

REPORTS (1)

A Fresh Approach to Policy Research

*Canada's Policy Research Initiative is an exciting new development in long-term, multi-disciplinary research, reports Richard Curtain.**

Canada's Policy Research Initiative (PRI) has no equivalent in Australia. The purpose of the following note is to report on an interview I was able to conduct in late August 2000 in Ottawa with the Executive Director of the Policy Research Initiative's Secretariat, Laura Chapman. The following description of the PRI and its secretariat highlights the range of activities undertaken, achievements, and shortcomings. This note concludes with an outline of the PRI's future directions.

The PRI has been highly successful in promoting what it calls 'horizontal' policy research capacity. It has done this by bringing together federal and provincial Public Service departments, university-based policy research centres and think tanks in government and other non government groups. (<http://policyresearch.gc.ca>). The PRI's activities have evolved since it began in 1996. Today, its key objectives are to: develop a cross-cutting, long-term policy research agenda; build a policy research capacity; and strengthen a culture of partnership across the policy research community.

The PRI offers an illuminating model for entrepreneurial activity in a federal public service setting. Despite operating for four years, the secretariat has only received official funding for two years.

Outreach activities

The success of the PRI has been its ability to break down walls of isolation and foster collaboration among policy researchers from different departments, different levels of government and different sectors, enabling them share ideas and research and learn from one another. It has done this by generating significant interest across Canada. Its flagship event is an annual national policy research conference which attracted in 1999 some 750 participants at \$C600 per head. Its third annual policy conference, to be held at the end of 2000, is entitled 'Canada in a Global Society'. The conference themes are: international relations, economic development, market transactions, cultural interchange, learning, access to information and participation in society.

Other activities include regional conferences, workshops and a National Awards Program to promote policy research and brokerage activities. The PRI's web site, set up as a major resource tool for policy researchers, has attracted in 1999 over 2 million 'hits', from 17 countries.

Its two main publications have a circulation of about 7000 people. The first is policy research magazine, *Horizons*, which summarizes recent developments in policy research in Canada and abroad. The second, launched in 2000, is a referred journal *Isuma*, meaning 'idea' or 'thought'. The first issue is on North American integration and the second is on early childhood development and population health. The journal's first issue is available online at www.isuma.net/issue.html. The outcome of an extensive cross-disciplinary research and policy projects are to be published by the University of Toronto.

Outputs

The first phase of the PRI began in July 1996, when the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Secretary to the Cabinet asked two senior government officials to identify the policy challenges that Canada would face in the coming years and develop a research plan to build a stronger knowledge base on these issues. Over 30 government federal departments and agencies volunteered to contribute, and after a few months of intense effort, produced the report *Growth, Human Development and Social Cohesion* (October, 1996). It informed medium-term policy planning in the federal bureaucracy and formed the basis for background advice to the incoming federal government following the 1997 federal election, and the subsequent 1997 Speech from the Throne (Note all key documents of the PRI can be found on their web site at www.policyresearch.gc.ca). This was followed by a second report, *Canada in 2005: Global Challenges and Opportunities* (February, 1997).

The second phase of the initiative began with the development of networks to pursue research on the key themes identified in the first phase: growth, human development, social cohesion, and the knowledge-based society and economy. The research and analysis generated through these networks culminated in a second major report in early 1999 entitled *Sustaining Growth, Human Development and Social Cohesion*. This report was used as a basis for briefing Deputy Ministers and Cabinet Ministers during mid-term planning, which culminated in the 1999 Speech from the Throne.

Also during this second phase, the initiative developed a partnership with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to fund in-depth inquiry by academic teams into the major trends identified in the first phase of the initiative: North American integration, multiple centres of power, environmental pressures, globalisation, ageing, social differentiation, technological change and changing values.

During this second phase, the initiative made major progress in developing knowledge networks, within the federal public service and outside it, to promote

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'horizontal' research, and sustained these networks through a series of conferences, publications like *Horizons* and *Isuma*, and its web site.

Resources required

The PRI is that it has achieved its success on a shoe string budget, starting with four staff and growing to 20 today. The website acting as a clearinghouse for policy researchers was set up at the cost of only \$C25 000. The Initiative started with no official status and survived through a combination of favours in various departments and funding generated through its own promotional activities. It has, after the second year, been recognised as an entity and provided a small annual budget of \$C2.9 million a year. The Executive Director reports to two Deputy Minister co-chairs, who in turn, report to the Clerk of the Privy Council. For administrative and budgetary purposes, the Secretariat is located in a section of the Privy Council Office budget reserved for taskforces, and commissions and other organisations requiring independence.

Indicators of success

In terms of outreach, the statistics are impressive when viewed from an Australian perspective. Some 2000 policy researchers are brought together each year through a series of regional and national conferences on particular multidisciplinary themes; the national conference has grown from 320 participants in 1997 to 750 in 1999. As noted above, the PRI's low-cost web site has attracted over 2 million hits in 1999 up from 160 000 hits in 1998. The most recent example of its outreach activity is the launch of a policy research journal to provide an outlet for cross-disciplinary policy analysts. This journal, and the PRI's other research products, now have a circulation of over 7 000 people in Canada, and abroad.

Reasons for success

The success of the PRI stems from several factors. One is the support from the top the initiative has in the form of the strong endorsement of the head of the federal public service, most recently Mr Mel Cappe, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet.

