

# The Australian Public Policy Research Network

## Promoting New Approaches to Public Policy

Richard Curtain\*

*What is absent is any inclination to challenge voters with big-picture visions for the nation's future and place in the world. There are few fresh approaches and ideas... Australia's future into the 21st century will also be affected profoundly by how the nation addresses bigger long-term issues that barely rate a mention.*

Where should Australia seek to fit economically and strategically into the dynamic Asia-Pacific region? What sort of reputation should it seek across the spectrum of human rights, environmental, welfare and equity issues? How should it deal with its ageing population? How should it advance reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians? What levels of immigration are appropriate for Australia in a world of highly mobile population movements? (Geoffrey Barker 2001, 'Give us vision instead of old flaccid ritual', *Australian Financial Review*, 13 August)

The Australian Public Policy Research Network (APPRN) aims to address some of the deficiencies of policy-making and its processes in Australia by fostering more innovative public policy focused on a long-term perspective. This article outlines the justification for proposing

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the Network, its overall aims, its proposed means of communication and the support it has received so far.

The aim of the Network is to provide opportunities for online and face-to-face exchanges for policy research analysts within the general framework of innovative public policy. In particular, the Network's focus is on the longer-term, big ticket issues by 'breaking down the silos' to canvass an approach to policy that spans more than program, department, level of government, academic discipline or particular sectional interest.

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The Network's initial focus is on building a community of practice among policy research analysts outside of government. This is seen as a necessary precursor to engaging policy analysts inside government in a range of online and face-to-face policy discussions.

### Concern about the level of public policy debate in Australia

Media commentary in the 2001 federal election campaign highlighted concerns about the state of public policy debate in Australia. John Hewson, eight days before the election, stated in an



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before the election, stated in an opinion piece:

The lack of genuine new policy and policy detail, and the superficiality of the so-called policy debates, especially the Great Debate, are most disappointing and demeaning of our political process. (John Hewson 2001, 'Howard taps latent racism', *Australian Financial Review*, 2 November)

These comments were matched by similar comments made by Paul Kelly in relation to the policy options presented on universities and foreign policy and an *Age* editorial writer in relation to government support for information and communications technology.

## Need for a quantum change

A major constraint on the development of innovative public policy can be the tyranny of existing policy paradigms. A 'policy paradigm', according to Hall (1990: 59 cited by Stone 2001: 7) is 'an overarching framework of ideas that structures policy making in a particular field'. The paradigm defines what the problem is and how it is to be addressed. From this perspective, powerful political interests often exercise a crucial impact on the kind of research, analysis and policy advice through their capacity to define the prevailing paradigm. Commissioned research can be subordinated to political interests, as a resource to be used to further those interests.

According to Hall (1990) policy paradigms are largely taken for granted and rarely subject to scrutiny. Policy-making from this perspective is characterised by long periods of incremental change, punctuated by brief periods of major change. Hall outlines three different levels of change or learning that can take place within this framework. First-order change is limited and is based on making minor adjustments to existing policies. The legitimacy of the overall policy framework is reinforced.

Second-order change or learning can take place when minor adjustments fail to address the problem. Limited

experimentation and new policy techniques are tried. However, the policy orthodoxy and its objectives are not questioned, only the way that these are achieved. This level of change is defined by a limited capacity to learn from policy failures because there is no challenge to the existing policy paradigm.

According to Hall, the third-order change (or 'social learning') requires a radical shift in thinking. If the existing policy paradigm generates problems that first- and second-order changes cannot resolve, the authority and coherence of the paradigm is threatened, and a 'paradigm shift' occurs. Problems are redefined through the development of new interpretative frameworks, and policy learning from external sources takes place. According to Stone (2001), researchers are often well placed to provide the foundations for alternative policy paradigms.

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However, the policy paradigm shift will only occur if there are opportunities for in-depth discussion and debate. These debates need to take place between the policy analysts who are the insiders operating firmly within existing paradigms and those policy analysts who, due to their positions and interests, are not required to operate within the prevailing dominant discourse.

## Australian Public Policy Research Network initiative

The National Institute for Governance at the University of Canberra, through its Director, Professor Meredith Edwards, took the first step in setting up the Network by inviting a range of organisations and individuals outside of government to a meeting in Canberra at the end of August 2001.

The 29 August inaugural meeting in Canberra attracted 35 participants from most States. Nearly half (16) of the

participants represented non-government organisations, 13 came from academia and 6 were consultants. A broad range of policy areas was represented: from economics, business, education, social and health policy and overseas aid issues to information technology, the media, energy policy and law and justice.

