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Jumping into the Political Fray: Academics and Policy-Making

Strengthening Canadian Democracy

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Biographical notes

Daniel Cohn holds a doctorate in political science from Carleton University. He is an assistant professor of political science at Simon Fraser University, where he teaches Canadian politics. His work has recently appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* and *Revue Gouvernance*. He is currently working on a book about public-private partnerships.

Summary

For the last 50 years it has been argued that academics have a special place within the policy process of liberal democracies. They are said to have an obligation to participate in public life by engaging in the policy process and to ensure that the knowledge they create serves the greater good. Academics, it is said, do not see themselves as mere experts; they consider that they should not contribute to the introduction of policies they do not believe in and whose goals they cannot support.

Scholars have obtained their freedom by being disengaged from the socio-economic and political power needed to implement the ideas and advice they might develop. As a result, they frequently see the relationship between academia and the state in terms of the difficulties they face in influencing policy-making.

In this study, Daniel Cohn argues that academics have substantial and ample opportunities to influence public policy but that this influence is usually indirect, achieved by convincing those with power to advocate for and/or act on their ideas. Cohn examines how such opportunities arise and can be generated by academics. He also looks at the ways in which state actors can best make use of scholarly advice.

It is argued that a key bridge between the ultimate decision-makers in state organizations (the so-called first community in the knowledge utilization literature) and academics (the so-called second community) are "third community" actors. This third community overlaps considerably with academia and is highly pervasive within both the state and the private sector. These actors use knowledge and information to produce analyses that are useful to decision-makers and then disseminate these analyses in order to influence or advise decision-makers. The research staffs of government ministries, cabinet committees, central agencies and task forces are all part of the third community, as are investigatory commissions, public inquiries and research councils. Cohn refers to these public sector third community actors as "policy advisers." In the private sector there are consultants, research staffs of political parties, interest groups of every sort and research centres (or "think tanks"). Research shows that when academics make the findings of their research accessible to policy advisers, either in the publications of third community organizations or by playing a more active role in the third community, they improve their chances of influencing public policy.

According to the author, one major barrier to the effective participation of academics in the policy process and to the ability of state actors to use their advice is the importance of context for state actors. Context is of minimal concern to scholars trained to employ the scientific method to find *the* answer to a given problem. For policy-makers working in a liberal democracy, context must

be taken into account and given serious consideration in almost every decision, as it defines the breadth and nature of their opportunity to advance policy.

Cohn goes on to explore the opportunities available for scholars to engage in activities that will foster a positive response to their policy recommendations. He shows that advocacy coalitions, which bring together members of the three communities — individuals and organizations who share normative and empirical beliefs and seek to work in concert with one another — are an essential element of Canadian public policy reform. And he shows what can happen if academics over-reach and make recommendations that are unsuitable for a given context and for which there is inadequate support.

Résumé

Plusieurs auteurs ont avancé que les universitaires jouent, depuis un demi-siècle, un rôle particulier dans le processus d'élaboration des politiques des démocraties libérales. Ceux-ci auraient ainsi l'obligation de contribuer à la vie publique en participant à l'élaboration des politiques et en s'assurant que les connaissances qu'ils développent, dans leur domaine respectif, servent le bien commun. Mais les universitaires ne seraient pas de simples consultants. Ils auraient la liberté de choisir les idées et les politiques qu'ils désirent contribuer à mettre en œuvre et donc d'en refuser d'autres qui sont, à leur avis, contraires au bien commun.

Or, cette autonomie, acquise grâce à la distance qui les sépare du monde politique et socio-économique, serait également, selon plusieurs, un facteur qui diminuerait leur influence directe dans le processus d'élaboration des politiques publiques.

Daniel Cohn examine ce rapport paradoxal qu'ont les universitaires avec le monde politique et soutient qu'ils disposent malgré tout de nombreuses occasions d'exercer une influence sur ce processus. Cette influence serait indirecte et obtenue en convainquant les détenteurs du pouvoir de défendre ou d'appliquer leurs idées. L'auteur examine d'où viennent ces occasions et comment les universitaires peuvent les multiplier. Il s'intéresse aussi aux moyens qui permettraient à l'État de tirer pleinement parti de leurs travaux.

Daniel Cohn explique que le lien décisif entre les grands décideurs des organismes publics (la « première communauté », selon le terme en usage dans le domaine de l'utilisation des connaissances) et le monde universitaire (la « deuxième communauté ») est assuré par les acteurs de la « troisième communauté ». Cette troisième communauté chevauche le monde universitaire et est omniprésente tant dans la sphère privée que publique. Ces acteurs utilisent le savoir et l'information pour produire des analyses utiles aux décideurs, analyses qui sont ensuite diffusées en vue d'influencer ou de conseiller ces décideurs. Les membres du personnel de recherche des ministères, des comités du Cabinet, des agences centrales et des groupes de travail font tous partie de cette troisième communauté, de même que ceux des commissions d'enquête, des audiences publiques et des conseils de recherche. Dans le secteur privé, la troisième communauté est représentée par les consultants, le personnel de recherche des partis politiques, les groupes d'intérêts de toutes sortes et les centres de recherche (ou « think-tank »). Selon l'auteur, les études montrent clairement que les universitaires qui diffusent leurs analyses auprès des conseillers politiques, par le biais des publications de la troisième communauté ou en jouant un rôle actif au sein de cette communauté, multiplient leurs chances d'influencer les politiques publiques.

