Research Based Urban Policy: A Paper

by Len Gertler
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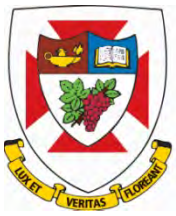

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Research Based Urban Policy

a paper by

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prepared for

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of Its Mandate - Part 1

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Research Based Urban Policy

Since I left the Urban Affairs Ministry in the mid-summer of 1974, I have continued to have an association in one way or another with the subject of "urban affairs". Immediately following my departure and return to the groves of academe I got involved, in cooperation with Ron Crowley, in an effort to interpret the research that had been initiated by Urban Affairs and to relate that to a broader appreciation of the cities of Canada. That effort saw the light of day in the book, Changing Canadian Cities: The Next Twenty-Five Years, published by McClelland and Stewart in 1977.

In the same period I had something to do with the initiation of a graduate research project by Angus Schaffenburg, then a Planning Master's candidate at the University of Waterloo who in 1978 successfully defended a thesis on the topic, The Development of Federal Urban Policy: A Case Study of MSUA, 1971-76. Then in the Spring, 1979, I published in the Canadian Journal of Regional Science a paper on "The Challenge of Public Policy Research", drawing heavily on the MSUA experience. Finally, I was Special Editor of the Spring, 1982 issue of the same journal on the theme of "Public Policy - Urban and Regional Issues". It included insightful contributions by Ron Crowley, Audrey Doerr, Allan O'Brien and Barry Wellar.

On the basis of all this, I would not go so far as to lay claim to recognition as the poet laureate of the decline and fall of the Urban Affairs empire, but perhaps I may be allowed to enjoy the humble status of an assistant coroner. The important point is that my report, in a sense, has already been filed. It's on the record to be consulted as you please. So why continue to bother about "Research Based Urban Policy"?

The best answer I can give is a bit complicated; it has two dimensions. The MSUA was an experiment in building a new kind of institution. It was an innovation for the purpose of developing policy and advising government with respect to a broad policy field cutting across several departmental jurisdictions, and in a way that was deliberately divorced from the distractions of program delivery. Furthermore, its central institutional concern: how to create and sustain an effective information and analytical base for public policy, remains unresolved. The issue is generic and the Urban Affairs case serves as an illustration of a broad dilemma of modern governance.

Thus we are not here, merely expressing a passion for history - to set the record straight, so to speak; nor, a perverse curiosity in institutional pathology. I start from the premise that what we are involved in is a search for an answer to one of the compelling riddles of modern government. From this perspective the concern of this commentary will not be on the merits of this or that particular initiative of Urban Affairs. Instead, it will be on what we can learn about the experience of the '70s which might lead us towards a more productive relationship between knowledge and public policy, between research and intervention in societal processes in a country like Canada.[1]

The Context

It is by now part of the conventional wisdom that the Urban Affairs policy Ministry emerged on the Ottawa scene along with the general thrust of the new Trudeau regime towards rational government. And certainly there can be no doubt concerning the claim to rationaltiy in relation to that legendary base-line of modern Canadian politics: the era of Mackenzie King in which

inadvertence in government processes was raised to a high art.[2]

The foundation of "the rational model" in the Ottawa of the seventies was the Cabinet Planning System. It featured a two-tier structure presided over by the Priorities and Planning Committee chaired by the Prime Minister, and specialized committees in broad policy areas such as Economic, Social, and External Affairs and Defense. It is not the place here to go into the intricate choreography of the annual processes of priority setting and resource allocation in which strategic overviews, the Fiscal Outlook, the "Lakes and Lodges" meetings, the Fiscal Framework and Throne and Budget speeches were the major political-administrative artifacts. Excellent expositions of these processes have been given in books by Audrey Doerr on The Machinery of Government in Canada, and by G. Bruce Doern and Richard W. Phidd on Canadian Public Policy. What needs to be highlighted was the attention given to two overriding processes: policy development and co-ordination. The first indicated a political will towards attaining a more sophisticated information and knowledge base for public policy. For the record, I lean towards a pragmatic definition of that term: the amalgam of objectives, strategies and instruments (be they expenditure, taxation, regulation, investment and enterprise or exhortation) that are deployed to meet publicly expressed individual and collective aspirations. In the Ottawa of the early seventies "policy" was the buzz word that reverberated in the corridors of power.[3]

