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Building our Strategic Capabilities

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Abstract

In this thinkpiece, I want to ask the question: "What's going wrong with British strategy and policy-making?" We live in a world in which the quantity and quality of research grows exponentially and in which governments espouse ever-growing commitments to systematic, evidence-based policy-making and implementation.

Yet, public policy failures seem to face us wherever we turn. Aside from the global financial crisis, perhaps there have been no larger public policy failures than the Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001.

I want to explore this question by looking at aspects of national security policy with which I have been involved since the turn of the century. I'll illustrate this with my own tales from the frontline of trying to link knowledge with practice. My focus will be on the UK and US but this is by no means a problem limited to those two countries.

The Problem

I like to think of our serious engagements overseas as examples of massive public sector change programmes. The most ambitious of these, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, were attempts to apply a wide range of human, technological and financial resources to bring about social and political change in pursuit of national policy goals. In that sense, they can be analysed in the same way as can domestic policy interventions. In other words, efforts to achieve goals such as reducing child poverty, cutting crime, reducing smoking, or bringing about stable economic growth can be compared to the Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan interventions. In both sets of cases there are target populations whose behaviour we are seeking to change through the coordinated application of a range of instruments. We may of course conclude that seeking to build a stable and democratic Iraq is rather more complex and challenging a public policy problem than nudging Britons to smoke or eat less, but we can usefully consider them in the same breath in our discussion of policy-making and policy implementation.

Now, I take it for granted that all of us here would agree that the UK and its allies made massive mistakes in its policy-making and implementation with respect to Iraq and Afghanistan, and that the results achieved have been severely sub-optimal. Journalistic accounts, memoirs, scholarly studies and blue-ribbon panels and inquiries have documented the problems in considerable depth.

Sadly, these are just two examples of failure. At a broader level, the UK has criticised itself extensively in recent years. Parliament's joint committee on national security and the Commons Public Accounts Committee have launched coruscating attacks on the ability of Whitehall to "do" strategy. For instance, here is the PAC's commentary on the government's response to its initial inquiry into "who does national strategy":

> "The central contention of our Report is that Government has lost the capacity to think strategically. … The ability to articulate our enduring interests, values and identity has atrophied. … We argued that the

> Government needs to reclaim the art of creating "national strategy" which should encompass all areas of Government activity … The Government's response suggests that there are fundamental confusions about terms, no agreed definitions and hence at present *none of the prerequisites for constructive engagement with the analysis in our* Report."[1]

While government, inevitably, tries to present a positive face towards its critics, there is acknowledgement at senior levels that all is not right. In June 2012, the government launched its "Civil Service Reform Plan". Whilst naturally couched in the language of Whitehall incrementalism, one doesn't need to read too deeply between the lines to get the point. In respect of policy making, the plan notes:

> "the quality of policy advice is not always consistent or designed with implementation in mind. There must be a clear focus on designing policies that can be implemented in practice, drawing on a wider range of views and expertise. At the same time, policy makers must have the skills and tools they need to do their jobs. And they should have a clear understanding of what works based on robust evidence."[2]

With respect to implementation, the report can afford to be harsher in the wake of a string of high-profile delivery failures from IT projects, through child support to Olympics security:

> "Implementing policy should never be separate from making it. Successful outcomes depend on designing policy with clear objectives, creating realistic timetables and professional project planning. Policy that is difficult to implement wastes time and money. Effective delivery is particularly critical for the Government's most important and high value projects, as this drives efficiencies and improves public services. In the past, delivery of

[1] House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, *Who does UK National Strategy?* Further Report with the Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2010–11, Sixth Report of Session 2010–11, 25 January 2011, p.3.

[2] The Cabinet Office, *The Civil Service Reform Plan,* June 2012, p. 14.

these major projects has too often been poor."[3]

The picture gets more depressing the more one looks at the details. Let me give the example of something known as the "inter-departmental conflict pool". This was a brave attempt to force the MoD, DFID and FCO to jointly formulate plans and deliver small-scale projects overseas to prevent or stabilise conflicts. The pool has funded dozens of activities over the years, some of which individually have been quite useful. More than one such project has kept me busy hopping on and off helicopters in some dusty back of beyond over the years. Indeed, Whitehall was so skilled at projecting an image of success that former US defence secretary Gates lobbied Congress to set up a similar system in the US. And yet, from within the Whitehall sausage machine its always been evident that the conflict pool system does not really work. This summer, the Independent Commission on Aid Effectiveness published the following devastating critique:

> "It has … struggled to demonstrate strategic impact: it lacks a clear strategic framework and robust funding model; its governance and management arrangements are cumbersome; and it has little capacity for measuring results. …The Conflict Pool has operated for more than a decade without a coherent approach to results management."[4]

In other words, HMG does not know what this money has achieved. I won't belabour a point – there is a real problem with policy-making and implementation, which we keep re-recognising.

The Paradox

The weaknesses identified most recently in the Civil Service Reform Plan are paradoxical. We have seen a rapid growth in attempts to take a more systematic, rational and evidence-based approach to policy so as to mobilise the whole of government to achieve policy objectives. Attempts to achieve a more "scientific" approach to policy-

[3] The Cabinet Office, *The Civil Service Reform Plan,* June 2012, p. 18.