A second key factor behind its success is, undoubtedly, the ambitious work-plan and creative risk-taking of the secretariat under the leadership of Laura Chapman, who has remained at the helm from the beginning. While Ms. Chapman's substantive rank is equivalent to that of a Deputy Secretary, she has had to build a knowledge infrastructure from scratch while negotiating resources from wherever she was able to seek them out.

The PRI's success is also due, in no small part, to its entrepreneurial promotional activities. National and regional conferences, workshops, a national awards program, a newsletter, refereed journal and web site have all created a snowball effect. The Canadian Policy Research Awards Program, for example, is able to attract 1 000 guests to its Awards Dinner, many from the private sector. Its award categories are: outstanding research contribution, career achievement in policy research, citizen engagement,

knowledge broker, media presentation of policy issues and post graduate awards.

Limitations

The PRI acknowledges, however, that its impact has not been sufficient to rectify shortcomings in the government's capacity to address increasing complex and inter-related policy issues. The Policy Research Secretariat's draft paper on a three-year strategy (June 2000) acknowledges that, while progress has been made, the policy research capacity in Canada's federal public service is still uneven and limited, with weak incentives to support policy making across departmental boundaries. The draft strategy also acknowledges the need to better engage Deputy Ministers (departmental heads) in horizontal policy formation.

The Policy Research Initiative highlights significant achievements in four areas. The first achievement it notes is the development of more future-orientated, horizontal policy research within the bureaucracy and its use in government planning. The second is building capacity within the public service for horizontal research. Its third achievement has been to widen the circle of policy research through linking together in neutral venues researchers who have come from a variety of organisational backgrounds. These gatherings have helped to increase the sharing of knowledge and have also served to celebrate policy research achievements. The fourth area of achievement has been to accelerate the momentum for the horizontal policy research among a broad range of stakeholders.

While successful in their own right in promoting a horizontal perspective, the Policy Research Secretariat also acknowledges that its efforts to date within the public service have been ad hoc exercises, drawing on existing resources. The networks based on broad themes were successful in helping officials develop shared priorities for horizontal research. However, there were limitations to the process as it has often been difficult to address issues that cut across the networks. The secretariat has also noted the uneven capacity of departments to make substantive contributions to major policy research projects.

Future directions

The PRI has just received approval for the workplan for the third phase of the Initiative, from 2000–01 to 2003–04. It has three main priorities. The first is a new systematic approach to initiating and managing horizontal research projects that bring together government and academic researchers. The second activity planned is the implementation of a human resources strategy to improve the policy research capacity within and outside the public service. The third area of planned activity is to further foster ways to share knowledge between all interested parties.

In relation to the latter activity, called a 'common space' strategy, the focus will be on linking researchers to one another, have them share their research and knowledge so they can learn from one another, and promote their work by celebrating their achievement. This will be done by working in partnership with others in a completely open manner both across departments and with non-government organisations as a means of leveraging available expertise.

The new approach to horizontal policy research will initially focus on four top research priorities: North American integration, sustainable development, social cohesion, and Aboriginal persons. Each project will have a Deputy Minister to provide vision and leadership to a develop and fund an ambitious time-table of research over several years. As older projects wind down, new projects on emerging issues will be selected and launched, resulting in a continuously evolving inventory of four to six projects at any one time.

After the first four projects are up and running, the government will consider launching another one. The following issues are considered candidates for this next round of selection: *Understanding Canadian Cities* could identify and analyse medium term policy pressure points such as the impact of the new growth poles of the knowledge economy, issues of culture and social cohesion and the intensity of social problems in specific urban neighbourhoods; *Understanding Rural Development* could analyse pressure points such as outmigration, particularly of the young, the absence of a critical mass of knowledge workers to allow rural communities to tap the potential of new communication technologies and the persistence of single industry economies.

In addition, to these policy issues, policy research projects could be considered to advance some policy tools. One of the current candidates is *Citizen Engagement*, or understanding how to develop a greater role for citizens in the decisions affecting them. Another candidate is *Instrument Selection*, or finding alternatives to legislation and regulation to achieve citizen and corporate compliance. The PRI notes that policy outcomes are often focussed on areas where government has limited control and influence is mainly achieved through partnerships. Alternatives to legislation are particularly important in these instances. It is also recognised that regulatory compliance imposes costs on businesses and citizens. How these can be lessened is an important issue, not

least as a means of assisting international competitiveness. Incentives and public advertising campaigns also can play a role in encouraging social behaviour.

The third policy tool proposed for policy research is *Quality of Life Indicators*. Evidence of improved outcomes in relation to health, environment, crime and education are increasingly sought by citizens from government. However, it is noted that how these outcome measures are formulated creates fundamental challenges for existing compartmentalised policy responsibilities.

Conclusion

The lessons for Australia are several. One is to show the value of having an entrepreneurial broker within the bureaucracy promoting enhanced policy research capacity, and building knowledge networks across the departments and with other sectors. The second lesson is the need for a separate entity to identify and encourage the undertaking of policy research on a range of big issue items, beyond the purview of any one department, agency or discipline.

Canada's PRI also demonstrates the value of promoting partnerships to share knowledge within and beyond the bureaucracy to make the best use of scarce and otherwise dissipated resources.

Not least, the PRI highlights the importance of cultivating a common space where policy researchers from a variety of organisations, backgrounds and disciplinary perspectives can come together to share knowledge. However, this capacity to create an environment that encourages the sharing of knowledge requires independence on the part of the knowledge broker. The success of the PRI suggests that policy research is best undertaken in a shared environment that is at arm's length from those responsible for immediate policy implementation.