

Government as Clients for Social Science Research

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Regierung und Verwaltung als Klienten sozialwissenschaftlicher Forschung

Inhalt: Sozialwissenschaftler stellen sich zunehmend die Frage, welchen Beitrag sie in Prozessen politischer Willensbildung leisten können. Einige – die Pessimisten – sind der Ansicht, daß sie diesbezüglich wenig Möglichkeiten haben; andere – die Optimisten – sind zuversichtlich, daß Einflußchancen langfristig gegeben sind.

Eine nähere Betrachtung zeigt, daß die Pessimisten den Tatsachen näher kommen: Die Agenten politischer Willensbildung erweisen sich gegenüber Informationen neuer Art vielfach als resistent und sind – mit Ausnahme der Wirtschaftler – nicht geneigt, Sozialwissenschaftler als ernstzunehmende professionelle Experten anzusehen. Sie suchen ihre Unterstützung bestenfalls zu vordergründigen, von der Sache abgehobenen Darstellungs- und Legitimationszwecken. Andererseits und zugleich hegen auch die Sozialwissenschaftler – besonders die Soziologen – ihre Vorbehalte, nicht zuletzt, weil sie das Staats- und politische Leben oft unter dem Vorzeichen elitistischer Theorien anvisieren. Dazu kommt, daß sie in Fällen, in denen sie im Zuge ihrer Forschungen auf das Geschehen tatsächlich Einfluß nehmen könnten, entscheidungsstimulierende und bündige Schlußfolgerungen, die die Politiker dann von ihnen fordern, nicht oder nur zögernd anbieten wollen.

Erfahrungen der letzten Zeit legen immerhin nahe, daß ungeachtet dieser Schwierigkeiten die Optimisten recht behalten könnten: Hochqualifizierte sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung, die die Gesellschaft bewußt auf ein neues Verständnis der Rolle des Staates hinzuorientieren vermag, dürfte am Ende in der Lage sein, den jetzt herrschenden Stil in der politischen Willensbildung zu verändern.

Abstract: Social scientists have become increasingly interested in the contribution of their disciplines to public policymaking. Some take a pessimistic view and conclude that social science has little contribution to make, others take an optimistic view and claim that it can influence the consensus that underlies public policy over the long term.

An examination of the respective predispositions of social scientists and policymakers suggests that the pessimists may be nearer the truth since policymakers are often resistant to new information and, with the exception of economists, do not consider that social scientists are bona fide professional experts. Policymakers may only seek the aid of social scientists as an independent facade in any case. Equally, social scientists, and especially sociologists, because of the dominance of elitist theories, are often suspicious of government. Moreover, when their research is likely to actually influence events, they may be unwilling to provide the decisive and rapid conclusion the policymakers will demand.

Past experience, however, suggests that despite these handicaps the optimists may be right in the sense that high quality social science research that consciously sets out to convert society to a new view of the role of the state can change the dominant policy consensus.

I. Introduction

Public policy has become one of the dominant interests of the social sciences. In the field of political science about which I am most familiar this growth of interest has been very rapid indeed: 'The number of articles with "policy" in their title in the *American Political Science Review* (APSR), if we omit "foreign policy" articles, up to 1968 could almost be counted on the fingers of two hands'. I have made a rapid scout through the British equivalent of the APSR, *Political Studies*, and the growth in interest in policy seems to have been even more recent. This upsurge of interest has also been reflected in the appearance of new journals on both sides of the Atlantic, largely or entirely devoted to the study of policy, such as, *Politics and Policy*, *Public*

Policy, *Policy Studies Journal*, *Policy and Analysis*, *Policy Sciences* and the *Journal of Social Policy*.

Two factors that could account for this growth in interest seem to stand above the ruck. The first is the growing complexity and intractability of government. Policymakers, whatever their previous inclinations, are much more willing than in the past to enlist any aid that might ease their burden. Social scientists have merely responded to this growth in demand for their services. The second dominant factor is a change in the focus of the social sciences, especially perhaps political science, to the output side of government; a new desire to look at society in terms of change and a conscious return to prescription after many arid years searching for a non-existent, value-free

haven. One of the effects of this growth in interest in policy has been to kindle an interest in the actual contribution of social sciences to public policymaking. MARTIN REIN (1973) in a perceptive paper has divided the literature on this subject into two camps, the sceptics and the optimists.