L'un des principaux obstacles à la pleine participation des universitaires au processus d'élaboration de politiques et à la capacité des décideurs d'utiliser leur expertise réside, selon Cohn, dans l'importance que revêt la conjoncture aux yeux de la classe politique. Pour des universitaires formés à des méthodes scientifiques axées sur la quête d'une réponse idéale à un problème donné, la conjoncture revêt une importance relative. Mais pour les décideurs d'une démocratie libérale, aucune décision ne peut être prise sans tenir compte d'une conjoncture qui détermine à la fois l'opportunité, la nature et l'étendue de leur action politique.

L'auteur s'intéresse aussi aux activités dans lesquelles pourraient s'engager les universitaires pour susciter une réponse favorable à leurs recommandations de politiques. Il montre que ces derniers auraient avantage à s'impliquer à l'intérieur de coalitions dont les membres partagent les mêmes convictions et le même désir de collaborer. Cohn affirme que ces coalitions, qui réunissent des membres des trois communautés, jouent un rôle clé dans la réforme des politiques publiques au Canada. Finalement, il examine les conséquences négatives qui peuvent se manifester si les universitaires formulent des recommandations qui ne reçoivent pas l'appui de ces coalitions et qui sont inadaptées à la conjoncture.

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Daniel Cohn

Introduction

The relationship between academics (people who hold permanent teaching and research positions in post-secondary institutions) and the state has been a topic of debate in Western societies since at least the time of Socrates and in Eastern societies since at least the time of Confucius (Bloom 1968; Yutang 1943). Seneca, the Roman stoic philosopher, believed that scholars had a moral obligation to serve the state whenever their services were needed. He saw only three reasons why a scholar could be relieved of this obligation to serve: ill health or old age, refusal of the scholar's services by the state, or public affairs so corrupted that the state is incapable of benefiting from the scholar's advice (Griffin 1992, 328).

As a teacher, minister and adviser to the Roman emperor Nero, Seneca knew whereof he spoke in discussing a corrupted state. Still, Seneca continued to serve, asking to retire from public life in AD 62 only after he had lost all hope of restraining the emperor. In AD 64 his request was renewed when Nero began sacking foreign temples to raise the money needed to rebuild Rome after the great fire. Although his requests were denied, Seneca thereafter served in name only, for the most part absenting himself from public life (Griffin 1992, 76-95). The implication here is that academics have a duty as citizens to use their knowledge for the public good and can avoid this duty only in exceptional circumstances. In Seneca's day, when speech against the state was a dangerous exercise, refusal by the state to accept one's services could legitimately lead to a decision to remain silent. Considering Seneca's thinking on this topic from a perspective within a functioning liberal democracy, some might argue that the withdrawal of the scholar from public life can be justified only on the grounds of ill health or advanced age.

For the last 50 years it has been argued that academics have a special place within the policy process of liberal democracies. Unlike public servants, they are not required to serve the wishes of democratically accountable political masters. Unlike professionals such as accountants and lawyers, they need not consider whether their advice will harm a specific client whose interests they have a moral obligation to protect. Finally, unlike those who work in the "real" worlds of the modern economy or the state, they have the freedom to ignore short-term contextual issues and to focus on the long term. These factors have led elder statespersons of modern scholarly life to argue that academics have an obligation to both become involved in public life by participating in the policy process and ensure that the knowledge they create serves the greater good. By this it is meant that academics are not merely technical experts. They should not contribute to the introduction of policies they do not believe in or whose goals they cannot

support (Cairns 1995, 288-9; Lasswell 1951, 9-10). Perhaps the most profound manifestation of this position is found in the pages of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, a publication for those people who are the quintessential technical experts: nuclear physicists and engineers. The *Bulletin* was founded by some of the scientists who had designed and built the first atomic weapons for the United States government. They believed they had a moral obligation to try to reduce the threat to human survival posed by nuclear weapons. The Doomsday Clock on the *Bulletin*'s cover serves as a warning of how close humankind is to the use of nuclear weapons. Its periodic movement toward or away from midnight symbolizes the board of directors' support for or concern about current policy developments (*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 2002).

As with many circumstances created by modern social relations, the good news is also the bad news. Academics have secured the freedom to act in service of the greater good only by being disengaged from the socio-economic and political power needed to implement the ideas and advice they might develop. Scholars today commonly see the relationship between academia and the state not in terms of the legitimate reasons by which they can avoid participating in the policy process, but in terms of the difficulties they face in influencing policy-making.

In this regard it is worth considering Reg Whitaker's (1992) reinterpretation of the later works of the Canadian economist and historian Harold Innis.[1] According to Whitaker, Innis came to see that as a scholar and as a Canadian he was blessed with an ability to understand both the world in general and the context of the rise of the American empire in particular, but that this power came at a cost — the absence of influence. It was the freedom of scholarship that allowed Innis to delve into matters and draw conclusions about Canada's economic and political origins. However, he had to be careful about what he said. Canada was still quite repressive and academic freedom did not extend far beyond the classroom. More pertinent to this study, however, Innis had difficulty communicating his ideas to those who had not invested time and effort in the scholarship necessary to appreciate his insights. For the ordinary reader Innis's ideas represented a startling breach with the world view that informed the status quo of daily life and that buttressed the power of those who ruled over society. As a Canadian looking inward from the hinterland toward the core of the American empire, Innis could see not only flaws in the world order that no American thinker could, but also the dire implications of those flaws for the development prospects of societies such as Canada. Yet just as his scholarly freedom was purchased through his absenting himself vocationally from true power, his status as a

scholar in the colonial world at the edge of empire made his work geographically marginal. Whitaker argues that Innis's conclusions regarding this dialectic between intelligence and power explain the profound pessimism exhibited in his later works.

