

## ORGANIZING FOR URBAN POLICY: SOME COMMENTS ON THE MINISTRY OF STATE FOR URBAN AFFAIRS

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The Ministry of State for Urban Affairs was put to rest quietly on March 31, 1979. During the four years which it took to dismantle the organization the painful bleatings of those who got caught in the death throes were heard periodically, but little attention was paid to them. Nevertheless, the period from its creation in 1971 to an event in 1975<sup>1</sup> which marked the beginning of the end for this experiment in policy machinery included some vital and stimulating years.

There have not been many detailed reviews or assessments of the Ministry of State concept as it was applied in the field of urban policy.<sup>2</sup> Professor David M. Cameron [2] has done an analysis of the Ministry's establishment and its first floundering efforts to develop national urban policy. His criticisms, in part, focused on internal administrative leadership (or lack of it) in the Ministry's early period. He described the efforts of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs to exercise its mandate as akin to a rudderless ship and said that "the rhetoric that belched from its funnels belied its reality; surely its designers had created a phantom" [2;246]. Cameron concluded with a plea for common sense in developing urban policy at the federal level. He did not preclude the need for a specialized agency within the federal government for the purpose of analyzing the impact of

<sup>1</sup>I am referring here to the amendment of the Central Mortgage and Housing Act in December 1975 which allowed the position of the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Corporation to be held by the Secretary of the Ministry. The integrated portfolio-management model which was subsequently put in place effectively displaced the role of the Ministry in policy coordination. See [3:147] for discussion of the organizational change.

<sup>2</sup>The Ministry of State concept has received its share of attention in political science and public administration literature, but no in-depth pathological study of urban affairs has surfaced.

federal activities on cities, but felt that organized efforts to formulate a national urban policy would be beyond the grasp of federal responsibility. Certainly, the issue of how the federal mandate in urban affairs came to be interpreted by the Ministry was a central problem respecting its effectiveness, but the issue became a problem, or rather was made a greater problem than it might have been, in the way the Ministry organized itself to interpret and exercise its mandate.

In a study prepared for the Science Council of Canada in 1974, Peter Aucoin and Richard French [1] reviewed the experience of the Ministry of State for Science and Technology. In the context of reviewing the ministry of state design, they compared the Science and Technology and Urban Affairs cases. Their analysis challenged the premise that "knowledge is power." In their view, this premise provided the inherent weakness of the design; to be effective, a policy agency needed program responsibilities. The ministries of state could not be expected to conduct research, consultations, analysis, and policy formulation with a view to implementing the policies through programs if they had no leverage over line departments and agencies that had the program responsibilities. A second main criticism of the establishment of the ministries was the purported lack of support from central agencies like the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board Secretariat and the central staffing agency, the Public Service Commission, in helping them to operate within the existing system of departmental and agency structures.

The gift of hindsight and the experience of two more recent ministries of state make it possible to challenge these criticisms. In the first instance, the separation of policy and program responsibilities is not necessarily a problem if other means are devised to ensure implementation of policy. In the cases of the Ministries of State for Economic Development (MSED) and Social Development (MSSD), leverage was provided by linking them into the Cabinet Committee process. These Ministries provide secretariat services to their respective Cabinet Committees as well as being responsible for policy coordination and development. Clout had been added, therefore, not by providing program responsibilities but rather by inserting the Ministries between the line departments and the Cabinet. Although assessment of their effectiveness varies depending on which officials in Ottawa one talks to, it seems that the new Ministries approach the status of sectoral policy coordinators much more than their predecessors did. In these cases, knowledge is power. However, the knowledge is not based on research done internally as much as on strategic intelligence regarding activities in the respective policy sector.

The second criticism, that the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs withered on the vine due to Privy Council Office and Treasury

Board Secretariat neglect, is really a moot point. Given the original mandate and structure, support from the Privy Council Office, for example, over and above that which it did provide would have been nothing short of intervention.<sup>3</sup> If the Ministry had served a Cabinet committee, the relationship would have been quite different and would have resulted in a different kind of liaison. In any event, in its early years the Director-General of the Policy Branch in the Ministry was a former Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet in the Privy Council Office and several officials in the Coordination Branch had formerly been with the Treasury Board Secretariat. Linkages with the central agencies were not missing.

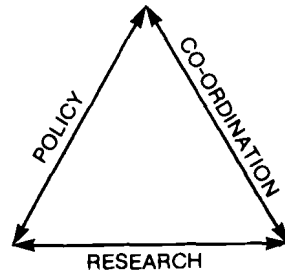
In my view, some of the more important problems were to be found in the internal organization of the Ministry. Recently, Professor Len Gertler [4] has critically examined the research role and activities of the Ministry. In his account, a number of important aspects of the nature of the organizational problems within the ministry are considered. Gertler identified four interrelated forces which led to the decline and fall of policy research in the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. These included limited support from external research constituencies and organizations like the Canadian Council on Urban Research; the internal conflict and confusion about the research role and mission; ambivalent links with the Canadian academic establishment; and problems of political leadership. The second force mentioned, the internal conflict and confusion about the research role and mission; ambivalent links with the Canadian Council on Urban Research; the internal conflict over the research role and mission, raises some important questions about the activities and internal design of the Ministry. The following discussion will attempt to address some of the questions which Professor Gertler sets out in his conclusions in considering the relationship between policy and policy-related research in a government setting.

In brief, it is my contention that although the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs was designed to be a policy agency, there was no clear conception of what that meant within the organization. A certain incompatibility arose between the research and policy functions, largely as a result of the differentiation rather than the integration of those two functions within the organization. Despite numerous and often continuous internal reorganizations, the activities of the ministry were divided into three main sections during the greater part of its existence.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between and among

<sup>3</sup>This was done when warranted in cases of interministerial or interagency disputes, especially in its latter years.