## Support received

As of early November 2001, ten organisations have become foundation sponsors and six have become organisation subscribers. These range from those with a strong focus on economic and education research to those with social policy focus. Further details will be posted on the Network's web site, due to be online before Christmas 2001.

## Building a community of practice for policy analysts on the 'outside'

The initial focus of the Network is to form a 'community of practice' among the disparate group of organisations and people outside of government who are engaged in research-based policy analysis. The first stage, therefore, is focusing on seeking funding and other support from these organisations and setting up a web site to serve the 'virtual community'.

The reasons for starting with policy research analysts outside government are threefold. First, compared to policy analysts within government, they do not currently have any easy means of identifying or communicating with each other. Second, they have access to limited resources to undertake research related to policy issues. Third, they have little or no means to shape priorities for the expenditure of public monies by governments on research related to policy issues.

The next stage will seek to engage with policy analysts inside government in two types of dialogue. This dialogue will be promoted through an interactive web site, online discussions and face-to-face meetings. One option for engaging in a dialogue is an open-to-all, but moderated,

general online discussion on issues such as what criteria define good public policy.

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The second form of dialogue proposed is small, online discussions among interested parties on specific policy topics on an invitation-only basis. One condition of participation in these more focused discussions will be an undertaking to abide by 'Chatham House' type rules. Interest was expressed at the August meeting in setting up online discussions on the topics of the environment, immigration and refugees, health policy and intellectual property issues associated with commissioned research.

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The medium-term aim of the Network is to go beyond the initial online establishment of a 'virtual community' of research-policy analysts to holding face-to-face conferences. The medium-term aim of the Network is to hold a national conference in April 2003. The purposes of the conference will be to define the principles that underpin innovative public policy, to explore what horizontal or cross-cutting approaches to public policy involve and to identify the research gaps that the application of these principles exposes.

To summarise, the Australian Public Policy Research Network can be said to have two distinguishing features. One is using online and face-to-face forms of communication to promote interaction among policy research analysts and other interested parties. The second is to promote innovative policy based on a variety of research inputs. The Network, therefore, is different from other

emergent networks with a policy focus. These tend to more information-based and are seeking to perform a clearinghouse role. From the Network's interactive and process-oriented perspective, they are best viewed as complementary rather than overlapping or competing.

## Citizen engagement in policy-making

Citizens are not government, they elect it and want to be served by it. But if they are to participate more than just via the ballot box, then they need proper access to information, meaningful consultation and opportunities to take an active part in policymaking (Caddy 2001: 59).

Most OECD governments over the last decade have greatly increased the scope, quantity and quality of information for their citizens. The number of governments consulting citizens to seek feedback on policy proposals has also increased, but at slower rate and with large differences between countries (OECD 2001).

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However, the OECD notes that there is little evidence of the active participation on a partnership basis of citizens in policy-making. Where it does occur, it is only on a pilot basis in very few countries. According to the OECD Policy Brief 'Engaging Citizens in Policy-making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation', active participation in policy-making by citizens starts from a recognition that citizens have the capacity to discuss and generate policy proposals independently:

It requires governments to share in agenda setting and to ensure that policy proposals generated jointly will be taken into account in reaching a final decision (OECD 2001a: 3).

A related OECD publication entitled *Citizens as Partners: Information,*

*Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making* offers an assessment of the state of play in relation to citizen engagement in 23 OECD countries as well as the European Union (OECD 2001). The report also includes extended case studies ranging from citizen consultations on health policy in Canada and Denmark, to education policy in the Czech Republic, social housing in France and engaging the poor in policy-making on poverty and social exclusion in Flanders (Belgium). Other examples include using information technology to strengthen government transparency and relations with citizens in Korea and using consensus conferences to develop policy on genetically modified food in Norway.

The report is part of a wider program by the OECD's Public Management Service (PUMA) to identify practical tools for public participation in policy-making, and to evaluate government efforts to inform, consult and engage in policy-making citizens and civil society organisations. PUMA is also seeking to highlight innovative practices for involving civil society organisations in policy-making and, in particular, to assess the opportunities and limits of online consultation in engaging citizens and civil society organisations in policy-making (OECD 2001:76-77).

The OECD report also notes that one important gap in existing practice is the absence of appropriate guidelines for public servants to participate in online discussions. What is the status, for example, of a public servant's contribution to an online discussion in their specific area of expertise? (OECD 2001: 58). Only the Netherlands and Canada appear to be addressing this issue in policies they are developing (OECD 2001: 58, 102).