[4] *Evaluation of the Inter-Departmental Conflict Pool*, IACI report 12, July 2012

making are of course not new – Wilson's government had central policy review groups. Over more than a decade of Blair-Brown government, there were numerous initiatives to address just these issues. Public Service Agreements were implemented with huge effort to manage and monitor implementation of large-scale policies. Strategy units were rolled out in the cabinet office and departments; the PM's Delivery Unit sought to hold departments accountable for delivery. Mandatory training in strategy and "evidence-based decision-making" was imposed on senior civil servants. Research councils and universities were funded to produce policy-relevant knowledge while the Whitehall intelligence apparatus was upgraded with a focus on horizon-scanning and more professional training for analysts.

So how, possibly, in 2012, could the country's top civil servants state without a trace of humility that "policy-makers must have the skills and tools they need" or that "successful outcomes depend on designing policy with clear outcomes"?

While the coalition government initially rolled back many of the Blair-Brown reforms, e.g. downgrading strategy units and ditching public service agreements, the clamour for strategy and "results" is now as strong as ever. The government recently floated the prospect for a NICE for social policy; the Office for Budget Responsibility and IACI have been laudable attempts to provide a challenge function and independent evidence base. And the supply of advice on strategy and evidence-based policy-making continues to grow. The Alliance for Useful Evidence and NESTA[5] are two notable initiatives making a difference

But why is it not working?

So, there have been plenty of recognitions over the past 15 years that government is not good enough at strategy, policy-making, evidence-based decision making and at implementation. And there have been a plethora of attempts to, incrementally, fix this. Why has it not worked?

I'll use some case studies of my own experience in the national security arena to suggest some pointers – I'll talk about Iraq; Afghanistan; and Whitehall policy-making.

[5] http://www.nesta.org.uk/

Iraq – conceptual frameworks and the generation of evidence. I worked on Iraq as a researcher at RAND; as head of plans for the CPA in 2003/4; as a strategy adviser to MNF-I in 2007 and as an adviser to the Iraqi MoI in 2006-7. I'll give two instances from my experiences in Iraq. First, the decisions to dissolve the Iraqi Army and Baath Party in 2003. This is not the place for a discussion on the rights and wrongs of the policy (though in my view the problem was more in the implementation than in the principle) but from the perspective of my topic today, the two key failures were in terms of conceptual understanding and a simple lack of evidence. Those who took these decisions simply could not conceive of these institutions as part of the solution rather than insurmountable obstacles to US goals. And there was no way within UK or US decision-making to robustly challenge these concepts. At the same time, though, we had a complete lack of evidence – Western governments simply failed to understand the nature of power, the organisation of violence and the political economy of Iraq. This evidence would have at least provided policy-makers with a clear warning of what to expect.

Second, the evolution of policy-making and planning in Baghdad between 2003 and 2007. I served in policy and planning roles in the US mission in both periods. There were two reasons why the plans and policies in 2007 were much better (by which I mean more realistic, evidence-based, achievable). First, at the conceptual level the horrors and failures of the intervening period had forced US policy-makers to accept a more open policy-making process and accept more challenge to their frames of reference. In particular, in 2007 coalition planners were able to set policy goals which, while depressingly low, were realistic. Second, and perhaps most obviously, we had generated useable evidence. There was of course very limited up to date academic research but the coalition had generated enough tacit and explicit knowledge through its practical experience on the ground to enable the planners to design and implement policies that exploited Iraqi political dynamics to help turn the situation around. *In the context of this talk, the relative success of the 2007 "surge" was a success of strategic thinking (ends/ways/means) and of evidence-based policy-making (we knew whom*

to influence in which ways to bring about the desired social change, in a measurable way).

Afghanistan – Deliberate blindness and accidental blindness. I have worked periodically in Afghanistan since 2009, advising ISAF and managing advisory teams in Afghan ministries as well as research and delivery specialists in Helmand. I'll give two examples from Afghanistan. First, we consciously adopted a Nelsonian approach to the ANSF. For the last few years, the coalition has spent billions of dollars and invested huge effort in an unprecedented effort at social engineering – building up the ANSF. Locked into this paradigm, successive commanders have wilfully ignored two evident facts. First, that these forces are completely unsustainable by Afghanistan and donors. Second, that building up large numbers of often abusive, corrupt forces in support of an exclusionary political settlement will often exacerbate rather than mitigate the conflict. The evidence on both these points has been clear for a while but we have walked into the train-wreck blindly. Current ISAF plans call for a rapid demobilisation of up to one-third of the ANSF within a couple of months after 2015, which is clearly a recipe for disaster. While there are many positive things about the ANSF, at the macro level, we have wilfully and blindly followed a policy that can only be disastrous in the longer term.

