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PUBLIC POLICY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

Otto Doering
Purdue University

The scope of this topic is broad enough to be beyond prediction and almost beyond imagination. It is also questionable whether one close to the topic can comment with dispassion and see the forest for the trees. I remember Jim Watson's criticism of the narrowness of British biologists in the 1950s, especially their non-interest in biochemistry and their tendency to "waste their efforts on useless polemics about the origin of life or how we know that a scientific fact is really correct" (Watson, p. 46). I will try to be different.

I am going to start from the widely held view that there is something wrong with public policy today. I will contrast some different views about what is wrong with public policy (and its formation), identify some major common touchstones of these, look at some historical experience, and then venture a few of my own opinions.

Many believe that citizen democracy is not functioning, representative government has failed, and the primary role of public policy leaders is to reconnect citizens to their political world. But, in assessing any problem, we need to start by asking why we are where we are today—because people are not generally stupid, and there are good reasons why they are doing what they are doing.

Daniel Yankelovich, in his book *Coming to Public Judgment*, assesses the problem as follows: Americans are not worried about their political freedom and their political liberty is not endangered—they take it for granted, and among other things this allows them to focus on their material well-being. What is dangerous is the erosion of participation (p. 1). Implicitly he is also talking about the erosion of the effectiveness of participation. Contrast this with the totalitarianism of both the right and the left which spurred participation to extremes as part of the mechanism of social control. We saw this in Nazi Germany and in 100 percent voter turnouts in Communist countries, but this is not the sort of participation Yankelovich is talking about.

Several factors have led to this erosion of participation (which coincidentally erodes the impact of participation and may lead to a decline in the freedom to participate). His assessment is that "few institutions are devoted to helping the public form considered judgments" (Yankelovich, p. 4). Yankelovich, the quintessential

pollster, blames part of this on the opinion polls and the media. He believes opinions expressed at the moment are not the judgments people would actually make. “The quality of public opinion is good when the public accepts responsibility for the *consequences* of its views and poor when the public, for whatever reason, is unprepared to do so” (Yankelovich, p. 24, italics Doering’s).

What is important to Yankelovich is a process that gets people to public judgment. This process includes three phases: consciousness raising, working through and resolution. This is none other than our basic public policy education model of problem identification, evaluation (assessing alternatives and their consequences) and choosing a solution (based on facts and values).

One reason such public judgment is short circuited is that the media is not doing its job. He points out that the media does lots of consciousness raising with little attention to alternative solutions and their consequences (the working-through process). The media also falls down in agenda setting—not correctly identifying the problem, i.e., symptoms rather than the problems themselves become the focus. Both of these limit the process of coming to public judgment.

Yankelovich also believes there is a problem with the “Expert-Public” gap. This is especially important during the working through stage. What is the public to think when the experts disagree? Part of this difficulty arises from major differences between expert and public opinion (even when the experts agree!). He summarizes these differences as follows:

<u>Expert Opinion</u>	<u>Public Opinion</u>
An empirical proposition.	A value judgment.
Can be validated.	Cannot be validated.
Personal preferences are set aside.	Personal preferences are major focus.
Criteria of quality is validity.	Criteria of quality is acceptance of responsibility for one’s views.

Many misunderstandings between experts and the public originate in “the differing points of departure each side takes to various issues” (Yankelovich, p. 92). The technocratic view of the world and the difficulties in communication between experts or elites and the public are a major theme for Yankelovich. They figure prominently in the inferred causes of the problem he identifies as “sources of resistance” (Yankelovich, pp. 181-189). These are:

1. A self-centered view of the world.
2. Threats to the status of experts.

3. Modernism as an ingrained philosophy of learning behavior (instrumental rationality and the culture of technical control).
4. The worship of Science.

His view is similar to the kind of skepticism exhibited in the late 1800s by Mark Twain (read *Connecticut Yankee . . .*) and others toward the dominance of technology and the technical elite. There are some interesting messages here for those who consider themselves technical specialists who know what ought to be done.

In summary: the message from Yankelovich is that public opinion on which policy is based today is ill-formed and incompletely formed. What is needed for good public policy is what he calls public judgment. Some of us would see public judgment as the product of a traditional public policy education experience that integrates effective problem identification, consideration of a range of alternatives and their consequences, and the final decision which includes values, facts and an acceptance of the consequences in making the final individual judgment.

Frances Lappe has another view (and describes another part of the public policy elephant) in her book *Rediscovering America's Values*. She believes we should use our values as guides for the way we decide and conduct policy. My immediate response to that statement is to reflect upon the difficulties Woodrow Wilson brought upon us when he began doing this in the conduct of foreign policy. This leaves me with some disquiet, and a feeling that this may work sometimes, rather than with a ringing endorsement of this approach.