<sup>4</sup>There was a fourth main division, Planning and Evaluation, which took on a greater importance in the latter years of the Ministry's existence. The last

them was often depicted in the following way:



In theory, the separate identification of these three functions and the presumed relationships and linkages made sense. Research findings would provide the basis for policy development which, in turn, would be delivered or implemented intra- or inter-governmentally through the coordination wing. Flows of information and experience would not simply be one-way but would establish reciprocal links for exchange and further development. Thus, the Policy Branch could obtain information from the Coordination Branch, which it could use in its policy development activities; the Research Branch would obtain information and guidance from the Policy Branch in developing its research agenda, and so on.

In practice, the creation of these separate units led to the separate interpretation of the Ministry's mandate by each to suit its respective sub-organizational goals. Each unit, in particular the Policy and Coordination Branches, tried to incorporate policy, research, and coordination activities at the branch level. The National Tri-Level Conference project provides a case in point. This project was located in the Policy Branch, although logically it should have been placed in the Coordination Branch which had the responsibility for intergovernmental consultation. However, personal interests at the senior management level caused its location and retention in the Policy Branch. Although resources were harnessed from all parts of the Ministry in preparing for the two national tri-level conferences which were held in 1972 and 1973, the project team became a microcosm of functional integration in the Ministry. The project established its own network of official intergovernmental and federal contacts, relying, when necessary, on Coordination intelligence. Background research for the preparation of position papers or cabinet memoranda was generated by project officials or obtained from sources outside the Ministry. The contributions of the Research Branch to the Conferences were independent of the policy

Secretary of the Ministry used this unit as his management arm for the Ministry and portfolio matters.

process which linked in at the political level, but could not be considered part of it.

Similarly, the Coordination Branch created its own self-sufficient base in promoting and organizing regional tri-level conferences. Often, Policy Branch officials were only peripherally involved. For its part, the Research Branch focused its attention on establishing relationships with its own external clientele, which included quite different constituencies than those cultivated by the Policy and Coordination Branches.

Many more examples of these independent initiatives could be documented, but, at the same time, it would be unfair and wrong to create the impression that internal coordination was lacking completely. Inter-branch cooperation occurred, but the centrifugal forces were often strong ones. Perhaps this was the result of the numerous and diverse constituencies which the Ministry tried to serve from other federal departments and agencies, provincial governments, municipal governments, universities, non-governmental organizations, and so on. The Ministry had a complex mandate; that its organization was equally complex was not surprising, but the nature of the internal organization tended to isolate rather than integrate its several functions.

In my view, the primary purpose of a policy agency is to develop policy. So far so good. How then can you relate policy development and policy-related research? Like other government agencies, the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs reported to a minister, a politician. He was responsible for the agency, and it was within the realm of his responsibilities to determine what its priorities and agenda should be. His officials could bring him ideas, but in effect he decided what work was to be done. Responsiveness to ministerial needs is expected from officials in any government organization, but it is even more important, and there is a greater onus on officials, in a policy agency, for responsiveness to the minister generates the only results that policy officials can achieve. They cannot fall back on administering programs if their advice is not taken or their minister has little interest in their respective undertakings.

Research is important to the policy officer to the extent that it provides ideas and technical assessments of those ideas, some of which he may choose to use. If the work is technical, the research must be interpreted and translated in terms that the layman, that is the minister, can understand. If the internal organization of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs had been structured to allow for the integration of policy, research, and coordination around policy issues (which I have suggested above happened in a limited number of ways), would the results have been better or more effective? My answer to that is probably yes. It would have meant a far different role for research than that which was developed, but it would have

worked towards building a policy capability that could have served ministerial needs in a positive and more balanced way. Furthermore, this would have resulted in better communication, assuming personalities were compatible, between the Ministry and the Minister.

Thus, we come to a question raised by Professor Gertler: If one of the structural requirements of policy research is that it be accessible to decision-makers, can the policy research process retain sufficient independence to assure the integrity of the results? [4:88]. My answer, quite simply, is No. Government organizations which report directly to ministers do not have the independence that assures research integrity in the sense that academics understand it. I would go so far as to say that if a university was made directly responsible to a minister for policy-related research, the minister would move very shortly to fire everyone or simply ignore their activities and keep the university's budget down. Policy-related academic research seldom includes strategic considerations. It is helpful for the policy analyst to have research material to draw upon, but the strategy and formulation of the arguments will advocate certain courses of action in support of government objectives which initially or ultimately will be set by the politician [5].

In speaking of policy-related research, one must always ask who the client is in order to determine what is really meant by the term. In a government department or agency, the client is the minister, not academic peers or extra-governmental institutions. In a university, policy-related research from a public servant's perspective is viewed probably as curiosity research. The so-called alienation between professor and politicians is largely a function of the different institutional worlds in which they live. In the past, the academic community has had unrealistic expectations about the impact it can have on public policy; conversely, the politician and public servant have been less than sympathetic to the importance of academic research to the formulation and evaluation of public policy. What is needed are more "middle of the road" vehicles like research councils and policy institutes which can be given a strategic policy agenda for research but left the freedom to maintain the integrity of the results obtained whatever the government's policy objectives may be.

The Ministry of State for Urban Affairs was an important catalyst in focusing on policy issues and designing a research agenda in the field. Some argue that it failed; I would disagree. 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. That it tried to do too much for too many too quickly was a testimony to its vitality and its youth as an idea and as an organization.

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