
Urban policy-making: some strategic considerations

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Lecture

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My entry point for the study of urban policy was politics and the search for meaningful policies I could take to the people as Western Australian Labor Leader. In my case that meant policies for Perth - and by Perth I didn't mean the CBD and its local government but metropolitan Perth north, south, east and west. There had been a decade of serious effort in improving the governance of the state's non-metropolitan regions but less effort in relation to Perth, a powerhouse economy in its own right and the place where most Western Australians lived. Local activists had their views on what was needed as did property developers but I wanted a policy framework that reflected the wider public interest and which took into account the needs of tomorrow as well as today.

Fortunately, I had an ally in these endeavours - Professor Peter Newman and his colleagues at Murdoch University. They brought new urbanist thinking to Western Australia not just as a matter of "theory" but also "practice", many of them having been involved in the campaign to re-open the Perth to Fremantle railway in the early 1980s. When you are in the political fray day in and day out as I was it can be hard to think and act strategically; therefore, having academic allies strong in theory but also with their eyes and ears close to the ground is more than useful, it's essential.

One of the first things I did in government was set up a Sustainability Policy Unit in Premier and Cabinet to progress an election commitment to develop a comprehensive sustainability strategy. Following a process of consultation both within and outside government, academic input and cabinet consideration the Final Strategy was released in September 2003. Managing urban development was a major part of the chapter that dealt with sustainability and settlements and whose goal was to "plan and provide settlements that reduce the ecological footprint and enhance quality of life at the same time".

In my talk today, I will make the case for sustainability as a policy guide but will situate it in a broader discussion of strategy. I will

1. Outline what it means and - why it is important - to think and act strategically,
2. Contrast a sustainable development as opposed to a populist and fundamentalist approach to strategy and
3. Make a case for an appropriate mix of top down and bottom up policy making and implementation, not one or the other.

THINKING AND ACTING STRATEGICALLY

What, then, does it mean to think and act strategically? What distinctive features mark out a government that works in this way?

Firstly, it will be clear on its goals and the particular objectives it sees as necessary to promote those goals. In other words it will have an identifiable sense of purpose and narrative to back it up.

Secondly, it will have a well-developed understanding of the context in which it is working. It will situate itself within its environment, not with a view to succumb to it, but with a view to being able to manage it on behalf of its community-wide goals.

Thirdly, it will develop a set of policies and programs for which there is evidence of effectiveness or at least a well-founded view that appropriate results will follow. It seeks policies that are relevant and feasible.

Fourthly, it will not take its own organisation as a "given" but rather as an engine room of change that h

Fifthly, it will be fully conscious of the need for broad community support - and relevant stakeholder support - for what it is doing. It will seek alignments and allowances.

Finally, it will be monitoring and evaluating as it implements, not as an academic exercise but with a view to making adjustments along the way.

In other words such a government will have a sense of purpose, an understanding of context, feasible policies and programs, a change ready organisation, partnerships in the community and a readiness to adjust (or "agility" as we so often say today). In his book *The Art of Public Strategy* (2009) Geoff Mulgan put it this way: "All strategy involves setting priorities - being rigorous about what matters most, and directing energies to tasks that can be accomplished". It was, he said, all about "focus" and paying "systematic attention" to purposes, environments, directions, actions and learning. Incorporating learning is important as a reminder that governments need to be "iterative, experimental, and adaptive" rather than purely "linear" in their conception of change.

Listing these factors begs the question "why be strategic"? Why not just make the best of what is an unpredictable and uncontrollable world? Why pursue systematic change when we know that so much of it fails? This is, of course, the "events management" view of modern government. It's more about responding than it is about shaping, except perhaps in relation to one or two issues deemed more important than the rest. In those cases some degree of strategy may be helpful but not for the government as a whole.

Strategy is designed to take us beyond the status quo and towards a new and better world. Strategists know that if any of the six factors mentioned aren't taken seriously the capacity to produce results will be hampered. However, this begs the question what the results being sought? Is it political power pure and simple? Is it the social realization of a particular ideology? Is

it sustainable development? This takes me to the different types of government and how they understand strategy.

TYPES OF GOVERNMENT: POPULIST, FUNDAMENTALIST AND PRAGMATIC

Firstly there is populist government where everything is arranged around the aim of winning and keeping political power. Public opinion, focus groups and political marketing are essential tools for all governments; but for populists they are defining features.