It is not just those who practise scholarship at the margins of empire, and who practise in disciplines that unsettle the world view informing the status quo, who feel a profound lack of influence. Stephen A. Woodbury (2000), a past president of the American Midwest Economic Association, laments the lack of influence that scholarly economic research has had on American public policy.[2] Woodbury sees the principal barrier to the effective use of academic economic research in American public policy as a disconnect between scholarly economics on the one hand and public officials, be they bureaucrats or politicians, on the other. Somewhat echoing Whitaker's reading of Innis, Woodbury claims that the problem lies in two areas: first, public officials are not equipped to understand scholarly economics; and second, the problems of interest to scholarly economists are increasingly disconnected from those of the real world. However, Woodbury is not as pessimistic as Innis was, nor does he place all of the blame on the shoulders of public officials. For him the solution lies in economists taking the time to explain their research findings to decision-makers and other lay readers in ways they can understand. At the same time, he believes, scholarly economists must carefully listen to the concerns of their public audiences so that these can be integrated into future research programs. The present study expresses more optimism than Innis is purported to have done in his later years, and perhaps a little less than Woodbury does. It argues that academics have ample and frequent opportunities to influence public policy, but that the influence available to them is usually indirect and secured by convincing those with power to advocate for and/or act on their ideas.

This study looks at the sources of these opportunities, how scholars can increase the frequency of the opportunities and how state actors can best make use of scholarly advice. It argues that context is really what separates academics from policy-makers — whether we are speaking of the decision-makers who populate political offices and the higher reaches of the bureaucracy or the policy advisers on whom they depend. While context is of minimal concern to academics trained to employ the scientific method in seeking *the* answer to a problem, for policy-makers functioning in a liberal democracy it must be taken into account and considered seriously in every decision, as it represents the very breadth and nature of each policy-making opportunity. To gain influence, academics need to fully appreciate the issue of context and the methods available to overcome any obstacles that it poses.

Finally, the essay explores the opportunities for scholars to engage in activities that will make the context within which decision-makers are acting more conducive to the policy recommendations they wish to make. Here, the idea of advocacy coalitions (Sabatier 1987) is drawn upon to illustrate how a successful effort to reform Canadian public policy was launched. This concept is also used to illustrate what can happen if scholars overreach and make recommendations that are unsuitable for a given context and for which there is inadequate support.

Three Communities

The divide between decision-makers (those with the power to make public policy such as politicians and senior civil servants) and academics (those engaged in the creation of knowledge and information) is not as great as it first appears. This is because it is bridged to a considerable degree by a third community, the knowledge brokers. Lindquist argues that this third community comprises

> [i]ndividuals and organizations that do not have the power to make policy decisions, but, unlike the academic community, they do possess a clear aspiration of policy relevance in the work they undertake. This work — called policy inquiry…consists of publication and convocation activities as well as the generation of information (1990, 31).

In simple terms, these actors use knowledge and information to produce analyses that may be useful to decision-makers and then disseminate them so as to influence or advise decision-makers (1990, 37). Those who work within the government and whose work is intended primarily to support the efforts of decision-makers are referred to here as policy advisers.

The pervasiveness of this third community and the extent of its overlap with the second community (academics) illustrate just why it bridges the gap between academics and decision-makers. The research staffs (both permanent employees and contractors) of government ministries, cabinet committees, central agencies and task forces are all part of the third community, as are investigatory commissions, public inquiries and research councils. In the private sector there are consultants, the research staffs of political parties, interest groups of every sort and research centres (or "think tanks"). In Canada the federal and provincial governments have invested considerable time and effort in facilitating dialogue among third community actors as well as between them and actors from the other two communities, in the hope of improving public policy. However,

their efforts have not always been consistent (Dobuzinskis forthcoming; Voyer forthcoming).

Academics who are committed to shaping policy play important roles in the third community. The involvement of English-Canadian academics in third community organizations within the private sector has historically been slight if measured against the standards of Quebec or against the involvement of academics in such organizations in other countries. It has been argued that English-Canadian academics are more likely to participate in third community activities by serving as short-term (or contract) policy advisers to the state or by assuming permanent roles as either policy advisers or decision-makers (Brooks and Gagnon 1988). However, this view might be outdated (Bradford 1998, 108), especially considering the widespread growth of what Lindquist calls "policy club" research centres in Canada (1993, 576). Abelson defines these centres as organizations that seek to bring together academic researchers and policy-makers with similar interests (2002, 20-1).

Given this situation it should not be surprising to learn that when Landry et al. surveyed Canadian social scientists nearly 50 percent reported that they always or usually made an effort to transmit the results of their research to those with the ability to shape public policy. On the other hand, only 12 percent felt that their research findings led to policy applications and only 3 percent were willing to say that their findings always led to policy applications (2001, 339-40). On the surface this result may seem quite depressing. However, these descriptive statistics are only part of the story. As we shall see, academics are often more influential than they might appear. Furthermore, the engagement of academics in third community activities is a good predictor of the impact of their research.

Building Vertical and Horizontal Links between the Three Communities

It is easy to see why academics and policy-makers can sometimes be uneasy partners. Perfect rationality has long been viewed as beyond human capacity (March and Simon 1958), however much we like to think we do our best to meet the standard. Scholars try to meet this standard by applying scientific methods that isolate phenomena and control other factors so that the phenomena themselves can be better understood and so that, if a problem is judged to exist, a solution can be found. Policy-making also seeks to be as rational as possible. However,

policy advisers — those who research issues and prepare options for decision-makers — cannot generally focus their attention so single-mindedly; they must take account of a much broader range of factors. While scholars are trained to search for *the* answer, this answer might not fit the context within which policy advisers believe they are operating, given the concerns that decision-makers are known to have and the prevailing balance of political and socio-economic forces. Consequently — policy-making being a more pragmatic pursuit than academic research (Lindblom 1959) — policy-makers tend to search for *an* answer rather than *the* answer. In the policy-making literature these contextual settings are sometimes called "policy windows," the shape and size of which are said to go a long way toward determining the character of the policies that are produced (Kingdon 1984; Keeler 1993). The idea of policy windows points to another difficulty. It might take so long to find *the* answer that its proponents miss the proverbial boat, with the policy window narrowing appreciably during the course of the highly rational search. In this sense, perhaps too much is expected of academic research (Albaek 1995, 79-80). The idea that any one article or book is going to produce a specific, immediate and predictable change in public policy, regardless of the context in which policy-makers are acting, is unrealistic and likely to lead to disappointment (Landry et al. 2003, 193). On occasion, however, such "instrumental" utilization of knowledge does take place (Gerson 1996, 5-6; Borins 2003, 248-50).[3]