My second example is from Helmand. In respect of the potential for evidence-based policy-making, this is now actually a good news story. Since late 2009, a team in the PRT with which I have worked has put in place a systematic approach to the evaluation of the impacts of international interventions in the province. We have built a robust set of time-series data enabling us to have some sense of "what works" and hence are able to advise policy-makers on how to adjust their civil and military interventions. Given the complexity of the environment, our evidence base is naturally much more limited than it may be in a domestic policy environment but it represents the most evidence-based approach available. That's the good news. The bad news is that this work only began at the end of 2009 meaning that we have no ability at all to systematically track change since the 2006 baseline when UK troops deployed. Its an open secret now that UK troops went to

Helmand with a very poor understanding of the province but how can it have seemed a good idea for HMG to wait nearly four years before starting to systematically collect data in a way that would allow for evidence-based decision-making?

Policy-making in Whitehall – no incentives, business as usual. In 2008-9 I served as deputy director of the FCO Strategy Unit. One of our key roles was to seek to infuse strategic thinking and evidence-based policy making into foreign policy. Let me just give the example of PSA30. PSA30 was a cross-cutting plan and set of targets to which FCO, MoD and DFID had signed up – it was focused around preventing and reducing violent conflict overseas. It was intended to focus HMG efforts so that the departments would work more closely on this objective, for instance judiciously combining development assistance, diplomacy and security assistance to head off state collapse or internal conflict. PSA30 had its civil service apparatus – regular meetings chaired by a PUS, minutes prepared and actions noted, periodic scorecards by the PMDU and earnest "initiatives". It was accompanied by great trumpeting of UK "successes" in joined-up government such as the afore-mentioned conflict pools, the Stabilisation Unit and the Helmand PRT (no comment!).

I was a believer. To my eternal embarrassment, I remember going to brief Paul's staff at DCDC as the FCO rep and assuring them that the military would get the direction, strategy and clear set of goals they so desired from PSA30. How naïve I was. After a year of backbenching the meetings, commiserating with harassed officials servicing what seemed like pointless paperwork, and watching initiative after initiative drain away in the face of departmental stonewalling, I grew up and realised that everyone was going through the motions. Nobody really cared that much and there were few career or departmental incentives to getting this right. It was Whitehall business as usual rather than a serious effort to do real, joined-up strategising and delivery management.

Back to the Library

My examples are varied but I think they represent multiple facets of a fairly familiar story. To confirm my intuition, I went back to the library. There is an expansive literature on decision making, planning, strategy

and implementation in many fields. But most of it says the same sort of things.

- Decision-making, and hence policy-making, is rarely the output of a rational, evidence-based design process. Graham Allison and all those other observers of decision-making in groups remain as valid as ever. We therefore need to be alive to how decisions are actually taken and evidence is actually used.
- There is a natural human desire to simplify complex situations and apply "engineering" solutions. Many of the approaches to planning that we use are therefore not good at dealing with complexity. Mintzberg has made this point most eloquently from a business perspective. From all sides more sophisticated planning approaches have emerged which seek to deal with complexity. In the military world, the US SAMS course now teaches "the art of design" as a way of addressing complexity. Development practitioners and community organisers are now hot on "Theory of Change" approaches which allow for more nuance and flexibility.
- The challenges of implementation in complex public policy interventions have been eloquently documented at least since Aaron Wildavsky's seminal work on the topic. There should be no surprises when we're seeking to implement much more complex policy interventions in much more complex environments.

So What?

I have sought to explore and illustrate some issues surrounding the links between knowledge and action in relation to policy-making and implementation in the national security sphere. My thesis has been that we have been consistently bad at this in some of our major national security enterprises but that failures in this domain are far from unique. The ability of our public policy machine to make and implement effective policies based on evidence seems to have been remarkably poor at least over the past decade and a half. The result, at least in my examples, has been

massive waste of resources, lives and sub-optimal policy outcomes.

Perhaps we just need to accept that these problems are hugely complex, that our governments and societies will inevitably operate in this way and that we need to do our best to muddle along and improve incrementally where we can. As one experienced Whitehall hand warned me when I first went into King Charles Street – "don't waste your time trying to fix the system; it'll wait you out."

Alternatively, and this is of course the inspiration behind SSI and the MStrat, we can believe that we can make a difference and seek to do better. I believe this is the least we owe the many thousands who have died in places like Iraq and Afghanistan in part because of our failures. Perhaps three lessons for us here in SSI and for our future students:

- Understand the nature of decision-making. Understand the political economy of our own decision-making – the bureaucratic politics, personal incentives, organisational cultures and the psychology of decision-making. Its not enough to produce good strategy or evidence; the trick is to shape and influence our own decision-making system and to build communities for change.
- Use knowledge professionally. There is nothing esoteric about strategising and evidence-based decision making. It is surely unconscionable that decision-makers can be "too busy" to take the time to think systematically through ends/ways/means, to gather baseline data and then to assess what impact their policies are having. And yet we continue to throw people and money at problems without any real idea what is being achieved.
- Finally, and eternally, decision-making is about moral courage. Challenging assumptions, sticking to what the data says rather than accepting prejudices, and being willing to call it as it really is. These are all fundamental moral characteristics we would hope that our future strategists and practitioners will have. Sadly, in the recent past, we have not had a good record on this front.