Questions We Face in Developing a Program in Public Policy

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There is a general feeling among Extension Service workers that public policy work is more difficult to handle than other fields of activity. Their feelings may or may not represent the true situation. It is true that certain problems exist in connection with policy work which, if they exist for other lines of extension activity, are not nearly so acute as in policy work. In this paper, I raise questions and offer a few comments on six problem areas which I consider important to successful work in public policy: (1) selecting personnel who will lead the work, (2) deciding who will do most of the policy work, (3) securing administrative support, (4) handling questions of value judgments, (5) dealing with pressure groups, and (6) selecting appropriate problems. A seventh important area, teaching methods, is omitted since it will be dealt with in another session of this conference.

Before discussing the problem areas, I believe it would be helpful to explain what I mean by public policy and educational work in public policy. I look on public policy as being a proposed course of action which involves more than one individual, firm, or business enterprise and in which some organization or body of people, which is responsible to other people for its actions, is involved and is operating within the legal framework of the nation. This definition would exclude proposed courses of action which involve private business activity (production and marketing) except where public controls are imposed on private activities. Also the definition excludes illegal activities. In the case of extension work, I assume that further limitations might be imposed by the selection of policy issues of particular concern to farm people.

Educational work in public policy is defined as providing people with information (principles, facts, analytical tools) which will help them make better decisions in regard to courses of action which involve public policy. Educational work in public policy involves getting the major issues before the people, stimulating thought about the issues in the light of the best known facts, principles, and analytical tools, and seeing that argument

proceeds according to logical principles. To me, educational work means more than simply acting as chairman of a meeting or presenting the pros and cons of an issue. It means presenting relevant principles, facts, and methods of analysis, and perhaps alternative courses of action, and attempting to appraise the consequences of each. In this respect, educational work in public policy would be the same as educational work in any of the production fields.

SELECTING PERSONNEL

I realize that what I am about to say about personnel does not apply to this group since you have had much training and experience in the field of public policy. But I dare say there is not one of you who would not like to have more personnel assigned to policy work in your state. Since policy work is young and not fully developed, I believe it is important to spend a few minutes discussing personnel.

First, I would like to emphasize the importance of using only top-flight men in work on policy. It is a difficult field of work, and the first essential for success is competent, well-trained men. The training should be broad and should embrace economics, political science, sociology, and other closely related fields. The policy specialist must have a thorough understanding of the principles of at least one, and preferably all of these disciplines. In addition, he should understand the practical side of the problems with which he must deal. For example, how can he discuss intelligently problems of taxation without knowing enough economic theory to understand the incidence of taxation, or the federal budget without an understanding of monetary and fiscal policy? The better the specialist understands his subject, the better position he is in to interpret it correctly to his audience in a simple and understandable manner.

DECIDING WHO WILL DO MOST OF THE POLICY WORK

Who should do the policy work for a state extension service? Should it be done by the highly trained specialist? What part should the county agent and his local leaders play in a policy program? These are questions that must be answered before a state's educational program in the policy field can be developed. Some specialists assume that their function is to train county agents. Others assume that their function is to teach farm people

by whatever means they can. The latter group may spend much time with farm audiences, using the county agent to call the meetings and to get the people to attend.

My opinion is that the specialist will have to carry a much heavier load of the policy work than would be true for some other fields. County agents cannot become experts in all fields and are not likely to have sufficient time to prepare themselves to adequately handle many of the current policy questions.

SECURING ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

How far can one go without administrative support? How does one go about getting administrative support for policy work? I hope you do not expect me to answer these questions, but I do want to point out a few things that will help. First, administrative support is essential. An understanding by administrators of what education involves is important. Personnel must be competent and the administration must have confidence in the personnel. Second, the approach to policy problems must be sound. Third, the approach used must be educational. Evangelism must not be substituted for principles, facts, and fair treatment of the issues. Fourth, the specialist should not attempt to take a stand for the institution, but may express his personal views if appropriate and if his audience understands what he is doing. Fifth, the program must be aimed at educating the people and letting them make their own decisions.

HANDLING QUESTIONS OF VALUE JUDGMENTS

What is a value judgment? How does one maintain objectivity in policy work? How does one keep his personal biases out of his work? Should economists make value judgments?