The sceptics consider that there is very little scope for social science in the formation of public policy, whereas the optimists believe that there is a potential role for social science and are preoccupied with formulating ideas as to how this role could be made more effective. Broadly speaking, the sceptics' view derives from the pluralist notion that there cannot in practise be 'one right way' of acting in government in a democracy because there can be no public unanimity on policy issues. In an open society there can be no such thing as the public interest, only a series of differing group interests. Social science research therefore follows policy and can never lead it.

The optimist, on the other hand, accepts that in the short run research is determined by prevailing majority views which underpin existing policy, but claims that over the long run research can also itself change such views. Research, in other words, can both follow and determine policy.

I am not sure whether under REIN's definition I am an optimist or a sceptic since I *do* believe that social science can change the prevailing views – paradigms, operating ideologies, ethical systems, consensual frameworks or whatever – but at the same time I am also a pessimist in the sense that I believe that research has only a limited role in public policymaking. In the short term it seems to me it has to follow existing policy. However, I do not think this is because of the pluralist nature of democratic government, but because of its inherent characteristics and because of the predispositions of policymakers on the one hand, and the nature of social science and the predispositions of social scientists on the other.

In making these assertions I am aware that I have been strongly influenced by the British experience and while it seems likely that some of the factors inhibiting the contribution of social science to policymaking that will be dis-

cussed in this paper are probably common to all representative democracies, it would be imprudent to claim that all of them are. Certainly the relationship between social science and policymaking in Britain seems to be substantially different to that operating in the United States, for example (see SHARPE 1975).

Before explaining the inhibiting factors two qualifications must be noted. The first relates to the contribution of social scientists working as permanent civil servants, and permanent research units within government itself. Such in-house contributions by the social sciences to policymaking have an important part to play in modern government, though the fact that it is under the direct control of policymakers means that it will always be a limited role from a strictly academic viewpoint.

The second qualification relates to economists. For a number of reasons governments are much more receptive to economists than to any other social scientists. Whether at the end of the day their actual contribution is any more significant let alone successful (in the sense that predicted consequences of recommended actions were correct) than its sister disciplines is debateable. The point is that most economists believe that they have got a contribution to make to public policymaking and, above all, policymakers believe this too. There are a number of reasons for this greater receptivity, the most obvious of which is that economics deals with *the* central policy issue – the allocation of resources. It also enables policymakers to comprehend society as a whole as a single economy and to relate it to the world economy. The crucial point is that economics confines itself to measurable effects which, among other things, enables it to establish what SHONFIELD (1972) has called a 'causal nexus' between existing policies and a wide range of economic indicators of the consequences of these policies on different aspects of the economy. Policymakers, in other words, are receptive to economists not only because they believe that what they have to say will help government, but also because economists have a self-contained technique, a demonstrable professional expertise or 'mystery'. It is this mystery, which to the policymaker comes closest to resembling the expertise he expects to receive from, say, physicians or

engineers, that gives the economist the necessary status in the eyes of policymakers, and it is this automatic status that is of key importance. No other social science apart from statistics, which is a technique rather than a discipline, can match economics in these respects.

At the other extreme, political science is perhaps the least attractive to policymakers since it appears to have no recognizably coherent technology or explanatory construct to offer apart from a mixed bag of institutional and electoral prescriptions laced with some institutional history and statistical techniques. This is likely to be especially the case where there is a high status permanent civil service with a strong emphasis on intellectual capacity rather than specialist qualifications as in France or Britain. As the guardians of the State machine and the political confidants of Ministers they are likely to regard themselves as their own political scientists and will tend to see little point in recruiting outsiders to do the job they regard as pre-eminently their own.

Sociology probably falls somewhere between economics and political science since it has a greater concern with evolving systematic explanatory theory of society than political science so that it has a marginally greater attraction for policymakers, but much more important, sociology offers expertise on the social reality behind the formal facade of government and especially the actual impact of government policies on society as opposed to that presented through the official, legal and institutional lenses through which government has perforce to view it.