The impact of academic research on public policy is perhaps captured more realistically by envisioning it as "informing" policy-making and analysis than by searching for examples of a specific piece of research resulting in a specific policy decision (Lavis et al. 2002, 140). According to this approach to knowledge utilization, academic research influences public policy when policy-makers become aware of a school of thought on an issue that has come to prominence within some academic field. The policy-makers will incorporate the general findings of such research into their work if and when they encounter a problem that may be understood or resolved using those findings. According to this approach, it is impossible to assess the impact of scholarly research outside the context in which it is used. As we will see below, this has important implications for what policy-makers can demand of scholars and the research they produce. In addition, policy-makers are influenced not so much by the individual works of academics as by the schools of thought that these works represent (Landry et al. 2003, 193). Schools of thought on given issues are sometimes called policy paradigms. Hall (1990, 59) defines a policy paradigm as "the broad goals behind policy, the related problems or puzzles that policy-makers have to solve to get there, and, in large measure the kind of instruments that can be used

to attain these goals." In other words, policy paradigms, when taken from scholarly work and used in policy-making and then accepted by decision-makers, can provide policy advisers with a shortcut to understanding a given problem and its potential solutions, dramatically reducing the range of solutions they must consider when formulating recommendations for decision-makers.

More will be said about policy paradigms below. Before we proceed, however, it should be noted that in this approach to understanding the policy influences of scholarship, knowledge utilization is a multistage process in which ideas are converted into actions.

Landry et al. (2003), in investigating the utilization of university research in Canadian public policy, employed a modified version of the Knott and Wildavsky (1980) multistage model of knowledge utilization:

- *Reception*: policy-makers receive academic research relevant to their work.
- *Cognition*: policy-makers read and digest the academic work they have received.
- *Discussion*: policy-makers participate in meetings, conferences or workshops to discuss the findings of the academic research.
- *Reference*: policy-makers cite the work and its findings in their own reports or documents.
- *Adoption*: policy-makers advocate for the adoption of the reported findings as official policy.
- *Influence*: the findings influence decisions in the policy-makers' administrative unit.

Landry et al. (2003) surveyed 833 policy-makers. They found that when expectations for individual academic works are reduced to a more realistic level and it is the impact of academic research as a whole that is assessed, rather than the impact of a given researcher on a specific policy, scholarly output appears to be influential in most public policy fields. However, there is no denying that the stages of knowledge utilization as laid out above form an inverted pyramid or a funnel, with fewer and fewer ideas being utilized by policy-makers in the latter stages of the process.

One limitation of using the evidence from Landry et al. in this essay is that the authors do not differentiate between those public officials described here as third community actors (knowledge brokers engaged in policy inquiry), or policy advisers, and first community actors (those engaged in decision-making). Considering their discussion of how they went about recruiting their sample (2003, 196-7), it is likely that many of their respondents were indeed third community actors rather than the public policy decision-makers described here.

Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider their adaptation of Knott and Wildavsky's multistage approach to decision-making in terms of the three communities. It could be argued that as one progresses from the earlier to the later stages of the process, the interaction shifts from that between the second and third communities to that between the third and first communities. It is in the third community that knowledge and information generated by academic research is put to use in policy analysis and in the development of policy solutions for the phenomena defined as problems.

The work of third community actors is, therefore, as important to the development and adoption of policy paradigms as the scholarly research conducted by academics. Landry et al. (2001, 2003) also attempted to determine what makes some academic research findings more influential than others. They found the adoption of research findings in the policy-making process to be primarily an interactive process. One of the key predictors of the influence of scholarly research proved to be "user context." This means that tailoring scholarship to the expected needs of policy-makers is next to impossible beyond the immediate term, since it would require academics to predict the future — not just developments in their own fields of research, but the entire context in which decision-makers and policy practitioners will need knowledge and information in their fields. It *is* possible, however, to establish scholars as a reliable source of useful knowledge and information. Consequently, it is not enough for scholars to simply publish their work. They must also advocate for it. They must put their work in front of policy-makers, highlighting the policy implications, so that when a relevant policy window opens up, it is there. They can best do this by forging links between academia and the world of public policy-making at a general level. Such links can be and indeed are being forged through forums and other events that bring scholars and policy-makers together, through state-sponsored collaborative research projects such as the Policy Research Initiative (Voyer forthcoming), and through the opening of avenues for academics to work in the public sector and for policy-makers to work in academia (Borins 2003, 250).

