two points in mind here's my advice to those who aspire to move from theory to practice and become not politicians but policy advisers within government.

Rule Number One: "Knowledge is power".

Policy advisers need to keep in touch with the world of policy research and application in their area of work, not only in Australia but overseas. Governments are trying things out all the time not just as policy handed down from above in a systematic way but also as improvised in the course of day-to-day service and program delivery. Indeed, a recent Demos publication (Re-imagining government, 2006) reminds us that frontline workers and middle managers account for half of the innovations generated in the US and developing Commonwealth countries, rising to 82 per cent in advanced Commonwealth countries knowing about these developments is an enormously important asset.

Rule Number Two: "Remember the People".

It is important for policy advisers to be aware of the relationship between public policy and public opinion. When different options are being considered the attitudes of people are not just

important from a political point of view. No matter how rational a policy may appear it must take account of popular attitudes. Such knowledge of popular opinion and attitudes is also useful when policies are being fine-tuned and when implementation plans are being developed. If it is outcomes that matter - and they should - then the people cannot be ignored.

Rule Number Three: "Be prepared"

A good deal of public policy emerges from the day-to-day work of government in handling crises and responding to events. Even though these events may be unanticipated and their dimensions uncertain governments are expected to be decisive and effective in their response. Policy advisers need to be ready, willing and able to assist in the development of the 5-point plan as well as the comprehensive blueprint for the overhaul of the public sector! Case studies about crisis and events management should be on the reading list.

Rule Number Four: "Relationships are the key".

Policy-making does not occur in a vacuum and the role of the Prime Minister's (or Premier's) Office and the major central agencies (Treasury and Cabinet Office) is crucial. All policies have to be funded and need to be slotted into a government's overall program. All too often policy advisers see the "centre" as the "enemy". The reality is that central agencies are the gate keepers of modern government and advisers ought always to keep them fully informed. This builds the trust and confidence that will be invaluable and possibly decisive when it's tough going in the Expenditure Review Committee.

Rule Number Five: "Implementation means communication and management"

Policy development should always be seen as but one phase in a continuum. Policies have to be implemented and that means communication not only with the community but also within the public service itself. There will as a matter of course be issues that have to be managed as part of the implementation. For example, those delivering the policy will have to be fully briefed and trained for the task ahead. Such consideration should be part of the policy planning process right from the beginning.

Rule Number Six: "Leave no stone unturned"

In developing a policy plan it is crucial that all the potential hazards and problems be considered up front. All too often policy advisers are so captured by the "idea" that they take a range of crucial factors for granted, including public sector capacities . Risk management is not just a good principle for government generally it is a vital tool in policy development. At least if we are aware of potential risks we can consider options for their mitigation.

Rule Number Seven: "Engage the stakeholders"

Policy advisers need to keep in close contact with all the stakeholders involved in their policy area - the political party committees, the trade unions, the community and interest groups, academics, and, importantly, the relevant government personnel. It's not just a case of knowing the views of these stakeholders but also of knowing how they operate and how they respond to particular pressures and circumstances. Often what their leaders say and do are two different things!

Rule Number Eight: "Follow up"

It is important for policy advisers to keep in touch with proposals as they are implemented. Indeed, establishing proper and effective mechanisms for monitoring and assessment should be part of the implementation plan and needs to be taken seriously in practice as well as theory. Inevitably the parliamentary or media questions will come asking the Minister to report on the progress of government initiatives, particularly those announced with a great deal of fanfare.

Rule Number Nine: "Say no to stupidity"

Always remember that Ministers (and Premiers) will from time to time have policy "enthusiasms" whose implementation would be disastrous. They may be too relaxed following a holiday or too pressured following a session of talk back radio. Whatever the cause advisers should be prepared to say "no" when the occasion warrants. In doing this effectively some applied psychology will be necessary. Just as important, however, will be a good deal of telling evidence pertaining to the merits of the proposal that has captured the Minister

Rule Number Ten: "Smell a rat"

Policy advisers have power and this is understood by those seeking government support. Advisers should always be on the lookout for political and commercial interest when receiving and assessing proposals often presented as "much needed reform". Due process and due consideration always deliver the best results. As hard as it is to define the public interest is always the best guide. It is, as Terry Cooper intelligently observed, "a kind of question mark before all official decisions and conduct". Lest we forget.