As PETER BERGER has put it,

'To ask sociological questions, then, presupposes that one is interested in looking some distance beyond the commonly accepted of officially defined goals of human action'. (1763: 41).

Given the increasingly egalitarian and humane spirit of government, this sociological perspective ought to be of particular value to policymakers. However, it has been claimed that sociologists tend to suffer a self-imposed handicap in relation to contributing to public policymaking in the sense that so much of the discipline seems to be not only concerned with the unofficial side of society behind the formal facade but

with the 'subterranean'. This predisposition has meant that most sociologists tend to be instinctively hostile to formal, official structures and to government in particular. RALF DAHRENDORF has described the effect to this preoccupation with one aspect of the social order as it affects the participation of sociologists in government in the following terms:

'To define the science of sociology by concern with the unofficial and indeed defense of the underdog, means of necessity to define it out of the mainstream of social and political development, a generally benevolent though sometimes maleficent sect of subterranean inquirers, whose frustrations are most likely to lead them to embrace absurd and totally inconsistent beliefs in the possibility of turning the world upside down in order to make the unofficial official, and the subterranean world the place to live for all' (1975: 7).

This is a fairly sweeping indictment and it is not my concern to assess its validity, but whatever view is taken of his interpretation, DAHRENDORF has undoubtedly put his finger on a crucial factor in determining the success of the relationship between social scientists and policymakers and that is their respective occupational predispositions. In assessing the validity of the sceptical or optimistic view of the contribution of social science to policymaking we have to extend the discussion to include occupational predispositions and more especially to the interplay between predispositions and the institutional constraints imposed on each, but particularly those imposed on the policymakers. Let us first examine the predispositions of the policymakers.

II. Predispositions of Policymakers

The first predisposition of the policymaker we must note and one which makes him decidedly less receptive to social science than is usually supposed is simply that he dislikes too much information. The usual position is that the normal processes of policymaking generate more than enough information without outside academic assistance. More than enough, that is, by the policymaker's own estimation but not necessarily the estimation of outside observers particularly perhaps social scientists. In the first place the inclination of most policymakers will be for action (either negative or positive) rather than words. Aggregating information as well as aggregating

gating interests is one of his primary tasks. Government is after all concerned with decisions that usually have to be made within a fairly short time limit and this means that one of its main tasks is closing off as many options as possible by establishing criteria of rejection. Rigorously applied this can mean, if the policymaker is lucky, that the decision 'selects itself' with the minimum of friction and time wasting and the maximum of plausibility. These are not the conditions under which more information will, or can, be actively sought from outside government, for any new information will almost certainly delay matters. But it may well generate further options as well without providing any new criteria of rejection. KEYNES, who had rather more experience of government than perhaps any other British social scientist before or since, pointed out this essential feature of government long ago, yet it is seldom adequately recognised: 'there is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult' (as quoted in TITMUS 1938: 5f.).

Of course social science's potential contribution is not confined solely to providing information. It obviously has a demonstrably important part to play in monitoring policy: of assessing how far past policies are fulfilling their objectives. That this is a key contribution that social science can make is emphasized by both CHERNS (1972) and REIN (1973) in what are two of the most persuasive and well-considered discussions of social science and public policymaking. But as REIN points out, even this role may in practise be much more limited than might at first be supposed because research can monitor policy, 'only if government has a policy to implement, that is, if it has established a definite, unambiguous course of action directed to a specific and definable aim' (1973: 26). But, we must ask, is this usually the case? The answer must be 'no', not only because a great deal of policy is inherited from the past and the objectives it seeks to fulfil have been forgotten, but also because a great deal of policy is literally objectiveless in the sense that it either has no objectives that could be defined, or the objectives are so complex or contradictory that no policymaker, is willing to commit himself to any defined set of objectives. This brings us to an important feature of the constraints facing policymakers,