## APPRN's key principles

For the purposes of the Network, public policy is broadly defined as societal goal setting within a medium-to longer-term time horizon. This definition is much broader in scope than the one sometimes

used within government where public policy can be seen as predominantly to do with a macro economic focus.<sup>1</sup> From this broader perspective, public policy often needs a research base to provide the basis for a comprehensive understanding of the current environment and what society's likely needs are.

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The starting point for the Australian Policy Research Network is a broad set of principles. Membership of the Network is open to all organisations and individuals who support these principles designed to contribute to better policy making.

These principles are that public policy should:

- aim to be long-term in focus;
- be broad and comprehensive in scope and, therefore, not constrained or limited by departmental responsibilities or academic disciplines;
- involve, where possible, input from a range of stakeholders, including a representative group of citizens
- be based on transparent processes, and
- draw on a range of inputs such as research using qualitative as well as quantitative data, consultations, evaluation results and simulations from economic and statistical modelling.

<sup>1</sup> For example, The Treasury's Budget Paper No.1, 2001–2, Statement 4, entitled 'A More Productive Australia—Policy and technology', interprets public policy in this way: 'In Australia, a sound macroeconomic policy framework has encouraged competition and created a strong incentive to apply productivity-enhancing ICT advances in the Australian economy'.

## Independent of any advocacy role

The Network seeks to be independent of political parties and specific interest groups when they are performing an advocacy role. To underpin this principle, the Network is seeking for its core funding from a diverse range of sources. While the Network members may seek to use research findings to support their own organisation's goals, the Network itself eschews any involvement in advocating particular policy options, other than encouraging processes that are likely to produce innovative public policy.

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## Proposed means of communication

In specific terms, the Network will seek to communicate to its members and the wider public through a variety of means, moving from the passive, information only modes to the more highly interactive. Seven levels of interactivity are envisaged, with access to some levels free and other forms of interaction, which are more resource-intensive, subject to the payment of a subscription fee.

The first level of communication proposed is through the provision of basic information, via a web site on a free access basis, to key documents in the public domain such as major statements by governments and examples of good public policy making. The next level of communication will be the opportunity for individuals to post messages or notices through a message board facility on the web site on a free access basis.

The third level of interactivity envisaged is the capacity for individuals to participate in a moderated online discussion about broad, cross network issues such as identifying and refining the key components of good policymaking. It is proposed that this invitation be subject to participants agreeing to simple set of rules for involvement. They will also be asked to provide personal details, to be confirmed by a moderator, as a guarantee of acting in good faith. The details requested are likely to consist of name, address and a public policy relevant affiliation through employment or other connections. However, it will be possible for individuals who agree to the rules of involvement to preserve their anonymity by using allocated 'nicknames'.

More resource-intensive activities will need to be covered by subscriptions from organisations and individual subscribers. These will include a monthly newsletter offering information on recent reports related to the Network's goals, recent additions to clearinghouse web sites, information on relevant face-to-face meetings and highlighting the policy research capacity and output of specific subscriber member organisations each month.

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The fifth level of interactivity aimed for will be the opportunity for individuals, with appropriate support, to form small knowledge networks around particular policy issues. This can be done by participating in online discussions to explore such topics as the implications of recent research findings. Online discussions can be a valuable means of bringing together policy research analysts from a variety of institutional bases to exchange information in a low-cost and non-committal way.

These 'e-discussions' around the implications of research findings for particular policy issues offer a way to engage in a freer exchange of views among policy analysts than might be possible through face-to-face meetings and at much less expense in terms of cash and time resources.

Face-to-face meetings on a local, regional or national basis on specific or general topics related to the Network's aims are the sixth level of interaction proposed. These topics will be first identified and refined through online discussions.

As noted above, a national conference in April 2003 will be the culmination of activities in the medium term. The focus will be on an agreed set of good public policy principles, identification of a set of 'big ticket' policy research issues for further consideration and a highlighting of the research gaps inhibiting the development of innovative policy.

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A longer-term aim for the Network, within two to three years time, is to develop ways as an independent broker to promote citizen involvement in formulating and implementing public policy. The expertise accumulated in fostering better communication among policy analysts can be used to explore how best to provide more opportunities for citizen consultation and engagement in the public policy process.

## Proposed institutional arrangements

The Network will be administered through an independent board, under the auspices of the National Institute for Governance (Professor Meredith Edwards, Director).

The roles for the independent board will be to set a budget for planned activities; advise on appropriate sources of funding; contract the services of appropriate personnel to manage the Network, including setting up and maintaining a web site, acting as a moderator and bringing in expertise as required; monitor progress against the budget; produce an annual report to be posted on the Network's web site; and incorporate as an association if the board so decides. It is also proposed to set up an IT Reference Group to advise on more effective ways of using available software and Internet resources.

