

Guest Editorial

Academia, Policy and Politics

JULIAN LE GRAND*

Richard Titmuss Professor of Social Policy, The London School of Economics & Political Science, UK

In October 2003, I started a secondment from the London School of Economics (LSE), where I hold the Richard Titmuss Chair of Social Policy, to No 10 Downing Street, where I worked as a senior policy adviser to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. I began working initially on a specific project: developing policies on extending user choice in public services, with particular reference to health care and education. Then I was asked to be the Prime Minister's health policy adviser, a role I agreed to take on up to the general election that took place in May 2005. In the event I stayed on a few weeks after the election until August of that year, when I returned to LSE. So I worked for nearly two years in Downing Street.

Mine was an unusual appointment. Most of my Downing Street colleagues were much younger than me; unlike me, all had had experience of working as political or policy advisers in government, despite their relative youth; and none were academics. Although interchange between government and academia is not uncommon in the United States, it is rare in the UK and other countries. So the editors of this journal felt that readers might be interested in my reflections on the experience, especially the differences between being an academic in a university and an academic in government: the squarish peg of academia in the round hole of politics and policy.

Of course, the most obvious difference was in working style. As a senior academic at a good university, your time is broadly your own to allocate as you will – apart from the occasional lecture or seminar series, and even those you can usually re-arrange if necessary. But in government, as Harold Macmillan so famously noted, you are at the mercy of events. So often I would wake up in the morning, switch on the radio, hear about the latest outbreak of MRSA in a National Health Service (NHS) hospital or the mile-long queue of people waiting to register for a new NHS dentist, and know that the reflective paper the Prime Minister wanted on the pros and cons of more patient choice was going to have to be put off yet again. Rarely did days work out as planned; indeed, rarely did minutes work out as planned.

*Correspondence: Professor Julian Le Grand, Department of Social Policy, The London School of Economics & Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: J.LeGrand@lse.ac.uk

Related to this was another change in working style: the pace. Papers in Downing Street are written over 24 hours (if you're lucky), instead of 24 months. And, in fact, they often do not suffer very much from being done that way: I was surprised how good a job one can do in those circumstances. Of course, at least in part this was due to many years of experience in thinking, in reflecting and in accumulating knowledge, enabling me to make quick (and, I hope, occasionally accurate) judgments on the issues of the moment. But it also suggested to me that all those extra days, weeks and months spent in reading or writing academic papers may have sharply diminishing returns.

But let me concentrate on two major differences of substance between being an academic in academia and one in government. The first concerns *responsibility*. As an academic in academia, I have engaged in many policy discussions, both proposing new policies, and criticising existing ones. These tasks were made a lot easier by the fact that it seemed as though what one had to do or say was pretty limited. If the aim was to suggest a new direction for policy, it was only necessary to provide the idea. It would be someone else's responsibility (the politician or the civil servant) to develop the policy concerned and to make it ready for implementation. If the intention was to criticise an existing policy or policy proposal, it was someone else's responsibility to think how to deal with the criticisms: to respond to them, and, if necessary, to amend the policy concerned – or perhaps to discard it altogether and to devise an alternative.

But when in government the option of irresponsibility – or of shifting the responsibility on to someone else – is not open. Max Weber (1991: 116) described irresponsibility as one of the two deadly sins in the field of politics (the other was, perhaps surprisingly, lack of objectivity) and in this, as in so much else, Weber was right. What one says or does in government matters. People's lives will be affected for good or ill by one's actions or inactions, and this can never be forgotten. (In fact, of course, one is not allowed to forget it, particularly because some people will be affected adversely: the barrage of criticism – often emanating from, or supported by, academics – is unremitting, and, it has to be said, is rarely balanced by praise from those who will benefit).

More specifically, those in government involved in making policy have to do what my colleague Nicholas Barr (who had a similar secondment experience to mine, only at the World Bank) has called the two parts of implementation: the technical/administrative and the political (Barr, 2005: 298–299). The first process involves resolving the technical problems, the non-resolution of which can often derail a policy. And the second involves working out the politics: the ways of dealing with the different interest groups involved. On the one hand, this requires the appeasement of the losers, or, if the decision is not to appease them, then to deal in some other way with the problems they raise. On the other hand, you have also to make sure that the winners appreciate their winnings – *and* the fact that their winnings are the result of the policy concerned (a fact that is often surprisingly unrecognised).