and that is their inevitable reluctance to be pinned down in an situation of political uncertainty. This is because the corollary of policy monitoring is first, that there will follow some judgement of performances, and no government can tell whether the judgement will be favourable or unfavourable. Second, and more significantly, so far as major policy is concerned, making your aims explicit gives your opponents a ready-made target to shoot at. In normal circumstances, no politician in the saddle will be willing to agree to that. Even among programmatic parties the maximum ambiguity about precise objectives as can be safely managed without appearing to be irredeemably opportunist is generally the rule. It is only a mild exaggeration to say that unless there are clear advantages to be reaped by stating the real objectives of major policy publicly, or where an incoming government is able to exploit the 'honeymoon' relationship with the electorate, ambiguity about aims is of the essence of democratic government. It is for these reasons, among others, that the programme budgeting fad that seems to have swept over most Western governments from its rather special origins in the U.S. Department of Defence now seems to have either been dropped (implicitly if not always explicitly), or has been shunted into the sidings of homiletic macropolicy techniques of which the corporate management approach that is now being promoted in British local government is a good example.

If there is a role for social scientists as policy monitors, it is likely to be for well-defined, and limited middle range policy and the social scientist involved must be prepared for the possibility that his work will be ignored, or possibly suppressed, if the conclusions can be construed as being damaging to the government.

Even if the policymakers do seek information from outside government when formulating policy, it is unlikely that academic social scientists will have the information the policymaker wants. This is because a great deal of academic social science is not about phenomena but about concepts; moreover, that which is not, will not usually be in the form that is useful for policy-making. This is not so much a problem of pure versus applied research, but simply that academic research is general whereas policy is usually highly specific and in addition requires a kn

of the institutions and processes in which it is to be applied. CHERNS has stated the problem as well as anyone. Social science research he claims, 'can only have specific use if it is concerned both as taking a narrow view of the problem it is tackling and has a strategy for its use designed into its methodology. Research of this kind turns out to have low generalizability which does not necessarily mean, but often does, that it is also trivial.' (1970: 55).

We have already noted that one of the constraints that the policymaker has to cope with is the shortage of time and it is a constraint of such importance in relation to the possible contribution of social science to the policymakers task that it merits further exploration. In the first place, the policymaker usually wants to reach decisions as soon as possible for time is one of his scarcest resources, partly because there are usually intense short term public pressures on him, partly because governments and legislative sessions have fixed time spans, and partly because the legislative process is an insatiable consumer of time. Moreover, the legislative process cannot be by-passed, so if time runs out the most elaborately prepared, most urgent, most worthy proposals remain mere intentions. Even when a longer time scale for policy formulation is deliberately chosen, such as a government sponsored inquiry, the time available is still likely to be too short for the academic. This is because governments have to be careful who and what research they commission. They will usually require 'peer review' as well as internal vetting of research proposals. Cumbersome financial approval procedures will also have to run their inexorable course, and problems associated with the seasonal character of research personnel recruitment shortens the time available for the actual research still further.

The academic engaged in research for government will also be inclined to resist being rushed precisely because he is now being asked to produce something that may possibly determine events rather than impress his academic peers. And determine events, moreover, in an institutional and policy setting he may discover after he has begun the research that is largely unfamiliar to him. This discovery is likely to delay him still further and add to a general sense of unease concerning the pace at which he is required to produce results. Unease, or worse, is likely to occur for the

academic in any case since he will become only too aware that what he regards as an end in itself is regarded by the policymaker as just another factor to be taken into account. Furthermore, it will also become apparent to him that the policy problem he is helping to tackle is merely one problem among many for the policymaker and once a decision has been made will probably be of no more further concern to him than yesterday's edition is to a newspaper editor. Such attitudes are profoundly disturbing and unsettling to most academics for their time scale is relative posterity whereas the policymakers' can seldom be longer than next week to next year. ROBIN HUWS JONES makes this point most tellingly in discussing government attitudes to sociological research when he confessed to 'a disloyal spasm of sympathy with the complaint that the sociologists' cry is "Give us the job and we'll spend the next seven years sharpening the tools."¹ Such considerations have led one American observer who has had a great deal of experience in commissioning outside research for government to conclude, 'the time required for the initiation, conduct and reporting of grant-supported research very nearly guarantees that the results will not be available in time to be useful in policy formulation and implementation'. (COWHIG 1961: 67).

