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Paper by Dr Adam Graycar, Executive Director, Cabinet Office, Department of the Premier and Cabinet at the launch of the Flinders Institute of Public Policy and Management (FIPPM)

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In public policy, like economics, many of the questions are always the same:

- How to ensure that our education system provides the most appropriate education for our kids
- How to make our diverse population strive for high standards of living while preserving our environment for the future
- How to make sure there is clean water for everybody when you turn on the tap
- How to stop people dying on the roads
- How to spread 40 years of earnings across 80 years of life

Many of the questions are perennials, but the answers change

- Who should pay for these things?
- Who should deliver certain services?
- Should the rich pay the same as the poor?
- If Bill Gates says it's okay – is it?
- Should government steer more and row less or vice-versa?

How do we develop and maintain the skills to deal with the hardest policy questions – about people and their lives and aspirations, about the industrial climate, about the sustainability of our national resources, about the protection of our borders?

Issues in
- problem selection
- define and limit problem
- determine data needs
- collect and analyse
- interpret
- communicate

How to do this? One could be tempted to say do a graduate course in public administration at Flinders – but that's not the full answer, nor the only option.

Some things change and some don't and we need to have the good sense to know what does and what doesn't.

The foundations of our public service haven't changed

- We need a neutral, professional public service that provides advice to elected officials, enforces laws and regulations and ensures the delivery of services to citizens
- We need an accountability regime with many checks and balances in the system to ensure continuous respect for the public interest.
There are fewer public servants today than a decade ago and nobody expects to see the numbers rising significantly.

Sure there will be continuing productivity gains in the public sector, but there is no powerful constituency for greater taxes in the developed world, and we will witness an ongoing debate about how much regulation there ought to be, especially unregulated individual behaviour on the one hand and the redistributive role of the state on the other.

We are heading towards a situation where we will need much much greater policy capacity in government. The balance among the three components of public service will change - among policy development, service delivery, and routine transactions.

Smaller government doesn’t mean fewer services – it sees them delivered more by the profit and non-profit sectors, sometimes through partnership arrangements, or sometimes as contractors.

While a lot of program delivery will be handled by contractors, and a lot of routine transactions conducted on-line, the primary role for public servants will be as policy developers, policy analysts, evaluators and evidence seekers, knowledge brokers and consensus builders, and they need to be well educated to do this.

Education, however is a necessary, but not a sufficient ingredient. Good policy analysts need to be smart, and they need to be personable. They need to get on well with stakeholders, be able to negotiate, be able to be trusted. A lot of good policy would not happen if there were no trust and no strong professional relationships with other agencies, Ministers’ offices, and of course, the Commonwealth. This is not the time for a lecture on Federal/ State relations, but we would be nowhere in Transport policy, water policy, health policy, trade policy etc etc without working cleverly, co-operatively, and often cunningly with the Commonwealth.

Government will play a strong policy role – it will provide leadership in dealing with the big big issues, with regulating and resolving the range of almost intractable challenges. It will genuinely steer, not row. We’re going to need lots of skills and lots of knowledge to keep government working well.

In Cabinet Office we are having a long learning exercise about policy, strategy, evidence, implementation and program effectiveness. We have learning clusters on strategic policy, we have inhouse policy analyses of Cabinet submissions, we are planning policy workshops and perhaps some joint educational events. We are lucky that we have some fabulous and very realistic raw material to work with, but unfortunate in that we cannot share it.

We are continually learning and we’ll never know enough to stop learning. We want to work in partnership across government, but also very importantly in partnership with our academic colleagues.
Next month we are having a getting to know you roundtable at Flinders to explore policy ideas and knowledge development and knowledge transmission experiences.

We grapple continually and relentlessly in the State Government with cross-cutting issues such as water resources, population policy, ageing issues, workforce development issue, technology and society, housing, transport etc.

To take but one example, consider the implications of an increasing number of people in our community experiencing mobility difficulties, whether due to disability or ageing. There is obviously a transport dimension because we can no longer assume that people can drive their car or walk a few hundred metres to the bus or train stop. There are going to be implications for our disability services and our health sector - we not only need to have the local GP or hospital services, we also need people to be able to access them. And we haven’t yet started to consider the stock of social capital - if it is healthy, there will be strong networks of support and people will want to help each other out.

In the longer term, if more people in the community have limited mobility we will need to think about how this might affect future housing and planning needs. Local government will have a role - might community transport provide an option? is the local infrastructure is up to scratch? We may need to engage the Commonwealth. So at a glance we can see that this one slice of a public policy issue has a myriad of intersections with other areas and tiers of Government. And this can change, depending on how we view the problem, and how we in turn propose to deal with it.

As Henry Kissinger once said, each success only buys an admission ticket to a more difficult problem.

We’re all in the knowledge business – whether its creating it, communicating it or applying it. Knowledge is a significant ingredient in any policy exercise.

Policy analysis is like a stir fry – lot of ingredients, lots of contrasting flavours and the ingredients can be varied according to the tastes of both producers and consumers.

In the policy kitchen there are different ways of using knowledge – indeed there are different types of knowledge. We need to make better use of different kinds of knowledge – if we can do so then we have a better strategic focus and a better handle on implementation.

We also need to have the right knowledge in front of decision makers at the right time. If Cabinet is meeting next Monday, its not helpful to say the article with all the findings will be published in a journal 18 months from now. This is not really a timing issue, but a knowledge management issue.

There are many types of knowledge – policy knowledge of what works, statistical knowledge, public opinion, scientific knowledge, ethical knowledge, legal knowledge, relationship knowledge etc.
In different policy areas the substantive knowledge is very variable. In some policy fields the knowledge is reasonably settled – agricultural science, preventive health, macroeconomics. In some fields the knowledge is highly contested – what reduces crime, how to get good educational outcomes, how to enforce drug policy, environmental policy.

And in other areas there just isn’t any real policy knowledge, biotechnology, the implications of cloning, e-government, privacy on the net. Nobody knows, in these areas what works, what doesn’t and what’s promising.

So, what are the messages to take away? Policy capacity is a scarce commodity - there’s a lot more demand for it than there is supply.

We have old questions, new answers, traditional public service values, a shrinking public service, great demand for more focussed and more tacit knowledge and for better skills in policy making.

What a wonderful stir-fry – lots of challenges for us in government and lots of challenges for academia, and I commend Flinders University, and look forward to strong working relationships between government and academia.

I hope today we are building a bridge between teaching, research and policy but we need more than a bridge, we need a super highway.