> *Knowledge utilization depends on disorderly interactions between researchers and users, rather than on linear sequences beginning with the needs of researchers or the needs of users…The more sustained and intense the interaction between researchers and users, the more likely utilization will occur (Landry et al. 2003, 195).*

In other words, scholars must engage in the activities of the third community in order to increase the likelihood of their work influencing public

policy. This finding has been generally confirmed. In their exploratory study of the utilization of health services research in the Canadian provinces, Lavis et al. drive the point home, recommending that researchers and their funders should consider activities of the sort listed above as part of the "'real' work of research, not a superfluous add-on" (2002, 146). Still, the picture that has so far been painted of academic involvement in public policy is a rather passive one. Scholars do their research, develop schools of thought as to the causes of and solutions to policy problems, and participate in third community activities to transmit their ideas and capabilities beyond the boundaries of their campuses. At some unknowable time, policy advisers and the decision-makers whom they serve might find some utility in their work and employ it to facilitate their own. Depending on the size and character of the policy window that opens, the school of thought will have more or less impact on the shaping of public policy.

   In the next section we consider what academics can do to increase the odds of their work influencing public policy, if they believe that the results of their research indicate a need for urgent and sweeping change, or to better take advantage of any policy window that might open up.

The Building of Advocacy Coalitions

In the preceding section it was argued that public policy decisions are contingent on context. In other words, the issues that are seen as problems, and the set of options that are seen as their potential solutions, are subject to change. Factors that influence change include current events and the political balance created by the strength and policy positions of public opinion, organized stakeholder groups and, of course, political parties. So far, third community activities have been discussed primarily in terms of building links between academics, policy advisers and decision-makers. We have seen that this leads to a rather passive form of participation in policy-making on the part of academics. However, third community activities can lead to a more proactive role for academics if targeted at a wider audience, including those knowledge brokers and leaders — in civil society, market organizations, the media, the state and political parties — who possess the social and economic power that academics lack. Actions targeting those who shape public opinion, and the public itself, as well as those who shape the policy positions of corporations, associations, interest groups and political parties, go beyond policy-making into the realm of politics, in that they actively take advantage of context or even seek to

reshape it. If truly successful, such efforts might facilitate the development of an advocacy coalition. Sabatier (1987) describes advocacy coalitions as collections of individuals, and the organizations within which they function, who share normative and empirical beliefs and seek to work in concert with one another. He argues that a genuine advocacy coalition is stable and enduring — lasting a decade or two rather than mere months. The formation of an advocacy coalition represents a complete realignment of political forces. In other words, it is the sort of event that can shift the context within which policy decisions are made.[4]

An advocacy coalition does not take shape overnight, nor is its emergence a matter of either pure chance or deliberate action. Regardless of the degree of chance or entrepreneurship entailed in the formation of an advocacy coalition, someone has to lay the intellectual foundations in the form of new ideas and new evidence. Such foundations allow for the reconciliation of views among groups that had previously not found common ground. For example, the concept of sustainability has had a role to play in reconciling the views of businesses, state actors, and social and environmental organizations so as to enable them to take a stand on important issues as a coalition. Sustainability was first popularized by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. According to the commission's final report, sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland 1987, 54). Sustainability recognizes that economic activities (concerning both profits and jobs) are no less important than social progress or environmental protection (Brundtland 1987). Adoption of the language of sustainability has allowed businesses to partner with state actors, as well as with social and environmental movements, in dealing with society's problems. It can even be argued that sustainability is good for business, in that it can be equated with the creation of long-term value for shareholders.

In Canada both business and state actors have been receptive to the notion of sustainability. In 2000 the federal government established funding that led to the creation of the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy, which has been charged with developing indicators of sustainable development for Canada (Finance Canada 2000). The government has also begun to produce annual reports on the actions it is taking toward the creation of sustainability in Canada and the impact of these actions (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2005). In the business world, trade associations and individual firms are taking steps to reorient their activities toward sustainability (Hartshorn et al. 2005; Lazar 2003; Sanchez 1998; Nitkin and Brooks 1998).

There is still much dispute in Canada about environmental sustainability, social sustainability and economic growth. Not everyone supports the sustainability approach, and even among those who do support it there is heated debate in many areas about the possible trade-offs and how they should be evaluated (Lawrence 1997). The disputes and the halting progress that has been made in many sectors have led some critics, such as Rabe (1997), to argue that sustainability is a symbolic rather than practical concept. Nevertheless progress is being made in some areas. British Columbia has been particularly affected, as illustrated by the advocacy coalition that has emerged in recent years around the preservation of wild salmon stocks. While traditional opponents such as commercial fishers, First Nations, and sports fishing and environmental groups still have their disagreements (see, for example, Richards 2003), they have joined forces with others, including academics, to formulate policies for protecting the various species of Pacific salmon. One of the organizing principles of this coalition is sustainability. Symbolic of the coalition, and the recognition it has received from the federal and provincial governments, is the Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council (2005), which includes representatives from all of the above stakeholders. Among the concerns of those seeking to protect wild salmon stocks, and one of the motivating factors in bringing them together to promote sustainability, is fish farming. Aquaculture facilities pose a number of risks to the marine ecosystem, some of which are easier to mitigate than others (Gardner and Peterson 2003). In a surprising development, the largest salmon farming operation in the world has reached a memorandum of understanding with an umbrella group representing the wild salmon coalition, with the two parties pledging to work together and alongside governments to improve the sustainability of the industry and the aquatic environment (Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform and Marine Harvest Corporation 2006).

The work required in laying the intellectual foundation for the emergence of an advocacy coalition is work well suited to the skills of academics. The Canadian scholars who were at the centre of a coalition of think tanks, business leaders and organizations, politicians, journalists and media outlets to promote the economic policy paradigm now referred to as neoliberalism began their efforts to change the direction of Canada's economic policy in the early 1970s. They were part of a global movement that argued that the economic crises then being experienced in many countries were the result as much of policy miscues that made them inflexible as of global economic events (Kelley 1997).

