

Canada's Policy Research Capacity: Observations from the Public Policy Forum

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In November of 1996, the Public Policy Forum wrote a letter to the federal Minister of Finance, The Honourable Paul Martin, about the need for "greater public-private collaboration in policy research" in Canada. Having been a part of the Minister's multi-stakeholder consultations on the 1995 budget, a number of important lessons emerged -- one of which was the benefits of bringing together knowledgeable people from government, business and the third sector to forge a consensus on a complex policy matter, that is, deficit reduction. It has become increasingly clear that government can not rely solely on the work of the public service in thinking through today's complex policy issues, and that input from and collaboration with other sectors provides many benefits.

The Forum's interest in this arena of policy research capacity has been long-standing. In 1988, 1991, and 1996, the Public Policy Forum organized roundtables, looking at capacity issues both internal to the federal government, and linkages with the external communities, especially in terms of the growth of the policy capacity in the private sector. Throughout this period, we have been observing with increasing concern the changes occurring in the policy and research environments in Ottawa. These changes (budgets reductions, development of parallel policy development organizations, departmental restructuring, 'managerialist' approaches to governing, new 'value-for-money' directions) have buffeted the policy and research communities and have generated questions about Canada's current capacity, within and outside of government. The combination of these changes, together with many other well-documented factors such as globalization and the impact of technology, have contributed to a decline in the overall capacity in Canada, but especially of the federal government, to do policy research.

In Canada, unlike countries like the United States, the federal government has been the most significant player in funding and generating policy research. A recent study on policy capacity in Canada noted the lack of willingness on the part of both Canadian politicians and bureaucrats to 'tolerate, much less

commission, external critiques of government policies'. This culture and the historical dominance of government in policy research has discouraged the growth of external organizations and the identification of new and innovative approaches to linking the policy-research communities. This has not been the case around the world. Today, with the federal government's role altered, Canada faces the challenge of looking to new and innovative approaches to policy research and policy development. While there are some creative models to consider – such as the Metropolis Project -- these are the exception.

The federal government itself has acknowledged these challenges. In 1995, Ivan Fellegi, Chief Statistician, was asked to chair a committee of senior federal public servants to look at "strengthening the policy capacity of the federal government". The final report set out a clear direction that the federal government had to both strengthen its internal capacity, and to build its relationship "with policy expertise outside government in the academic policy research community and in provincial governments".

In response to this report, the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) was launched in 1997 by the Clerk of the Privy Council. The PRI is a commitment by the federal government to identify the key medium term policy issues that will face the country, and encourage the rebuilding of a policy research community, both within the federal government and outside of it, to undertake multidisciplinary research in support of key 'horizontal' issues, such as social cohesion, knowledge economy, and human growth and development.

Earlier this year, the Public Policy Forum in partnership with CPRN (Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.) was invited to look at the issue of strengthening the relationship between the internal and external policy research communities. A background paper was prepared by CPRN that documented the current climate and the key issues that needed to be confronted. A roundtable of some twenty-five individuals from the federal government, academe, think tanks and some private sector representatives was held to assess these issues. In April, the Public Policy Forum organized a search conference with the dual objectives of (a) bringing together diverse perspectives and building a shared vision for the policy research community, today and twenty years hence; and (b) developing a set of tangible measures to improve relations.

The results of this search conference were significant. First, there was a clear consensus that there is a Canadian policy research community, committed to working together, and keen to expand beyond the traditional membership -- drawn largely from universities and government -- to include new and emerging players. These include think tanks and not-for-profit organizations which are increasingly contributing new data, information, research and networking opportunities to the public policy arena. In addition, there was interest in exploring relations with the business community and municipal governments, with a view to better understanding how they obtain, analyze and utilize research material. Participants underlined that public policy is no longer the purview of only one sector and that greater understanding of what every sector is contributing is key

to strengthening public policy in Canada.

The second major outcome was a recognition that funding alone would not resolve the current crisis in policy research capacity in Canada. Participants noted the importance of changing the culture and climate -- in both government and academe, and perhaps even more importantly, across these sectors -- to provide for opportunities where policy research can be openly shared and discussed, where more coordinated effort can be made to undertake policy research on medium term horizontal policy issues, and whereby an environment could be created to encourage the exchange of policy researchers across the community. Judith Maxwell of CPRN proposed the "10% Common Space Model", a virtual arrangement through which members of the broad policy research community would devote ten percent of their activity to a collaborative exercise in building and nurturing the community. This would include such activities as participating in joint data gathering and sharing initiatives, in developing shared electronic web sites, in partnering for research and development and participating in conferences that cut across the community and across policy research issues. The remaining 90% of members' activities would be devoted, as now, to their own pursuits and interests. In the spirit of increasing collaboration and better marshalling resources for key issues, participants also agreed that there was a need, once a year, to come together to talk about a shared agenda for policy research in Canada. To this end, the federal government has organized a national policy conference on October 1-2, this year in Ottawa.

Finally, while not a major focus for the search conference, the issue of funding was raised. Participants recommended that the federal government should provide stable funding to the PRI, and organize funding for horizontal policy research that now largely must be acquired by the external community through multiple funding submissions through various departments. It was also recommended that the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) initiate a 'quick response' fund that would reduce the amount of time currently required for approval of research and that would look to supporting work in think tanks and the not-for-profit as well as the academic community. Finally, participants noted that there was a need to look at how to pool resources better across sectors and, in particular, how to more effectively tap into funding provided by private foundations and philanthropic entities. The actual mechanism for bringing this into effect was not however addressed.

Overall, the search conference contributed to expanding thinking about the Canadian policy research community and went beyond identifying issues and barriers to finding solutions to improving the relationship.

Outside of this search process, the Public Policy Forum is itself looking at issues of policy capacity and at the external policy research community. There is little that has been done to date to acknowledge the contributions of sectors, other than the academic community, to policy development. This is particularly true of the third sector and the business community. The Forum is committed to holding further discussions with these sectors.

The Forum's mandate is to bring together leaders from all sectors to share their insights on a variety of public policy and public management issues and to find common ground or at least a common understanding of the convergence and differences of viewpoints. Our roundtables have been informed by research gathered from all sectors. In all instances, we have found the sharing of research across sectors has strengthened the outcomes of our conversations. Moreover, we firmly believe it is in the public interest that greater linkages need to be developed between government, academe, innovative new centres of policy research, other levels of government, including municipal governments, and the private and voluntary sectors. In our work, we have found a richness in data, information, experience and intellectual capital that these other sectors access and contribute and which allows them to both undertake and influence public policy. As noted in Ivan Fellegi's report, "the policy resources and contributions of those outside government [need to be considered] as a complement to the government's internal capacity."

There is no doubt that there is an shared interest across the Canadian policy research community to find new and innovative approaches to dealing with the complex public policy issues we face today. There is also a general awareness that these issues no longer fall neatly into boxes: climate change is an issue that impacts on our health, environmental actions or inaction, our industrial strategies and the robustness of our economy, on land use and transportation investments, - to name but a few. How we handle these issues will determine the future health and wellbeing of the country. It is a responsibility that we all share.