Coordination was seen as the hand-maiden of rational public policy. It expressed a determination that the policy ideas that filtered through the administrative pipeline to Cabinet and its Committees should be treated in an inter-related way lest, for example, the right hand of environmental protection

be contradicted by the left hand of industrial pollution. To achieve a style of government animated by these transcending processes certain things had to happen. Central agencies like the Privy Council Office (PCO) and the Treasury Board which were in a position to lubricate the new Cabinet Planning System assumed a highly strategic role; most line departments established policy or planning units; and some new policy agencies in broad, cross-cutting fields were created. Hence, Science and Technology and Urban Affairs.

Interpretation of the Mandate

Again, for continuity in this tale I can suggest a number of works which document in vivid detail the play of forces that brought "urban problems" to the top of the agenda in the Throne Speech of October 8, 1970, and then the subsequent formation in mid-1971 of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. The papers and volumes cited in my opening remarks may do for a start. In line with the synoptic judgement that I seek, I want to recall briefly the mandate and institutional design of MSUA, and then to move on to a proposition concerning the reasons for its decline.

The Ministry's mandate and institutional design must be understood as being inextricably interrelated. Metaphorically, the men and women at PCO and Justice were given an injunction to walk on eggs, without cracking them. Accordingly they came up with what seemed like an ingenious formula: an agency that could insinsuate itself between the line departments and the central agencies - really a specialized extension with respect to urban matters of PCO itself; and an agency which would have as its anchor two unassailable federal functions: coordination of well-established federal activities in such

fields as housing, transportation and public works which affect urban Canada, and policy advice on this federal urban connection. Then added on to these functions were two bold initiatives - and this is where the fear of cracked eggs comes in - which had potential for influencing the entire climate of urban policy and urban development in Canada, while respecting constitutional sensitivities, particularly the provincial jurisdiction over municipalities. My reference is to cooperation and liaison with the other actors in the urban policy process: provincial and municipal government, and private organizations; and to research on urbanization. These two together had the potential for transforming the urban policy process by making inter-governmental consultation the hallmark of the urban sector, and through an open research program progressively increasing the volume and quality of information commonly available to governments, community and special interest groups.[4]

On the role and potential of Urban Affairs research, I stand by my words written in 1979.

"I wish to establish the link between the research function and what I have called the 'touchstone' of the Ministry's mission: the capacity to turn inwards to the federal system and outwards at the same time. The inference I draw is that a research program embodying [these] principles [dialogue, flexibility, openness and substantial funding of external, independent studies] could go a long way to serving both "gods". While steadily building the capability to meet the in-house and policy coordination and development needs, the research program, in the way it would be both reported and used, would contribute substantially to creating the sought-for consultative climate. Everyone concerned would have a "piece of the action". And whenever the participants in the consultative process would assemble around a table to explore problems or strategies, they would appeal to a common information base drawn from investigations across the country, and would share the benefits of enhanced insight on basic issues. This is not to say that harmony would prevail. There would, of course, be controversies and conflicts, but those based on differences in research capability, and access to information would be minimized, although never eliminated."[5]

Other wrinkles of institutional design added to the novelty and challenge of the new Ministry. Those were the inclusion in the Minister's portfolio of two Crown corporations, Central (now Canada) Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the National Capital Commission; and the appointment of the Minister to the Cabinet Committee on Social Development and The Treasury Board. Thus, the Minister was handed a blessing that was mixed - some of the spending power which is conventionally associated with Ministerial clout, and with it the hazard of being drawn too deeply into what might be politically high profile program concerns, and correspondingly away from the demanding role of innovator in both policy substance and process. At the same time, participation in key Cabinet Committees would enable the Minister to pursue both the prescribed policy and coordination roles - on broad issues in Social Development and with respect to large projects in Treasury Board. However, just to make life interesting and to remind the Minister of the mortality of things political, the new breed of agency was declared to be of "a temporary nature; of such a duration as to enable them to come to grips with the policy problems assigned to them."[6]