Secondly, there are the fundamentalist governments of left and right who believe they have the truth about what works (and what doesn't work) and who see government as the technical exercise of applying those truths. In other words the outcomes they seek are in fact particular outputs (for example free markets in all aspects of life) deemed necessary for the good society.

Both of these styles of government have been found wanting. Populists are inevitably short-termists for whom the future is a bridge too far and the view they hold about "information management and control" sits uncomfortably with our belief in an apolitical public service. So too do they more often than not have to accommodate themselves to ignorance or prejudice when it may be creating major problems for social order. Fundamentalists are also hooked on one idea - be it liberty or equality or community - and have difficulty coping with contradiction, circumstance and unintended lack nuance in their politics and they inevitably fail, but usually not before damage is inflicted on our social fabric.

There is another way and I would call it principled pragmatism. The pragmatism about which I speak is that American tradition of thinking organised around "the idea that the function of thought is as an instrument of prediction, action and problem solving" (Wikipedia). It treats life as a learning process, the best ideas being those that emerge from the interplay between theory and practice. The theory or principle I bring to the pragmatist table is that of sustainable development which we may define as meeting "the needs of current and future generations through integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity" (WA Sustainability Strategy, 2003). Note that this concept takes us to potentially measurable aspects of social life and incorporates the future into its calculation of what matters. In other words, it takes us beyond populism and its purely subjective and numbers-based universe and fundamentalism and its narrow understanding of human nature and society.

Adopting a strategy based on sustainability rather than populism or fundamentalism is more complex and more challenging as a result - but is most likely to produce community-wide benefits or what we may call "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" because it leads us to examine more closely the consequences of what we propose. It's not a rigid methodology but a set of guiding principles that encourages us to look at all sides of a problem, to talk to those affected either now or potentially, and to think creatively about how to solve it. The deeper principle involved is "balance" in the way we live and in the world in which we live.

INSTRUMENTS FOR STRATEGIC GOVERNMENTS

This takes me back to Perth and my aspiration to make a difference for the people living there. What policies are available to produce good results? There are in fact a plethora of things governments can do to seek change in community outcomes that go beyond laws, directives and commands on the one hand and taxation and expenditure on the other. However, it is to these two that we inevitably go as the first port of call. In urban planning that means, firstly, the laws,

regulations and policies that apply to the way we occupy and manage space; in other words our planning laws and system and, secondly, the investment decisions of major government agencies in areas like transport, water, gas, electricity and the environment generally. These are the top-down instruments of power.

There is, however, a third instrument of power than can be put to good effort to support change - community engagement in all its forms ranging from an information campaign to a public meeting to a formal consultation to a democratic engagement based on random selection and deliberation. Such methodologies can be used to deal with small-scale local issues where interests are unyielding, in situations where significant conflicts exist between particular interests and the common good and also in relation to the general rules that should govern development.

Another aspect of the community context within which planning happens is local government. Local governments vary in prestige and trustworthiness but they do have resources and powers, even if limited. Ultimately state governments can override them but making that the basis upon which all relationships are built can be self-defeating. The alternative is to try partnerships around common objectives and with the intent to manage the inevitable conflicts of interest between "local" and "state".

In many ways it is the management of this tension between top down and bottom up politics and planning that is the key to success or otherwise. Governments have power and are expected to use it but so too are they accountable and not just in and through elections. It's not just a case of the need to back up power with the authority that comes from trust but also a case of finding new and relevant knowledge.

In the grand era of top-down planning all sorts of assumptions were made about people and how they wished to live, travel and work. What was lost was a feeling for "the overall quality of the public realm" and what was too often produced were "soulless living environments"¹. Involving the people in decision-making became necessary as a means of finding out what "liveability" and the "good city" really meant to the people who were city dwellers.

GALLOP GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

To promote good practice in community engagement I established a Citizens and Civics Unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It advised government agencies on how to involve the public in their decision-making and was an important source for reform, as was Minister Alannah McKiernan our Planning and Infrastructure Minister.

