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The Australian Policy Handbook: Fifth Edition

Catherine Althaus, Peter Bridgeman and Glyn Davis, Allen & Unwin, 2013, ISBN 978 1 74237 893 0, 296 pps, paperback AUD\$45.00

This is the fifth edition of the *Australian Policy Handbook* which says a lot for its usefulness to what is a discrete readership. After the first three editions the authors, Peter Bridgeman and Glyn Davis, were joined by Catherine Althaus, a policy analyst who is again a co-author. They readily acknowledge that policy development in any sector is an imperfect craft but particularly so in the stressful and often chaotic world of government. As they point out, there are no definitive answers to the many questions raised by those given the task of developing policy. They are to be commended for staying with the task. Through their experience and the valuable feedback and advice stimulated by earlier editions they have continued to pan a mountain of gravel for specks of gold that are of tangible value. The thrust of the text is to articulate some clear guidelines of process that will be of assistance to practitioners, many of whom start their careers knowing little about the task they have been set. The book, therefore, seeks to identify the constants of good policy making, ‘unashamedly written from the perspective of practitioners working from within the formal government machine’, against a background of intellectual rigour, a commitment to procedural integrity and a willingness to experiment and learn through implementation and adaption. One wonders, however, how much it would help the person described in the *Acknowledgements* as ‘a somewhat-panicked graduate trainee in Queensland Health (who) had never studied politics, policy or administration’ and had to ‘write a food nutrition strategy for Queensland quickly’. Though this was the catalyst for the first edition and presumably remains the driving force behind subsequent editions, one cannot help but wonder whether after five editions our graduate trainee is still left wondering.

This said their analysis of the exceedingly complex environment in which government policy is generated is useful and interesting, certainly interesting to novices such as the graduate described above but questionable as to how useful when one is faced with the immediate dilemma of how to write a policy. If anything it is rather too academic. In a handbook one expects to find material of a more practical nature. It is in essence a treatise on policy making frameworks in the Australian context and as such it is remarkably good. The layout of the pages at times distracts the reader from the main thread of the text. The inclusion of

summary statements and quotations as a form of side column and the random style used in presenting tables and figures divides the reader's attention in a way that is not helpful. It may have been better to blend much of this material into the basic text so it can be read without losing the flow. Throughout there is an underlying dilemma arising from the constantly changing and random reference to particular policies, an unfortunate emphasis on short term pragmatism as a reason for avoiding basic logic, and the use of jargon such as 'smart practice' and 'best practice' when at best what is meant is 'current recommended practice'. The use of terms such as 'smart' and 'best' indicate they are smart or best when this is seldom the case. There is at times a conflict between the serious and the cynical, for example, the quote from Jeffery Pelt, a character in the film 'Hunt for Red October' (1990) on page 68 seems to have no relevance. At best it is an attempt at humour, at worst a cheap jibe at politicians. These distractions subvert the reader's attention from the real to the surreal.

The book continuously informs the reader of the difficulties and obfuscations facing the policy maker. No doubt they are there but it would have been useful if they had tracked these obstacles in more detail. An example of this occurs when privatisation of prisons is used as a case in which economic tools are used to drive policy and the question is posed, 'What does a market and incentive analysis add to decision making about private prisons?' The eager reader however never gets an answer, instead the text switches to the Howard Government's creation of Job Network. It would have been very beneficial if the prison theme could have been followed through to highlight the point being made. It may also have been of practical benefit if just a few examples had been used throughout building a better understanding of how policy problems work out in the examples chosen.

The discussion on the place and value of evidence as a source of informed opinion rather than an ultimate determinate is useful for, in some cases, the intuition of a politician with an ear to community thinking can leaven the hard evidence to produce a better outcome than could ever be drawn from diametrically opposite material from equally qualified sources. Perhaps policy makers should be encouraged to work more closely with back bench members who are often better informed on community opinion than ministers. The chapter on policy instruments benefits from the fact that the subject facilitates objective description of process. But even here the reader is left wanting more information. The various subsets are briefly sketched whereas, given their importance in the process, a wider discussion of each section would be beneficial.