The Decline

Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that after a relatively brief heyday that the Urban Affairs Ministry had a turbulent and difficult history. A considerable part of its institutional life has fortunately been documented in some detail. Some of the major symptoms of stress and non-fulfillment of its mandate were the following. I have selected five:

1. The lack of official, Ministerial-level participation of the province of

Quebec in the Second National Tri-Level Conference on Urban Affairs, October 22-23, 1973, Edmonton.[7]

2. The abortive outcome of the Tri-Level Task Force on Public Finance which was initiated at the 1973 Conference, and which reported three years later in a form: monumental indigestible statistics, and circumstance that produced no results whatever.

3. The performance of the Senior Interdepartmental Committee on Urban Affairs which, established by Cabinet decision in July, 1973, to institutionalize high level coordination of urban-related policy and programs, did not in fact get off the ground; meetings were infrequent and the prescribed reporting to Cabinet through the Urban Affairs Minister or a parallel Cabinet Committee never materialized.[9]

4. The fate of the Canadian Urban Demonstration Program which, in anticipation of UN Habitat '76, was established in March, 1974 to stimulate innovative projects through a multi-sectoral fund of $100,000,000; but then was unceremoniously cancelled in April, 1975. Commenting on this, Allan O'Brien, who had been deeply involved both as President of CFMM and a member of MSUA's committee on this Program, wrote - "This may well have been the point at which the ministry ceased to become "established" and began its downhill slide to oblivion".[10]

5. The gradual erosion and trivializing of policy research in Urban Affairs which moved from a focus on major themes starting in 1972 to a motley collection of unrelated studies, and finally in 1977 to the dropping of the term "research" from the nomenclature of the Ministry.[11]

In stressing the downside of the Urban Affairs experience, it is not my intention to downgrade its positive achievements. The Ministry, throughout most of its life, was the beneficiary of the dedication and strenuous effort of staff at all levels. Some of its work such as that on the Inner City and Urban Growth made, in my view, an enduring contribution. I find myself in agreement with the judgement of Audrey Doerr: "The Ministry of State for Urban Affairs was an important catalyst in focusing on policy issues and designing a research agenda in the field.-----It stimulated critical thinking and it provided a base of experience of the strengths and weaknesses of policy organizations. It provided some new perspectives on the relation between policy and policy-related research".[12]

In seconding the motion of these remarks, it is precisely the relationship between policy and policy-related research that I wish to hold in focus. While research as an intellectual and methodological activity can be identified as a distinct process, in a government agency with a policy mission it really is, conceptually, inseparable from the other statutory functions of policy evaluation and development, coordination and consultation. Since by design MSUA was excluded from program delivery and any budgetary control of urban-related expenditures, the only avenue left to the Ministry was the power of its ideas in the decision-making process. The ascribed functions of the Ministry must be seen as a continuum of ends-resources-means. Policy and Coordination are in this sense Research in action.

Given this perspective, the critical consideration is the relationship of MSUA to the decision-making process of the Federal Government. Regrettably, the weight of the evidence indicates that the Ministry's institutional niche was from the start precarious if not entirely untenable. Analysts like Ron Crowley and Audrey Doerr make the point that the clout of a horizontal policy sector straddling many agencies and programs (for "urban affairs" the count was 27 and 117 in 1971) depends critically on its relationship to the Cabinet. Practically and symbolically that requires an acknowledged secretariat position between the line departments and a Cabinet Committee - much in the style of the second generation Ministries of State in the economic and social spheres. In the latter instance there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that their demise at the hands of Mr. Turner, was based on too much rather than too little power, but that's another story! Since an independent policy advisory status was never attained, the Ministry was left in limbo, vulnerable to all the play of sometimes lethal bureaucratic games.[13]