She utilised Consensus Forums to tackle the politically explosive issue of long vehicles and road trains in outer metropolitan Perth, the transport of freight to and from the port and to guide development on land opened up by a high school closure (Scarborough) and railway changes (Leighton Marshalling Yards). A Citizen's Jury was convened to settle a local dispute between suburbs on traffic flow on and off the new Reid Highway. In relation to the Scarborough land a deliberative survey to gain a proper insight into public attitudes was also held. Multi-Criteria Analysis Conferences were held in relation to East West Routes to the Fremantle port (as part of the Freight Network Review) and a proposed extension of the General Industrial Site in the North

¹ Professor Rob Adams, University of Melbourne Magazine, Sep 2014, p. 14

East Corridor. An enquiry by Design Dialogue was held for the Bassendean Railway Station upgrade and a 21st Century Town Meeting organised to guide planning for the future of Perth. This Dialogue with the City was the largest deliberative forum ever held in the southern hemisphere. Participants (including 1/3 randomly selected) produced *Network City: A Community Planning Strategy for Perth and Peel* and it was endorsed by the Planning Commission and the Cabinet.

All of this can help build trust in government so long as the terms and conditions of involvement are made clear and the initiatives are conducted professionally. Indeed they can give added authority to decision-making, particularly that which takes us into the future and the need to tackle vested interests on the ground and in the media.

Nor is it a complete alternative to top-down planning and the initiatives that flow from it. To this end the government was expanding the city road and rail network to meet future demand (the Perth to Mandurah passenger line being at the centre), building a recycling and desalination plant to help ease the pressure on the city's aquifers that feed its market gardens, adding gas-fired capacity to the electricity system, requiring developers to meet higher standards in all that they did and, most importantly, working to address issues of economic and social disadvantage in the south and east of the city. This revitalization required partnerships with local communities, governments and when deemed beneficial with private developers (for example in regenerating older public housing estates).

Very few of these initiatives from the top came without a degree of opposition and conflict. The water policies had been backed up by a Water Summit involving the public and relevant stakeholders but the other initiatives had come from within the government itself. Green activists liked the thrust of what was happening but wanted more focus on conservation. Developers saw the opportunities that came from change but balked at some aspects of a new regulatory regime. What became clear is that if you have a strategy aimed at particular targets government needs to be strong in the face of vested interests.

No government serious about results will rest its strategy solely upon top down or bottom up policy-making and implementation. It must be clear on its goals and what their achievement will require. There will be issues where slowing down the process to involve people will be necessary and those where a firm exercise of executive power over and against vested interests will be needed. As the UK Strategy Unit pointed out in their *Strategy Survival Guide* (2004) all decisions about government action need to consider three elements:

1. Do the proposed actions address the key issues and will they be able to deliver desired outcomes?
2. Can the proposed actions be delivered with the potential system capabilities and resources?
3. Is there sufficient political and public support to legitimise the proposed actions?

In other words acceptability is needed along with feasibility and suitability and where it is absent change may prove to be beyond the grasp of government. What good policy requires is good political judgement about when and how to implement as well as good design and capable officials to deliver it. In this sense policy making and implementing is an "art" rather than a "science".

CONCLUSION

Underpinning all of these developments - top down and bottom up - was the principle of sustainability and the equal status it gave to social, environmental and economic objectives. This promotes balanced development as opposed to the planning nightmares that have often come from modernism or the locational inequalities that have been created by laissez-faire development. Strange as it may seem but the evidence seems to support the conclusion that the pursuit of social, economic and environmental objectives together and as one project has a greater likelihood of assisting each, at least in the medium and long-terms, than does systematic prioritisation of one as against the others. Better cities are not only cleaner and healthier but also more economically efficient and socially just as a result. However, for that to happen they need the creative thinking we associate with sustainability and strategy; the former giving us the goals and the latter the means to achieve them.

In the Western Australian policy mix outlined above, then, we can see legislation, rules and regulation, government investment, public/private partnerships, place management and various forms of community engagement. Indeed to be truly strategic governments need to apply the full range of policies necessary to bring community-wide results. It's government as facilitator and enabler; focussed on economic, social and environmental outcomes rather than ideology or power. There is a blindness associated with too much ideology and a wilful aversion to the truth associated with populism that a principled pragmatism has the capacity to overcome. It all comes down to political leadership for sustainable development as opposed to directionless government operating on day-to-day basis or strategic government led by narrow ideologies or government as the relentless pursuit of political power. It's the "why bother" tribe on the one hand and the "keep it simple" tribes on the other that undermine good policy making.