During the postwar years Canada, like many other countries, built up Keynesian economic policies intended to protect society from economic turbulence. These policies worked reasonably well for a quarter of a century, and they

enjoyed wide consensus. In fact business leaders were at the forefront of the advocacy coalitions that pressed for the introduction of Keynesianism in both Canada and the United States (Ferguson 1995, 79-98; Finkle 1977, 356-7). Then, in the 1970s, something unexpected occurred. Western industrialized democracies entered a period of severe economic crisis (Cox 1987, 273-84). As the decade progressed, things worsened, as so-called stagflation, persistently high unemployment and inflation set in (Tobin 1982, 518). For policy advisers trained in Keynesian analysis, this posed a dilemma: they had to choose between stimulating employment, thus risking more inflation, and fighting inflation, thus risking more unemployment (Boothe and Douglas 1997, 210). Academic economists and a small but growing body of analysts in the public and private third community began to argue that attempts to stabilize the economy, maintain employment in spite of crises and generally protect Canadians from risks and change were in fact compounding the problems facing the country. They believed that Keynesian policies had reached a dead end. There was little that could be done to reduce unemployment in the short term (or to offer much protection against change in the short term), and if governments would only stop trying to do so, inflation would take care of itself. Furthermore, this would resolve the flexibility problem, as without government protection both investors and workers would quickly adapt to changing circumstances (see, for example, Walker 1977; Courchene 1980, 1984; Grubel 1984; Lipsey 1984).

The neoliberal academic economists had little success, until the latter half of the decade, in convincing business leaders and the organizations representing their interests to join them in an advocacy coalition built around increased flexibility rather than government protection from short-term risks (Brooks 1990, 89-90). By that time the members of the new coalition must have believed the situation was getting worse, not better, as the Trudeau government embarked on its nationalist phase of economic development (Williams 1994). The advocacy coalition (which was similar to what we might now call the market liberalization movement) achieved few policy successes in its first decade. Its first major victory came in 1982 when the Trudeau government appointed a royal commission to study the Canadian economy, thus tacitly acknowledging that the status quo in terms of economic policy was failing and that Canada was out of step with its international competitors. The Macdonald Commission broadly endorsed the line of thought advanced by the neoliberals (Bradford 1998, 115). The Mulroney government followed up on the Macdonald Commission's recommendation that neoliberalism be embedded in the Canadian economy by signing first the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and then the North American Free Trade Agreement (Doern and Tomlin 1991; Cameron and Tomlin 2000; Grinspun and

Krelowich 1994). Yet it would take a few more years, until the 1990s, for neoliberalism to become Canada's dominant economic policy paradigm.[5]

The events described above spanned roughly a quarter of a century. Nevertheless, for scholars seeking to change public policy substantially, participating in the building of an effective advocacy coalition is a surer route than simply waiting for their ideas to become relevant to policy-makers. First, such a wait might be very long indeed. Second, there is no guarantee that when a suitable policy window opens up, it is the ideas championed by academic research that will triumph. Even if academic researchers are unanimous in their views, they are only one group with one specific form of knowledge trying to influence the policy process. This is sometimes presented as a battle between truth (as revealed by scientific academic research) and ignorance (as revealed by political activity). However, democratic political processes are in fact a mechanism for reconciling multiple truths, or at least for selecting among them. The policy recommendations generated by scholars are only one of these many competing truths (Albaek 1995). The more competing truths are reconciled or eliminated, the more successful a group advocating for a given policy is likely to be. In this regard, one of the scholars at the centre of the neoliberal advocacy coalition had the following advice for those advocating further economic liberalization: "It is instructive to recall the free trade issue. Here, we economists had done our homework well, so that when the window of opportunity arose, we were well prepared" (Courchene 1999, 313-4).

The greater the change that academics wish to see, in terms of recommendations deviating from the goals of the existing policy paradigm (or even coming into conflict with them), the stronger and more broad-based the advocacy coalition supporting their views generally must be. This is because the existing policy paradigm represents a consensus as to goals among most actors involved in the policy process, even if the means to these ends is in dispute (Heffernan 2002). When compromises are needed, it is those policy elements that further the goals represented by the points of consensus that will be retained and those policy elements that conflict with them that will be taken off the table. In order to sweep away a policy paradigm and replace it with a new one, as the Canadian academic economists sought to do, the advocacy coalition must be very strong indeed. If scholars overreach and seek to bring about changes so great that they cannot be supported by an advocacy coalition, their recommendations are unlikely to be adopted beyond the degree to which they fit the prevailing policy paradigm and the interests of its supporters. This sort of situation often arises when scholars take positions as policy advisers. The results of reaching too far can actually be worse than those produced by the

somewhat passive strategy discussed in the preceding section. When academics make sweeping recommendations that conflict with the dominant policy paradigm, in the absence of a strong advocacy coalition to support them they can actually do harm in terms of moving policy further away from the goals they are seeking to fulfill.

It is worth returning to where this essay began, to consider the issue of atomic weapons. Prior to the official launching of the Manhattan Project, which produced the first nuclear bombs, academics struggled to convince the American and British governments of the need to support research in the costly and apparently impractical field of subatomic physics. European émigré academic physicists such as Leo Szilard, who were well aware of the capabilities of German science, as well as the horrors of fascism, were at the forefront of this campaign.[6] In 1939 they convinced another European émigré, Albert Einstein, to write to President Roosevelt on the topic. Einstein was so fearful of a world in which Nazi Germany was the first country to possess the Bomb that he abandoned his well-known pacifism to recommend that the United States consider developing atomic weapons. Once Germany was utterly defeated, many of the scientists whose work had led to the creation of American atomic weapons tried to prevent the use of these devices against Japan. They had become involved in building the Bomb so that Nazism could be destroyed before the Nazis got it and destroyed everyone else. Once the Nazi state had been obliterated by conventional means, in the summer of 1945, they saw no need to use the weapons. Many advocated for international control over atomic weapons and had grave misgivings about plans to design even more powerful ones. Their chief concern was that American policy would lead to an arms race with the Soviet Union that would imperil the survival of humankind. However, all of these debates were generally irrelevant, as the scientists themselves were deeply divided and those who opposed the direction of American defence policy had few supporters elsewhere. The concerned scientists were given a polite hearing and then told to go back to their laboratories and leave policy to the generals and politicians (Sherwin 1973; Bundy 1988; Lanouette 2000). An extreme case, perhaps, but it shows how scholars in a given field can lose control of an issue when they make a policy intervention without gathering the support needed to carry out their agenda.