Any interpretation of an issue as complex as the fate of a federal government ministry runs the risk of over-simplification. Accordingly, it is necessary to acknowledge briefly the impact of both an internal and contextual factor. Within the Ministry, it must be noted that its original internal design: separate units for Policy, Coordination and Research may have inhibited the functional integration on which its effectiveness depended.[14] And outside the Ministry, we can now see, thanks to the insights of Richard French, that there was apparently an intensifying rivalry during the '70s amongst contending planning systems operating from three different centres, namely the Privy Council Office (PCO), Finance and the Treasury Board.[15] The slight hesitancy in this assertion is due to the fact that the French diagnosis has been challenged, but not demolished in the pages of Canadian Public Administration.[16]. What is not in dispute, however, is the perception that in the face of competing policy stances, for example, the fiscal/monetary fine tuning of Finance vs. the strategic intervention of PCO, Cabinet was having serious difficulty in identifying and sticking to priorities. Meticulous evidence is brought forward to show that the idea of an "industrial strategy" pursued from 1970 to 1975, was a victim of this malaise.[17] So little wonder if on occasion Urban Affairs got lost in the shuffle.

A Disturbing Question

It is my hope that you do not find the explanations offered to this point excessively convincing, because the life and times of Urban Affairs still leaves us with a disturbing question. What I am referring to is the striking contrast between the luminous clarity of purpose expressed publicly by the "architects"

of the Ministry, and the denouement that we have noted. In the Throne Speech of October 8, 1970 we find these words:

> "One of the greatest of the challenges to individuality comes from the increasing pressures of urban living.....To solve the problems [of urban development] will require an increasing share of the nation's financial resources; not to solve them, to permit unmanaged growth, would result in an unacceptable drain of the nation's human resources. To foster coordination of the activities of all levels of government and to contribute to sound urban growth and development, the Government proposes the reorganization of its urban activities under the direction of a Minister of State for Urban Affairs and Housing. The Government seeks, by making rational its efforts in these fields, and through consultation with those most deeply concerned, to help Canadians reach and implement the decisions that will determine their urban future."[18]

This outlook was further amplified, and altered in one significant respect, when the Hon. Robert Andras, the first Urban Affairs Minister, tabled the draft Order-in-Council in the House of Commons on June 25, 1971. The interesting part of his speech is this:

> "The Ministry is purposely named the ministry of urban affairs, not urban affairs and housing, urban affairs and transport or urban affairs and land management; and it is so named because its policy mandate is unrestricted and as wide as possible, while its direct operational role is non-existant. The ministry's role will be coordinative as between federal policies and their departments. It will be supportive of all relevant federal programs and projects on behalf of comprehensive urban policy."[19]

The perplexing question that is raised is why in the face of these brave new words was the Urban Affairs idea implemented in a manner which seemed designed for failure? Do politicians willingly shoot themselves in the foot? One is led to the conjecture of either a lurid Machiavellian conspiracy; or to the possibility that the powers-that-were had a dim appreciation of the role of a research-based policy agency and of what it takes to make it effective. The first option gains some support from Douglas Hartle, former Deputy Secretary (Planning) to the Treasury Board, Referring to the then Deputy Secretary (Plans) PCO, he wrote in the Spring, 1983: "I do not doubt that he was intent on

wresting power from mandarins and ministers and gathering it to the prime minister and, by definition, to himself. His insistence on the creation of toothless ministries of state, such as MSUA, represented, I think, the decision model he had in mind at that time."[20]

Notwithstanding the stature of Professor Hartle, since he was a deeply involved protagonist in central agency encounters, I feel there is an obligation to reflect on, but also to temper his somewhat austere judgement. I am left with the other part of the conjecture, and to deal with that I think we must shift to a more conceptual level of discussion. This may be worth doing because the issues of governance raised by the Urban Affairs experience are still with us.