Value judgments should not be confused with personal bias. Bias is an attitude which is usually shared by a special group and comes to light with respect to special issues. Bias is conditioned by the circumstances one grew up in, his associations with other people, and a multitude of personal experiences which his subconscious mind works into a pattern. No one is without such biases, and pronouncements on public policy issues are invariably colored by them. Personal biases may be reflected in: (1) the problems selected, (2) the methods of analysis used, i.e., in logic

and assumptions, and in facts and observations used, and (3) in the methods of presentation, i.e., attitude, etc. Clearly, extension workers must guard against allowing such biases to creep into their work. Discussion of issues with co-workers should help one to discover personal biases. In dealing with an audience, it may be well to explain your own background and experiences in the beginning rather than to hide behind an assumed air of objectivity. The pretense of objectivity is often proof that objectivity does not exist.

Now value judgments are of a different and much higher order. They concern the ideas men and society live by. These ideas involve judgments as to which values are higher than others. Patrick Henry valued liberty higher than life. He could not "prove" by either logic or scientific experiment that liberty is actually of higher value than life. We say rightly that he "believed" that such was the case. Beliefs of this kind guide not only our personal conduct, but also the society of which we are members. In fact, society insists in a hundred ways that we adhere to such general beliefs as established and expressed in our laws, the Constitution, our education, etc. Value judgments on policy issues, when they invoke these beliefs, thus cease to be mere personal opinions, or biases; they touch the nerve system of our societal body. It follows that a sober sense of social and political responsibility must accompany the making of value judgments of this kind.

This is precisely why the question of value judgments is of such importance to extension workers who are, after all, "public servants" in the high sense our English cousins use that term. In our small ways, we are indeed entrusted with preserving the ultimate values on which our American society rests. And it surely behooves us to point out to our audiences that these values are constantly at stake in public policy questions. We should also be able to point out whether consequences of actual or proposed policies are consistent with these values. I think that we should give the highest recognition to extension workers who can handle successfully this "citizenship" task.

The trouble with all this is that you cannot "train" extension workers for this task in the same way that you train good farm management, or poultry, or forestry specialists. You can only

provide an atmosphere and opportunities which challenge the extension worker to develop insight, clear thinking, and a deep concern about fundamental policy issues.

Let us examine the special case of the economist. Should he assume value judgments, or ends, as given and limit himself to a study of means to attain these ends? Is the university obligated to tell the public what is right and what is wrong in regard to major policy issues? Do you think the specialist's obligation ends when he explains the theory of socialism or communism to his audience? Or is there an obligation to examine such economic and social systems in more detail and help the group arrive at a value judgment? The same questions would apply to any policy question.

The physical scientist does not hesitate to make value judgments, or at least to accept them as given. Once value judgments are accepted, the problem becomes one of a means-end schema. Judgment may be used in regard to observations, facts, or the consequences of a specific course of action, but judgment used in this sense is clearly not value judgment as I am defining it here.

Many extension workers have for years told their people what to do. Not only have they provided much factual information, but they have made many decisions for their people, such as when to buy and when to sell, what to grow and how to grow it, whether to conserve food and how to conserve it, etc. What I am trying to say is that we in extension have followed two roads. One involved making decisions for the people; the other involved presenting information, fact, and theory, and allowing the people to make their own decisions. Where do these two roads lead? The first leads to a situation in which farmers expect the experts to do their planning for them, the latter to a situation in which individuals learn to decide for themselves; in other words, to centralized planning versus individual planning. Which is best depends on the objective. If the objective is the training and development of people, the second one is definitely superior.

In regard to the "two roads" discussed in the above paragraph, a distinction should be made between making decisions for people and commanding action in regard to these decisions. Even though we, as extension workers, may make decisions for people, we do not command them to take specific courses of action.

DEALING WITH PRESSURE GROUPS

In policy work, how does one deal with pressure groups? The following points may help. First, recognize the existence and functions of pressure groups and keep them informed in advance of your activities. Second, deal with fundamental principles and with facts, not with opinions. Third, allow people to make their own decisions.

SELECTING APPROPRIATE PROBLEMS

What problems are important? How can the importance of policy problems be determined? Of what importance is timeliness in the selection of policy problems to discuss with rural people? When and how should issues of a controversial nature be handled?

One should explore the magnitude of the various problems and attempt to determine the effects of various solutions upon the people. Many problems seen and "felt" by farm people may not be as important to them as some of the problems which they do not even recognize.

No doubt educational work in the policy field can be much more effective when timing of presentation is given careful consideration. Learning is facilitated when the people are interested in and concerned about the topic being presented.

Whether a university can do good policy work in the middle of a hot public argument over the various aspects of a highly controversial policy issue is debatable. I believe some institutions could do it, and do it well. For others, I doubt if it would be wise to select such a problem at the "white heat" stage of public argument. It seems to me that the problem of handling controversial issues will depend on the circumstances existing in each state.