For a more mundane example, consider the case of the scholars who participated in debates on medical human resource planning in Canada. At the start of the 1990s the Federal Provincial Territorial Committee of Deputy Health Ministers asked two of Canada's most prominent health system scholars to evaluate and recommend improvements to Canada's system for training physicians.

The resulting Barer-Stoddart Report (Barer and Stoddart 1991) indicated that the existing per-capita benchmark of physicians to population was adequate (if maintained, it would actually reduce medical school enrolments). The authors argued, however, that this ratio would remain adequate only if fundamental reforms were made to the way in which medicine was practised and physicians remunerated in Canada. They made over 50 recommendations, which, taken together, would see governments take much firmer control of the practice of medicine with a consequent loss of physician autonomy. At that time the dominant economic policy paradigm was moving toward advocacy for market liberalization. Consequently, the policy window available was not ideally suited for expanding the power of the state. Further, there was little in the way of an advocacy coalition to support this type of health care reform, no public demand for sweeping changes and overt opposition to the project by some groups, including official representatives of the medical community (Canadian Medical Association 1992).

Not surprisingly, the policy-makers put off dealing with recommendations that ran counter to the emerging trend in public policy. They decided to take from the report those elements that would lead to immediate cost savings, such as cutting medical school enrolments. Such savings were necessary for the government to achieve the redirection of state spending advocated by the neoliberal reformers. Consensus formed around those recommendations that were in keeping with the emerging dominant economic policy paradigm of neoliberalism — there was no real reason for it not to, in the shape of either a strong push from the public for wholesale reform of health care or a powerful advocacy coalition. Today, the Barer-Stoddart Report is considered one of the root causes of Canada's physician shortage. While it is unfair to blame Barer and Stoddart for the problem, it must be admitted that they overreached by making recommendations that could be viable only if implemented as a package. Such a large number of sweeping changes could not succeed unless supported by an underlying shift in policy paradigm. Yet they were made in the absence of adequate political preparation, in terms of mobilizing the public, establishing a suitable advocacy coalition or obtaining assurances that the policy-makers concerned had indeed accepted the need for a paradigm shift. As a result, the knowledge that the policy-makers had created was put to a use that they did not support (Cohn 2004).

The American social policy scholar David Ellwood had a similar experience. After spending a career trying to improve the lot of the most marginalized Americans, he inadvertently became the architect of one of the most regressive and unworkable social schemes of the postwar era: time limits for social assistance. Ellwood's recommendation was originally part of a large package of

reforms that were based on his scholarly writings (1988) and whose successful implementation would, once again, have required a paradigm shift in public policy. The reforms would have seen the federal government create a number of programs for individuals and families long dependent on social assistance. Ellwood's time limits were conceived as a stick to be used against state governments, forcing them to take more proactive and expensive measures (such as subsidized jobs) to aid social assistance clients in danger of exhausting their resources. The aim was to encourage the states to spend their own money more wisely on less costly programs that reduced dependence on cash aid, such as education, child care and transit subsidies, in support of the new federal programs. However, the package passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton contained only the time limits and a block grant to the states, which they could use as they saw fit within the social envelope. Academic experts such as Ellwood saw the grant as inadequate (DeParle 1996; Ellwood 1996b). Reflecting on what went wrong, Ellwood (1996a) admits to having made tactical errors but also points to the need for social reformers to adopt a long-term strategy if they wish to be successful. He concludes his review of his stint as policy adviser to President Clinton by observing that if one cannot rely on the political leaders of a country to drive complex reforms that are revolutionary (as those reforms that conflict with the dominant policy paradigm are), then one must build an advocacy coalition, and possibly a social movement, to provide the necessary constituency for reform. While such a task may be time- and resource-intensive, scholars who choose to undertake it are in a unique position to succeed because of their freedom from short-term constraints.

Conclusion

In order for the relationship between scholars and policy-makers to succeed, policy-makers (whether policy advisers or decision-makers) need to know what can reasonably be expected of academic researchers, and academic researchers need to know what can reasonably be expected of policy-makers. The key issue here is context. Academics tend to minimize the importance of context: the answer is *the* answer, regardless of how difficult it is to implement and regardless of the other demands on the state. For policy-makers, on the other hand, context will always be a key concern, so they are looking not so much for *the* answer as for *an* answer.

Because context is of no great importance to scholars, policy-makers must accept the fact that academic research will not likely be designed to meet their

immediate needs. The policy advisers who serve the needs of decision-makers have to meet academics halfway and search for the ideas and schools of thought that have been developed by scholars and that might be useful to them if further developed. On the other hand, academics have to make their ideas known to policy-makers. The meeting point for their interactions is the third community, which spans the gap between academics and decision-makers. Meanwhile, academics must accept the fact that context limits the freedom of policy advisers to recommend the adoption of their ideas by decision-makers and to undertake substantial long-term actions to change the context in which policy is made. In short, if scholars and policy-makers can appreciate each other's views of the importance of context, then they have the basis for a prenuptial agreement. If they ignore each other's views, then they might be headed for divorce.