While the book 'unashamedly' focuses on tools for practitioners within government it does recognize the external factors that help shape policy and the increasing role

of external players. Yet one important area that has been overlooked is opposition members. It is to be regretted that too few academics spend time on considering the role of members of parliament in opposition. They seem to forget that the opposition is a government in waiting and that therefore the quality of their policy development will play a vital role at a future date when inevitably they come to government. The great advantage of developing policy in opposition is that the overall strategic direction is targeted to the next election. To a great extent the opposition is free of the time pressure governments are obliged to consider and thus are able to take a more structured approach, over a longer period of time, to 'get it right' or 'get it less wrong'. Members of parliament always learn more about policy making in opposition than they ever do in government. An examination of this alternative policy making dynamic could provide enlightenment for all who participate in the process in government.

The exploration of consultation processes and the corresponding attitudes of government are of particular interest, highlighting as they do the dichotomy between government's need for quick solutions and the necessity to spend more time initially to get a better outcome. More and more instruments are being created to solve failures within the process. Perhaps in the next edition the authors could give some attention to how systemic failure made be addressed by fine tuning the elements of the policy cycle. How many times can governments afford to fumble their approach to a problem before the cost of failure exceeds the cost of taking more time to methodically work through the process? Examples of fumbled policy abound, the second Sydney airport, mental health, education reform to name but a few to say nothing of the home insulation debacle which gets a mention on page 180. The chapter explores a variety of ways by which governments 'consult' the people and a number of examples given, two being, Deliberative Democracy — Perth's *Dialogue with the City* (2003) and Deliberative Polling — 'Muslims and Non-Muslims in Australia' (2005) run by Issue Deliberation Australia in response to the Cronulla riots. Given that both were some years ago it would have been interesting to have some indication of the success or otherwise of these initiatives. Later in the section on Consultation Traps, in relation to the establishment of NSW Police Accountability Teams (2002), we learn 'The initiative has so far failed to provide evidence of improvement in community consultation or police accountability'. This is an improvement but we need to know why. The authors' support for consultation strikes a positive note for policy making. Overall the Chapter is informative and of practical value.

It is always easy to critique from the sidelines but the authors, who by now are in very familiar territory, could perhaps summon the courage to break away from their

current structure to experiment with more structural elements, with hopefully beneficial results. It is also worth considering whether much of Chapter 12 should form the basis of a new Chapter 2. Rather than provide the valuable comments sprinkled through this chapter at the end it would be useful to have this advice from the beginning. For example, the emphasis on integrity which is more pronounced in Chapter 12 than in any previous chapter should be a reoccurring thread of the text. Given that principles and ethics are of paramount importance, but seem to have little place in today's politics, it is important to instill this from the beginning. One gets the impression that what characterizes the fumbles and stumbles is often that the element of integrity and principle is missing.

Policy makers cannot serve too many masters, that is not their job, their job is to create sound, workable, defensible policy. Sound policy wins support for governments. To describe policy as having an element of art seems to be an excuse for lack of exactitude. Certainly it requires innovation and imaginative thinking but most of all it requires a methodical approach to problem solving that should throw up the best solution in the current climate, for the best price and the least distress. For example, Eugene Bardach's book 'A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis', now in its 4th edition, outlines key elements of policy analysis in a logical flow without constraining them to any linear process. This makes the book easy to follow and use. He has three main aims, guiding students through his eight-part policy analysis process, helping students develop useful skills in acquiring data relevant to policy problems, and providing a roadmap for learning how to transfer good practice from one setting to another. Much of the essence of policy analysis and development lies in experience, perhaps no one under the age of 35 should be allowed to write policy, but books such as Bardach's help those developing their policy skills to reach a level of competency quicker.

Clearly the subject is huge but the challenge to provide meaningful but succinct guidance to the ever changing cast of novice players is even greater. Perhaps what we need is a companion book dealing with the practical aspects of policy making rather than more editions in their current form. Perhaps what is needed is a 'Policy Making for Dummies'. ▲