The last constraint on policymakers in relation to the contribution of social science to policymaking is their inability to assess the validity of what the social scientist tells them. In his work for the policymaker the social scientist will inevitably be involved, one way or another, with facets of human behaviour in relation to government, or the operation of official institutions. Such phenomena, however, form part of the working experience of policymakers. This working experience is moulded into a series of plausible explanations which in reality may or may not be accurate, but which are jealously guarded by the policymaker with all the pride and obstinacy that any professional guards the current orthodoxies of his specialism. He is therefore unlikely to discard them easily unless he can be presented with an alternative explanation that is backed by proof, i.e., has been validated by controlled experiments. This in the nature of things the social scientist cannot provide. This means

1 In: *The Almoner* 12, No. 2: 61, quoted in SINFIELD (1970: 28).

that, unlike the respectful attitudes the policymakers are likely to accord to, say, an accountant or physician, they are likely to greet the advice of social scientists with a mixture of suspicion tinged with incredulity where ever it touches on a policy or political process about which they claim familiarity, whatever the implications of the social scientists' research findings may be².

The social scientist in government will certainly find his advisory role difficult to sustain if his research breaks new ground and his findings refute received opinion; for that is precisely the point where professional policymakers have to desert him. The risks for the policymaker, both politician and civil servant, are far too great for them to do anything else.

III. Predispositions of Social Scientists

We now turn to those predispositions of social scientists and the constraints in which they work that seem likely to be most decisive in determining whether they can make a contribution to public policymaking. We note, first, that the policymaker's suspicion of the social scientist and his lack of respect for social science tends to be matched by the social scientist's own lack of confidence. This is derived from a number of sources. In the first place, he is only too aware of the precarious edifice of knowledge on which he is perched. He, above all, is aware that his knowledge lacks the validation of, say, the engineer, or even the physician. The social scientist, in other words, tends to share the policymaker's estimate of himself, . . . 'he has little inner certainty about his work . . . only half believes in it, . . . his data is uncertain, his means of verification lacking' (LIPPMANN 1965: 7). In the highly charged atmosphere of political decisionmaking that is so different from the university seminar room, the social scientist is vulnerable, and the policymaker senses his vulnerability from the degree of necessary indeterminacy in his findings:

¹This very indeterminacy then leads to tension bet-

2 See ROBERT K. MERTON (1959: XV, n. 5) for a brilliant description of such attitudes. MERTON is describing general lay attitudes to sociology but they also apply with equal force to most policymakers' attitudes to social scientists.

ween the expert and the policymaker, since the results of research are rarely decisive. The policymaker must still perform a difficult act of judgement based on his own views and experience; so he may well question the relevance of a social science that, for his purposes, is inconclusive and yet raises questions about the limited basis of his own evaluation.' (LYONS 1968: 10).

The social scientist, in short, is only too likely to fail the policymakers when they demand, as they assuredly will, a final, unequivocal conclusion, or recommendation. This brings us to another important characteristic of the academic social scientist, not so much as social scientist but as academic. Outside the lecture room, he doesn't much relish tidy emphatic conclusions of the kind policymakers tend to favour. Anyone who has participated in an academic decisionmaking body, however fleeting that participation may have been, is unlikely to need much persuasion that academics are, how shall we say, slow to agreement and even slower to the final decision. Perhaps the social scientist is worse in this respect than academics generally; certainly his whole professional posture and training has been directed against closing off avenues of analysis and in favour of opening them up and revealing their hidden dimensions. *And where he thinks his views may be acted upon*, of careful qualification; of dissembling; of never being pinned down; of not coming to a final conclusion if he can possibly help it.

Another aspect of the social scientist's predispositions that demands brief mention is the fundamental one of ideology or values. All social science research that is likely to be of any use to policymakers will imply some values³. So far as the substantive content of the research is concerned and the conceptual framework in which this content is analysed this much is conceded by most commentators who have considered the role of the social scientist in government. That is to say, it is accepted that the social scientists' contribution cannot be value free but, surprisingly, much less attention has been given to the much more obvious fact that governments are not value free either. The fact that they are not means that the problem facing the social scientist in government

3 For a discussion of this problem in relation to policymaking see MARTIN REIN (1974).

is not so much that his own value system colours his research and recommendations, but that these values may be out of tune with those of the government he is advising.