This essay also discussed the options available to scholars who wish to pursue policy that does not fit the context of decision-making. We saw the example of the academic economists who helped to build a powerful advocacy coalition that eventually changed the economic policy paradigm within which Canadian public policy is made. To continue with the marital theme, the building of an advocacy coalition may be viewed as a courtship of the decision-makers who lead the policy process. This is done by aligning the factors that influence decision-makers so as to create a favourable climate for the views advanced by academic researchers.

However, it would be wrong to conclude this discussion without mentioning the risks involved in academics' taking such overtly political actions as leading efforts to construct an advocacy coalition to back their policies. The risks can be divided into those that pertain to the individual scholar and his or her ideas and those that pertain to academia in general.

The risk facing individual scholars is that their efforts could be construed as too oppositional, jeopardizing their status as reliable sources of information and their relationship with public servants. Landry et al. (2001, 2003) argue that this is a crucial factor if academics are to influence public policy. It must be remembered that Canada's policy-making system is not a particularly open one. In contrast to some countries, Canada has few veto points, and groups or individuals seen as oppositional are easy to exclude (Cohn 2002). Nevertheless, if policy is so far from what a scholar believes is required and the present context does not favour change, then he or she has little to lose.

In terms of academia in general, the risks are far more substantial. Scholars in industrial democracies such as Canada are already under pressure to produce work that is policy-relevant (in other words, that assists governments in their work) and that is driven by commerce rather than by curiosity (Springall 2002;

Potter 2002). Further, there are troubling situations — for example, when universities place their commitment to their funding sources in front of their commitment to scholarship and the public good (see, for example, Thompson, Baird and Downie 2001). If scholars become too deeply involved in building advocacy coalitions and other means of influencing the policy process, the academy will be even more bound to respond to the needs of the day. This is a legitimate issue. However, it is also fair to ask how many academics see their research as pointing to the need for such sweeping policy change that its promotion requires an advocacy coalition. Many findings from academic research can be incorporated into public policy without challenging the dominant policy paradigm in the relevant field and therefore can be promoted by the means advocated by Landry et al. (2001, 2003).

Another issue is whether the public wants scholars to play an overt role in policy-making and a political role in society. The risk for an individual academic who is seen as too oppositional is that he or she will be shut out of the policy-making process, whereas the risk for the entire academic system is that it will lose public credibility.[7] Given the reliance of Canadian academia on public funding, this latter risk ought to be taken seriously. However, one of the great strengths of advocacy coalitions, and of even broader activist efforts such as social movements, is the division of labour they promote. Academics can play a crucial role in the development of advocacy coalitions while leaving the leading partisan and oppositional roles to third community actors, who are better able to fulfill them.

Daniel Cohn

Notes

1   Innis made many important contributions to scholarship on Canada and the social sciences in general, but is perhaps best known for his works on Canadian economic history such as *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1956). In a nutshell, he argued that not only the Canadian economy but Canadian society itself was shaped in response to the international demand for natural resources. This position became known as the Staples Theory.

2   This might seem shocking to non-economists, especially in light of Theodore J. Lowi's (2001) presidential address to the 18th Congress of the International Political Science Association. In this speech Lowi identified the role of political science as challenging hegemony and hegemonic ideologies. He then stated that, today, business executives managing the largest corporations are the hegemons and the ideology used to justify their dominant position is the discipline of economics.

3   This is illustrated by the case of phosphates. A single article by a Canadian researcher, David Schindler (1974), is credited with providing the impetus for restricting the use of phosphates in Europe and North America and for improving water treatment methods to restrict their output (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada 2001).

4   To some degree advocacy coalitions resemble social movements, and some are synonymous with a given social movement. However, they can also span the boundaries between movements. For example, the advocacy coalition supporting the continuation of Canada's provincially run single-payer universal health insurance systems spans the boundaries among many different social movements. For more on social movements, see Phillips (1999) and Smith (2005).

5   A dominant policy paradigm can be identified not because the actors who can be expected to support it do so but because the actors who are less likely to support it come to accept it. Using this benchmark, one could say that the Canadian variant of the neoliberal economic policy paradigm became dominant either as early as 1992 or as late as 1997. In 1992 the Liberal Party of Canada released *Finding Common Ground* (Chrétien 1992). Unlike the better-known 1993 "Red Book" election manifesto (Liberal Party of Canada 1993), *Finding Common Ground* made it clear that any new Liberal government would adhere to neoliberalism. In 1997 the Liberals were re-elected on a record that was primarily based on restructuring the federal government and its public policies so as to better conform to neoliberalism. Meanwhile, the only viable alternative as a ruling party, then or since, distinguishes itself from the Liberals by promising more rigorous adherence to this economic policy paradigm.

6   Szilard was the first scientist (in 1934) to theorize about setting in motion an atomic chain reaction. A chain reaction is produced when a single atom is split

so that both energy and fragments are released and the resulting fragments split other atoms around it, releasing more energy and fragments until all the reactive material is exhausted. This is the operative physical principle behind both nuclear reactors (which produce controlled chain reactions) and nuclear weapons (which produce uncontrolled chain reactions). Along with fellow European émigré Enrico Fermi, Szilard produced the first human-initiated atomic chain reaction and also invented the nuclear reactor (Lanouette 2000).

7   In the late 1990s Premier Klein of Alberta tried to whip up public indignation against the activities of social scientists at the University of Alberta's Parkland Institute, which he described in a public complaint to the president of the university as "one-sided and ideologically biased" (McMaster 1999). The attempt was unsuccessful; even traditional supporters of the premier in the tabloid press advised him that he was acting improperly (see, for example, Jenkins 1999).

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