## Funding sources

As noted above, funding will be sought from a diverse range of sources: foundation sponsors, corporate sponsors, organisation subscriptions and individual subscribers. To demonstrate the Network's independence, core funding will be sought from sources other than government. In addition, it is proposed to charge fees for setting up and moderating small group online discussions.

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**Foundation sponsors:** \$1000 and above (includes a subscription for two years). Foundation funding will be used to develop a content-rich web site, with free public access, based on the theme of promoting good public policy principles and a focus on policy related to 'big ticket issues'.

Advantages: The Foundation sponsor, if they wish, will be listed on the web site with logo as a foundation sponsor. They also will have an opportunity second to the board to be consulted on major issues concerning the Network. They will also have an entitlement to receive special mention as a foundation supporter in the April 2003 conference program.

Other benefits for foundation sponsors will include assistance with setting up knowledge networks on specific topics.

**Organisation subscription:** \$400 per annum. Organisation subscriptions will be used to underwrite the cost of producing a monthly newsletter directed at the needs of organisations. Content will include recent reports published internationally and in Australia on issues related to the Network's principles and organisations' areas of interest. The newsletter will also offer suggestions on good practice on dissemination strategies. It will also highlight each month the research output of one of the subscriber organisations.

Other benefits for organisation subscribers will include assistance with setting up knowledge networks on specific topics.

**Individual subscription:** \$50 per annum. Funding from individual subscribers will be used to underwrite the cost of producing a monthly newsletter for individuals. Content will include information on recent reports published internationally and in Australia on issues related to the Network's principles. The newsletter for individual subscribers will also provide information on specific issues related to individuals such as the research capability of member organisations and relevant job vacancies in public policy.

## Has it worked elsewhere?

E-discussions are sponsored by a host of international agencies, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, to bring together researchers and policy analysts. For example, the Community of Practice sites in the World Bank's Development Forum provide an online workspace for practitioners from around the world to share ideas, information, knowledge and experience on addressing specific development challenges.

The Global Development Network has used a moderated online discussion involving researchers in development

institutes and policy-makers in developing countries to work out ways to improve linkages between development research and policy. The United Nations' Economic and Social Development Division used an online discussion to invite feedback on a draft set of recommendations for the General Assembly to improve the prospects for youth employment.

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An experienced discussion list moderator for the World Bank notes that the success of an online discussion depends heavily on the sustained commitment and involvement of the sponsoring organizations (Kim 2000). However, there are substantial benefits from this form of communication:

They bring 'together' a larger and more diverse group of people than most physical conferences or seminars would permit, and their extended duration permits a level of sustained interaction and reflection on the chosen subject that is rarely possible with a conference or seminar (Kim 2000).

Kim suggests three main elements that need to be present to ensure that the online discussion is successful: they need to be well thought out and designed from the very start; they need a high level of attention from moderators/facilitators and they should involve a broad range of participants, many of whom need to be actively recruited to share their knowledge and ideas.

An analysis of the 38 online discussions archived on the World Bank's Development Forum's web site by the author shows that there are always more subscribers than the number of messages posted (on average 624 subscribers and 122 messages posted). This points to the well-known phenomenon of 'lurkers'—people who subscribe to a discussion list but do not take the further step of actually entering the discussion.

However, it is worth noting that the smaller the number of subscribers, often reflecting a more focused discussion topic, the higher the message post rate. Half of the online discussions (with 414 subscribers and less) recorded a message rate of 31 per cent. The larger subscriber lists (average 1018 subscribers) only recorded a message rate of 17 per cent. These data suggest that the Network will need to identify by trial and error which forms of communication and interaction are most effective and which are not worth pursuing.

## Conclusion

The 2001 federal election has produced widespread cynicism in the media about the capacity of politicians and, by default, the Australian Public Service to offer new ideas on how to resolve some of the major uncertainties facing Australia. The Australian Public Policy Research Network is one attempt to set up a mechanism to break out of the restrictive paradigms shaping debate in a range of policy areas from the environment and education to the treatment of refugees.

The Network's capacity to broaden policy approaches will depend on at least three key factors. One is the support in terms of time and financial resources of organisations and people who are working on a day-to-day basis in research-based policy analysis outside of government. Another is the willingness of policy analysts inside government, within an appropriate framework, to participate in open and frank discussions with policy analysts 'on the outside'. Thirdly, philanthropic sources of funding are needed to support the Network in its roles of policy entrepreneur and independent broker.

If the Network is forced to rely on government funding to survive, it will not achieve its goals in the longer term. The extent to which these key players are prepared to depart from past practices and endorse a new direction will shape the potential of the Network to foster conditions which can produce innovative policy.

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