There may also be a value problem arising from the techniques the social scientist employs. The apparently innocent sample survey, for example, which was much beloved by social scientists a few years back, when used as a consumer test of public policy, may be viewed by politicians not merely as a disguised referendum that seeks to outflank them as the legitimate representatives of the electorate, but as a covert attack on democratic government. From the social scientist's point of view what could be more rational and just than to find out 'what people want'? That government may not always be in a position to act upon such knowledge will be conceded by the social scientist, but he is likely to insist that what people want is what democracy is supposed to be about. However, politicians of whatever stripe may regard such notions as an attempt to relegate them to the status of delegates; or that the use of surveys mistakes the complexity of democracy for the demand and supply relationship in economic theory between the individual consumer and the single product firm; or as an attempt to weaken the capacity of democratic government to act on behalf of the majority by making it a prisoner of whatever policy issue that happens to take the fancy of the social scientist.

I am probably overstating the position; my impression is that most advanced industrial democratic governments are much more receptive to systematic policy monitoring research, if only because in a situation where more of the informed public are exposed to social science at the university, there is a need for government policy statements 'to have some rags of legitimation cast about them by quantitative research' (HOPE 1974: 22). Overemphasis is necessary however, merely to underline just how fraught with value problems even the techniques social scientists employ can be when applied to public making, let alone their substantive advice or research findings.

The last disposition of social scientists that seems to be relevant to their participation in public policy making is that the social scientist in go-

vernment will be a guest. He may not see it quite like that for as a citizen enjoying full political rights he may feel that his participation in policymaking is no more than his due and perhaps even a reflection of an enlightened government. But from the policymaker's point of view, the social scientist in government is being given a highly privileged position in society that his partners – both politician and bureaucrat – have only attained at some considerable personal cost and in the face of intense competition. They are unlikely, then, to be entirely uncritical hosts. The social scientist will be watched and he will need to be on his very best behaviour. This means that he will be expected to conform to the operating procedures of government in all their formal, ritualized glory in a hierarchical setting that has few parallels in university life.

Yet social scientists, perhaps more so than any other academics, may be the least prepared to be the model guest. From general observation there seems to be a strong tendency for social scientists who are interested in political institutions and public policy, to regard the upper levels of government with suspicion if not mild hostility. We have already noted the self-imposed handicap that it is alleged sociologists face in government because of their preoccupation with the unofficial and subterranean, but this suspicion of government, although possibly linked to sociologists' predilection for the unofficial, is something different. Precisely what its origins are lies outside the ambit of this paper, but it is of some significance that a dominating feature of much of the academic theory of democratic organizations is derived from the assumption that, whatever the outward forms may be, power is inevitably concentrated at the top. More specifically, that the conventional account of how democratic institutions work is mythical. Whether it is SCHUMPETER's theory of how the modern democratic state works, WEBER's theory of bureaucracy, MICHEL's iron law of oligarchy, the various elite-mass theories stemming from MOSCA, or the elitist account of community power, they all have this characteristic more or less in common. According to NORTON LONG the tendency to see government always in terms of power concentration and elitism is inherent in the nature of the social sciences:

'Our primitive need to explain thunder with a theology or a demonology results in the hypostatizing of an angelic or demonic hierarchy. The executive committee of the bourgeoisie and the power elite makes the world more comfortable for modern social scientists as the Olympians did for the ancients' (1967: 148).

Reared on such an intellectual diet and with such predispositions but imbued with no more than an average enthusiasm for democracy, it is perhaps hardly surprising that our social scientist when first transplanted to government tends to see his new colleagues in a slightly jaundiced light. These are not the most propitious conditions for successful collaboration.

If this cursory run through the respective dispositions of policymaker and social scientist that are likely to hinder successful collaboration between the two seems to err on the side of pessimism, it must be remembered that, in the United States and Britain at least, it has proved remarkably difficult to uncover many instances where social research has had a clear and direct effect on policy even when it has been specifically commissioned by government. Professor CHERNS recounts his own embarrassment when forced by a request to provide evidence of such effects in relation to government sponsored social science research, and he reminds us that the HEYWORTH COMMITTEE on social studies (Report 1965: Ch.VII) faced a similar fruitless task, as did no less than five separate investigations in the United States in relation to research sponsored by the federal government (CHERNS 1972). As IDA MERRIAM, Assistant Commissioner of Research for the Social Security Administration of the U.S.federal government, has put it:

'There is as growing recognition that much of the federally supported extramural research, particularly in the social sciences, has added little or nothing either to basic knowledge or practical decision-making' (quoted in REIN 1973: 3).