Of course, the two – technical and political – can be, and often are, linked, with technical issues being used by an interest group to derail or hijack a policy. In the list of difficulties produced by the opponents of a policy, the trivial technical problem often has an equal status to the more substantive one; and, since they all have to be addressed in some way, the former can exercise a veto power over the policy.

But whatever the objection, as an academic in government, as with everyone else there, you don't have the luxury of ducking the issue involved. You have to deal with all these problems and find answers. You have to deal with all the details. And all this is far from easy.

I have to say that I don't think it's only academics in government who have to confront these issues. I increasingly feel that academics outside have to as well, especially if they choose to intervene in politics as a policy critic or analyst. They are more powerful than perhaps they realise. A well-targeted criticism expressed on television or radio can sink a policy, regardless of its overall merits. A competent analysis that highlights the losers from a policy development (and there always are losers) can do the same. On the other side of the coin, a new policy idea that has both the technical and political aspects worked out can be very influential – especially during an election period.

So how should academics outside of government who wish to make a contribution to policy behave? If they advocate a policy, they need to offer assistance with resolving the technical details of implementation; and, at the least, they need to be aware of the political issues involved, even if they are not in a position to deal with them. Academic critics of a policy have a responsibility, not only to offer their criticism, but to suggest a way of dealing with it – or, if they genuinely feel that the policy is completely without merit, to offer an alternative. It is both intellectual laziness and Weberian irresponsibility not to do so. I now get so impatient with a standard academic opening gambit: 'I'm just here to ask a few questions...'. In fact, it is easy to ask questions: it is providing the answers that is the difficult part. If someone enters the policy domain and attempts to demolish a policy, it seems legitimate to ask him or her: 'Well, what exactly would you do?'. Yet that question is seldom asked, and even more rarely answered.

A second substantive difference between academia and the policy world concerns the role of *theory and evidence*. At least one version of what academics in academia are supposed to do – especially social and natural scientists – is to develop theories and test them using evidence. What are academics in government supposed to do? In this connection, I am reminded of a story about one of my few academic predecessors in government, Professor (now Lord) Maurice Peston, who was special adviser to Roy Hattersley, a minister in the Labour Government in the 1970s. According to Hattersley's memoirs, on Peston's appointment, he was asked to supply a job description. He submitted one line: 'to provide spurious intellectual justifications for the Secretary of State's prejudices'.

I should rapidly say that this is not a view of the academic's role in government that I endorse, but it does point to a problem that everyone in government encounters: how to develop policy in the absence of conclusive evidence. It would be good if academics in government could use such evidence to devise effective policy: indeed, evidence-based policy making is the gold standard. Unfortunately, the relevant evidence is usually not there – or, because good research takes time, it comes along much too late to be of use.

So what do policy makers do if and when they don't have all the evidence they need? Well, they rely on theory – or on gut instinct (itself often the product of some long-forgotten theory). And they will then pull in such evidence as can be found to support the direction that theory and instinct are taking them.

Academics can be useful to policy makers in both activities. They can provide the relevant theory, assessing its merits and defects; and they can assess the evidence that does exist both for and against. For instance, in the work I did on user choice in health care and education, I was able to draw on psychological and economic theories of behaviour, on the micro-economic theory of market success and failure, and on public choice theory concerning governmental success and failure. I was also well placed to assess the evidence that had emerged from some of the choice pilots in health care (an interesting example of government making a determined effort to obtain good evidence in a key area of policy before rolling it out), and to examine international evidence in the area. The consequence, I believe, was – and is – much better policy in those areas. But that is another story.

So what is the overall message? Academics in government do have an important role to play, especially in the assessment of theory and evidence. Academics outside government also have a key role – in the long run, a more important one – in developing the relevant theories and in providing the evidence. But, wherever they are, academics have an obligation to behave responsibly. They have the power to change the world, and that power should not be exercised lightly.

References

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