Lappe continues: "We have institutionalized our values, these very institutions are now in trouble, and we have thus lost the strength and freshness of the application of our values (through institutions) to considering appropriate policy." As we read further, it becomes clear Lappe is concerned about some very specific values.

Lappe focuses on the Liberal belief of self-centeredness—the Hobbes and Bentham idea of the basic competitive nature of man which causes real problems when debating or deciding public issues. In the past, this competitive individualism was mitigated by Western religion even though Liberal thought sanctified institutions like private property and the market in a way that further mitigated against useful and productive common decision making. In the Liberal tradition, private property's role was to provide "a source of independence against state power and other individuals." Also, the market did not require any "consensus about community needs while directly expressing individual desires" (Lappe, p. 10).

Lappe not only defines the Liberal (with a capital "L") tradition correctly, but also effectively uses Adam Smith as a counter argument—something to make conservative economists gnash their teeth. She says Smith thought the individual's sense of self worth

was embodied entirely within society and that there were external rules above individual human accountability. There is something of a chicken-and-egg difficulty here about priorities and precedence—the individual or the common good.

Lappe wants society to have a sociologist's or cultural anthropologist's view of the world (not realizing that the old cultural anthropology tradition has been ridden out of that profession). A democratic government is not to be just a means to an end, but prized through certain community values in its own right. (What we see here is a "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" view of democracy). Lappe holds that today, private property and the market should not be institutions just for protecting or enhancing the individual but should become mere "devices subordinated to our socially defined needs" (Lappe, p. 13). Property rights become rights of membership. Adam Smith's broader concept of social justice plays in here as well. What Lappe calls for is a change in the dominant set of traditional Liberal values as a solution for inappropriate policy that is based upon an inappropriate view of the world and an individual's place in it.

Lappe is advocating changing society (societal values) to change policy while Yankelovich is advocating changing the process through which the public expresses its wishes about policy decisions. Is society misinforming policymakers so we have to change the process, or is the nature of today's society such that we have to change it (its values) to get "good" policy? Alternatively, are institutions at fault? I, for one, am certainly not going to answer this question for you!

Typifying the institutional approach, Harry Boyte comments that, "Institutional politics is the practice in most large organizations and in government, it involves a strongly hierarchical structure, a language of rational calculation of individual costs and benefits, and a largely one-way information flow. This is what has left most people in the roles of spectator and political consumer today. *It's what people love to hate*" (Boyte, p. 5, italics Doering's).

Benjamin Barber refines this distinction claiming, "It is almost as if there are two democracies in America: the one defined by national parties and presidential politics and bureaucratic policies, a remote world circumscribed by Washington's beltway, walling in the politicians even as it walls out the citizens; and the other defined by neighborhood and block associations, PTAs and community action groups, an intimate domain no larger than a town or rural county where women and men gather in small groups to adjudicate differences or plan common tasks. With something of a pejorative sneer, we call the first "politics," cynical about the corruption of politicians, skeptical about the competence of voters or about the possibilities of participation in affairs so complex and institutions so bureaucratized. But about the second we wax exuberant, celebrating its spirited

good-neighborliness and restless activity, though we scarcely associate it with politics or democracy at all" (Barber, p. xi.).

Clearly there are very different views about what these people see as the basic problem of public policy today. It is fair to ask at this point whether these commentators are addressing symptoms rather than causes. None of them explicitly deal with:

1. The tremendous economic changes since the Second World War, wherein our nation started as *the* dominant economy in the post war period and is now being forced to accept a lesser status.
2. The great changes in demographics over the last generation that include changes in density, age distribution, ethnic composition, and comparative well-being.
3. The demise of the American melting-pot ideal.
4. The critical role of elites in changing or setting societal values. (One would certainly have expected Lappe to focus on this).
5. The rapidly changing view of what is "correct" politically.

There have been a number of extremely important historical changes. Among them are the changes in the nation's economy and shifts in regional power as well as the changing power shifts related to demographics. Our notion of what is "progressive" has changed—it is no longer equated with the populist views of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

We have seen the demise of the Victorian-based reforms that shaped what good and appropriate societal activities were for several past generations. These include a further change in the role and place of women today—a further evolution from the Victorian accomplishment of placing women and children in a protected status less subject to physical abuse. We have seen great changes in the expectations for, content of, and quality of education. We have seen changes in the definition of public and private ethics away from the puritanical Victorianism, some of which may have been hypocritical, but some of which fostered accepted behavior, trust and shared ideals between individuals. (This change made the savings and loan scandals possible—and the public does not seem to care that much about it, as long as the costs are paid later!). Finally, we have seen the demise of the folklore of personal honesty, thrift and hard work which served as an important stimulus to productivity and a sense of community responsibility—something Lappe does not take into account when talking almost exclusively about the competitive Liberal tradition. All of these are major factors if we are to try to explain why we are where we are today.