It is true, that there are a number of factors which may obscure the link between research and policy. Professor CHERNS points out, for example, how difficult it is to gauge the link because the time span may be too protracted, because we may lack adequate measures of change, and finally, because we often don't know the 'before' conditions accurately enough (1972: Intro-

duction XXVII). He might have added that the effect of social science research on a policy decision may also be obscured because it was purely negative in effect. That is to say, option C was chosen because option A (initially the most favoured) was ruled out by the findings of the research although the implications of that research (option B) were politically unacceptable.

We must, then, treat the verdict that social science has had very little impact on policy-making with some caution for it seems likely that the reason why its impact has been found to be so low is because the assessments have tended to concentrate on a direct and positive link between research and outcome. It seems much more likely that social research has played, and will continue to play, a much more significant part in policymaking than it is possible to ascertain simply by examining overt linkages. Moreover, its negative role could be crucial in ruling out certain options if not by offering clear guidance as to the final choice in the manner I have sketched out above. Nevertheless, when due allowance is made for these factors, the impact of social science research on policy seems to be remarkably meagre when set against the amount of research directly commissioned by government and we are forced back again to a sceptical rather than an optimistic posture.

Perhaps one consideration that has to be recognised is that government sometimes commissions research not because it ever intends to use it, but, as has already been suggested, because in a more informed age those in power feel they need to legitimate policy decisions already taken with some independent trappings. This is the 'front' function of research in public policy-making noted by BANFIELD (1965: 283f.). It may also commission research merely to head off short-term political pressures by buying time in the hope that such pressures will have subsided by the time the research is completed. Another habit that governments seem to be adopting with increasing frequency in those sectors where the problems are particularly intractable, or where there is too much political uncertainty for explicit statements of policy – land use planning is one example –, is to generate greater and greater quantities of information as a substitute for coming to a

decision. There is, of course, little social scientists can and need do about such ineradicable short-term habits of government.

There may be a great deal we can do about the long-term though. However sceptical we must be about the short-term contribution of social science to government, it is still possible to be reasonably optimistic about its contribution over the longer run. That is to say, social science can make a contribution to changing the dominating ideologies that underpin existing public policy. In short, social science can lead as well as follow policy.

But if it is to do so, social scientists will need to produce better social science. This may sound like a statement of the obvious, but there can be little doubt that, in Britain at least, there is a lot of truth in HOPE's (1974: 25) bald assertion that 'any research worker who comes up with vaguely progressive conclusions is likely to get an uncritical hearing, however rubbishy his work'. If the situation that HOPE criticizes is to be avoided and social science is to make a contribution to the evolution of new broad gauge policy — to lead rather than follow the dominant operating modes of public policy — at least two conditions need to exist. First, there must be sufficient diversity of 'consciously defended value systems' (HOPE 1974: 25) to generate an effective debate and maintain its quality. Secondly, there must be social science that consciously takes as its focus the broad-gauge dominating policy consensus, eschews direct entanglements with government and fruitless handwringing about a value-free social science, and makes a frank attempt to combine empirical findings with policy recommendations. This is the social science, 'that expresses a new way of perceiving society and the rights and duties of its citizens' (DONNISON 1972: 523) and seeks to convert the polity first and by a process of diffusion may get its views translated and transmuted into government policy later. As DONNISON (1972: 522) has suggested, in Britain at least, there has been a long tradition going back at least to BENTHAM and his disciples of this kind of social science, and there is clear evidence that it has had a profound impact on the direction and content of major public policy. Both conditions require the maximum freedom of expression and the maximum opportunity for quiet reflection. But

it is doubtful whether the necessary freedom and quiet can be achieved either within government or in independent research organizations. So it may be that the extent to which social science leads rather than follows the policy consensus will depend as much on the number and quality of social science academics who stick to their lasts within the University but who take a rigorously critical interest in public policy, as it does on the number who decamp to government and research organizations.

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