Research in Public Policy: Issues, Concepts and Conundrums

At this time I take it as axiomatic that the collapse of Urban Affairs in the late seventies has left a conspicuous policy vacuum in Canadian urban policy-making. It is now, after the fact, too easy to say that this does not matter because urban issues are no longer important to this country. There is room for skepticism. Indeed, the lack of an effective monitoring and analytical agency at the national level has obscured certain realities which we as a country will sooner or later have to confront. There may be a reckoning.

My own researches have shown a pronounced bias towards the situation which so alarmed the Federal Cabinet in 1971, namely the expansion of the big metropolitan areas. In 1971 there were seven above a population of half a million accounting for 42% of the population or urban Canada; in 1976, the

figure was 49%; and at the last Census, 1981 those centres, expanded to nine, made up over 54%.[21] Another telling statistic relates to the population of rural areas. Within a general downward trend (declining from 27% to 24% of Canada's population between 1961 and 1981), the country has witnessed a dramatic expansion of urban-based population into the countryside, so that today over 82% of rural population is "non-farm" - 10% more than in 1971 and 20% more than in 1961.[22] Urban policy will increasingly have to give attention to those issues: economic, social, spatial and environmental, arising from the encounter of city and country. This is a phenomenon which will be further accentuated by the rise of information technology, which will significantly increase the proportion of our population who will be able to chose an exurban residence while maintaining contact with their offices via a computer terminal.[23] To these issues of growth and structural adjustment are added in these stressful times the distributional issues that focus in the Cities: jobs, training, social services, recreation, housing and the inner city which must respond to increasing numbers of dependent households. In 1985, there is no lack of an agenda for research based urban policy.[24]

In the spirit of reconstructing the basis for a future Canadian urban policy initiative, I will now invoke a few fundamentals about the role and potential of policy research. Let me give you a very concise interpretation. For this, I call upon the insights of Amitai Etzioni, James S. Coleman, and Raymond Breton, who in the early innocent days of the Institute for Research on Public Policy wrote an illuminating little book called, The Canadian Condition, and of course, all of this is filtered through my own, sometimes traumatic experience as a policy researcher.[25]

The important point of departure is to distinguish policy research from what Corry and Bonneau have called "frontier research": curiosity-based empirical and analytical investigation through experimentation and or observation which has the purpose of discovering new knowledge. Policy research, by contrast, is a reflective kind of inquiry that tries to make sense of what we know in the interest of effective organized action on society's problems. One can catalogue a large set of differences between policy and frontier research: secondary rather than primary data; more synthesis than analysis; problem - rather than discipline-oriented; interdisciplinarity to address complex issues in contrast with discipline-defined issues; an accessible rather than technical vocabulary; and greatly concerned with communication to policy-makers and their constituencies, instead of the coolly indifferent intramural preoccupations of experts talking to experts.

This distinction that I draw between academic and policy research was an active concern in the Urban Affairs Ministry. Crowley in his 1982 comments observed that "for those from academic backgrounds, research is often an end in itself, and it would not be unfair to conclude that research staff in the early years of the Ministry did see research as a pre-eminent goal."[26] My own reflective observations written in the final year of the Ministry were: "Policy as a distinct species of investigation does not have deep roots in our academic soil. And because that was so abundantly clear in the product that flowed back from the campuses to the Ministry, it served only to deepen the two solitudes of professor and politician. From the viewpoint of the man in Parliament, the professor roared like a lion and produced a mouse."[27] I am now pleased to report a glimmer of hope. In the spring of 1984, a mixed group of academics and practitioners at a Workshop on Research in Public

Administration gave some thoughtful consideration to "the respective roles of political decision-makers, policy analysts and academic researchers around public policy issues."[28]

It is inherent in the concept of public policy research that it is closely related to government. This is not because non-government groups and organizations, be they the Institute of Urban Studies or the Canadian Labour Congress, have no interest in matters affecting the state of society like unemployment or environmental health; rather, it is because many of the issues are functionally and territorially broad in their impact and require the attention of the state. What is not, however, self-evident from the definition is why policy research may be important to the state; and why we should still care about research based urban policy in relation to the Government of Canada.