Coupled with this has been a critical change in the basic content of our national policy in America. In the past our national agenda in-

cluded: the establishment, defense and consolidation of the nation; the settling of the land; and the populist social reform goals to make society better—educating, protecting and giving opportunity to the young and the less fortunate on the one hand and, on the other, attempting to limit the scope of the powerful and wealthy to prevent their taking advantage of their position. All of this took place during a period of growing national wealth and prominence based upon a superb natural resource endowment easily capable of supporting our growing population.

Today, there is no overriding national agenda—little sense of nation building or of building a national culture. There are fewer shared ideals, where previously many opinion setters shared a common agenda including some degree of social responsibility. We face a declining resource base for essential production inputs and pressure on basic life resources like air and water. Most importantly, the critical economic questions being faced today are divisive ones over power, wealth and income distribution. People scramble to get a larger share for themselves with less focus on economic growth for everyone. The compensation for Fortune 500 CEOs has gone from thirty-five times their workers' average pay in the mid-1970s to 143 times in 1992 (*Wall Street Journal*, p. 1). We see fights over major economic stakes in the debate on national health care. Some worry about the distribution of resources going increasingly toward the old rather than the young—others are concerned about the declining attention given to investment in the future which is being sacrificed for current consumption.

All of these are major factors if we are to try to explain why we are where we are today, and many of the commentators on our national dilemma focus instead on merely jiggering the present system to get us somewhere else. Jiggering the system will not have sufficient impact to alter the paths of so many loaded trains that have already gathered speed in other directions.

There have been many basic changes in our society, its make-up, its values, and in the resources available to support it. This will have to lead to changes in the way society decides issues under almost any view of where our society should be going.

The nature and content of current and future public policy is just very different from what it was in the past and will evolve into something different in the future. These new issues are stressful on the decision process in different ways—all of which will require that decisions be made differently from the way they were in the past.

Given this change in society and in the basic nature of the critical public policy issues for society, I would not expect just a process reform such as Yankelovich suggests to meet our public policy decision making needs. I would not expect a sudden shift to Lappe's more socially-based set of values to do the job either. In fact, we already

have seen some very important shifts in values—something that does occur as a matter of course in open societies. For example, an important redefinition of property rights has already taken place. In the dispute over the preservation of wetlands, those who own wetlands have lost some of the discretionary rights over their property to the general public that prefers to preserve this resource.

My own bias leads me to believe there may be real value in trying to modify decision-making institutions so national decisions receive more of the attention and participation of the individual as Boyte and Barber suggest. But progress here is not made in a vacuum. We will have to do a better job identifying the changes in society and public policymaking that have already taken place and try to better gauge their impact upon current and future policymaking. This must be part of the definition process of the causes of our current dilemmas—the “why we are where we are today” that should have a logical explanation. If we cannot make this identification, we may be chasing symptoms. If we cannot speak with some accuracy and authority about why we happen to be investing less today in our youth and more in our elderly we are unlikely to provide a good basis for the public to ask if they want to continue in this direction or change to another path.

Tim Wallace pointed out in our discussion that change is made at the periphery (the local level, the more modest decision), and that we do accomplish a great deal by aiding this process. I agree with this, but believe we need to try to keep a broader focus to ensure that we deal with core societal issues and also with the question of more effective consideration of public policy issues determined at the center of government.

Jerry Howe raised the critical question of institutional change—not only for decision making but also for implementing new policies. If our changing society makes a new policy shouldn't we pay attention that institutions also change to make that new policy happen? The answer is certainly yes.

Both of these are important considerations. I would add that I am not sure exactly what direction the public policy process or public policy education should move in, but we should be moving somewhere different from where we are today. My view is that where we are today still reflects a past that is no longer with us in terms of issues, values, priorities and the decision making process itself.

We must do a better job identifying the major drivers of policy change that operate today and tomorrow, and as part of this process do a better job identifying those issues that are (and will be) relevant to society. This is all the more difficult because we do not have an identified and commonly shared national agenda. We are dealing instead with narrower issues and concerns over which there is not uni-

versal agreement. But, this is where we are, and these have to be dealt with.

I am convinced the success of Perot in gaining as large a vote as he did in the 1992 presidential election stems from his focus on issues of concern to the public that were being ignored or not dealt with by the two major parties. Given the megalithic structure of our two national political parties today, they are increasingly less flexible in shedding old concerns and taking on new ones. This inflexibility is part of what Boyte and Barber are talking about. The cost and media structure of the political process we have today give even less opportunity for ventures like Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose party. However, it is increased flexibility to take on new public issues and deal with them effectively that will, in my view, be the critical hallmark of how effectively we, as a nation, cope with the future.

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