On this question, I have turned to a recent work by two people who I perceive as sophisticated spokesmen of contemporary Political Science in Canada. They are G. Bruce Doern, Director of the Institute of Public Administration at Carleton University and Richard W. Phidd, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Guelph. Their book, Canadian Public Policy, is a highly literate effort, comprehensive, with many valuable insights, and it has the virtue of expressing a definite position on the public policy system as a key component of the Canadian political system.[29] But, I regret that I can find very little insight on the role of research in government.

Their guiding concept of public policy is, from my point-of-view, both the strength and limitation of their perspective. Ideas are the mainspring of the system. These, operating at three levels: ideologies, dominant ideas and

objectives are expressed in, shape and give life to the structures and processes of government. The state deploys a variety of instruments - taxation, expenditure, regulation, public enterprise and exhortation - to attain its ends. At any given time, the policies that emerge are the product of a complex array of forces: dominant ideas like efficiency, individual liberty, equity and regional diversity, as well as paradigms like Keynsianism or monetarism, which are given concrete expression in party platforms and Parliament; executive-bureaucratic influences; the play of interest groups; and the information and knowledge available to the system.

The interpretation of the latter comes to the crux of the issue raised here. Knowledge that is pertinent is seen to come from both intellectual processes and social interaction. Democratic policy-making must have both hard and soft information: "official statistics, quantitative and scientific data", on the one hand; and on the other, various kinds of judgemental, political intelligence generated from "ministers, their political staffs, the party caucus, party professionals, the media, individual citizens and opinion leaders." It is observed that "knowledge is not necessarily power...only one basis on which influence may be exercised."[30]

All of this, from my viewpoint, is beyond reproach - as far as it goes. What is to be noted, however, it that there is no place in this exposition for a policy research function. In keeping with the concept defined in this statement, reference is to a process which is dedicated to linking the worlds of processed knowledge and political intelligence, which is primarily integrative and interpretive in style, and is possessed of the importance of contributing to the quality and productivity of policy discourse through effective

communication to the main actors in the public policy process. This function is conspicuously absent in the exposition of Canadian public policy. Indeed, what are called "policy analysis units" are given short shrift; few do "genuine research", whatever that means.[31]

Policy Research and Legitimation of the Modern State

To further clarify the thrust of these remarks, I will conclude with an appeal to a line of thinking called "critical theory" which is mainly identified with a Frankfurt professor of philosophy and sociology, Jurgens Habermas. This is of particular interest to this discussion because of the implications in that theory of the concept of "legitimation" of the modern state.[32] Several strands of the theory can be brought together in a synoptic overview, as follows:

Legitimacy refers to "a political order's worthiness to be recognized" and to exercise political power.

The modern western state: Capitalist, technologically advanced and with a democratic heritage, attains legitimacy in two forms: procedural and substantive.

Procedural legitimation is based on processes in which agreement is obtained and decisions made in circumstances which participants feel are free and equal and without domination.

Legitimation related to matters of substance derives from effective state interventions to overcome the "dysfunctional side-effects of the economic process."[33]

A "social welfare state-mass democracy" seeks legitimacy by policies and programs addressed to the major structural risks of "developed capitalist economies", namely the disruptions of the business cycle; external costs of private production like those of pollution abatement; and unequal income distribution. At the same time the state must support the requirements of a capitalist economy on which it is dependent.

"The complementary relationship between state and economy results in a goal conflict---especially in downward phases of the business cycle---conflict between a policy of stability" in favour of the private business sector, and "a

interest in relation to public policy is the light it throws upon the potential of policy research in modern government. The prospect is raised that we greatly demean and underrate the significance of policy research if we conceive it simply as another technical process, instead of a strategic variable in the public policy system that can make a critical difference to the quality of government. It may be no accident that since the death of Urban Affairs in 1979, the urban-related policies that have flowed from Ottawa have given us little cause for celebration.

End Notes

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