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Christina Boswell

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PART I

*The political functions
of knowledge*

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The puzzle: explaining the uses of knowledge

POLITICIANS and civil servants seem to be attaching more weight to using research in policymaking than ever before. Over the past decade, it has become *de rigueur* for governments and international organizations to stress the need for ‘evidence-based’ policy. The tendency was well exemplified by the Labour administration that came to power in Britain in 1997. The new government accentuated the need for policy to be underpinned by rigorous scientific analysis (Parsons 2002). Policymaking, it was argued, should be ‘based on a comprehensive and foresighted understanding of the evidence’, ensuring approaches ‘that are forward-looking and shaped by the evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures’.¹ The intention was to move away from policy based on ‘dogma’ to ‘sound evidence’ of ‘what works’.² Evidence-based policymaking has become especially modish in the fields of health, education, labour market policy and criminal justice. As one advisor to former Prime Minister Tony Blair put it, ‘Governments have become ravenous for information and evidence.’ They recognize that their success now ‘depends on much more systematic use of knowledge than it did in the past’.³

This rhetoric has been backed up by a variety of new initiatives. In the early 2000s, the UK government established a Centre for Management and Policy Studies within the Cabinet Office, which was tasked with ensuring that government departments make better use of research. It launched a White Paper on *Modernising Government*, which argued that evidence-based approaches were critical to enhancing policy and delivery.⁴ The commitment to research was also supported by a

¹ Cabinet Office, *Modernising Government* (London: The Stationery Office, 1999).

² David Blunkett, ‘Influence or Irrelevance? Can Social Science Improve Government?’, Lecture to the Economic and Social Research Council (London, 2 February 2000).

³ Geoff Mulgan, ‘Government, Knowledge and the Business of Policy-Making’, Lecture at a Conference on *Facing the Future* (Canberra, 23–24 April 2003).

⁴ Cabinet Office, *Modernising Government*.

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substantial investment of resources in policy research. In the early 2000s, UK civil service spending on policy-related research rose to around £1.4 billion per year.⁵ The upward trend was even more pronounced in other industrialized nations, which, as a UK government report observed, were similarly increasing expenditure on research and demonstrating ‘increased awareness and activity to make these strategies and priorities a more integral part of policy-making’.⁶

The typical explanation given for this increased demand for expert knowledge is proffered by what is termed the ‘problem-solving’ or ‘instrumentalist’ approach.⁷ According to this account, governments and civil servants recognize that expert knowledge is crucial for improving the quality of their output. They are keen to draw on research to fill gaps in their knowledge, in order to adjust policy in a way that will achieve the desired societal impacts. Some commentators associate this with the growing influence of technocratic styles of policymaking (Fischer 1990). On this account, traditional ideological cleavages are no longer the major axis of political debate. Instead, governance has become increasingly technocratic, with debates typically revolving around the most efficient mechanisms for service delivery or the allocation of resources. This implies the predominance of what Tony Blair referred to as a ‘post-ideological’ approach to policymaking (Naughton 2005: 51). Technical knowledge and research assume a more important role than ever, with debates being settled through invoking expertise and data, rather than through invoking rival values or interests. As Frank Fischer puts it, policymaking ‘essentially devolves to a consideration of what is “feasible” given the constraints of the system’ (Fischer 1990: 15).

⁵ National Audit Office, *Getting the Evidence: Using Research in Policy Making*, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (London, 2003).

⁶ National Audit Office, *An International Review of Governments’ Research Procurement Strategies*, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (London, 2003).

⁷ See, for example, McNamara 1998; Walsh 2000; Checkel 1997; Nagel 1990; Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 16; Haas 1992. Expert knowledge in this context refers to the knowledge produced by research (in fact I use the two terms ‘expert knowledge’ and ‘research’ interchangeably). Research, following Stone, is ‘a codified, scholarly and professional mode of knowledge production that has its prime institutional loci in universities, policy analysis units of government departments or international organizations and private research institutes and produced by academics, think tank experts and [policy] professionals’ (Stone 2002: 2). This definition will be elaborated later in the chapter.

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The problem-solving account of the role of knowledge in policymaking appears to be *prima facie* plausible, and may well characterize some cases in which policymakers solicit research to guide policy. It certainly corresponds to the self-perception of many officials and politicians engaged in knowledge utilization. When asked why they value research, policymakers typically emphasize the importance of filling knowledge gaps as a means of improving policies. Similarly, those engaged in policy research often conceive their role as that of providing knowledge that underpins adjustments to policy, or assisting in the development of new programmes. This notion of problem-solving research has been criticized by a number of scholars, who argue that the reality rarely conforms to this neat model. Instead, research tends to have a more diffuse, gradual and indirect impact on policy. Often its greatest contribution is to influence the background perceptions and attitudes of policymakers, through a more incremental process (Nutley *et al.* 2007: 36–7). This is what Carol Weiss famously termed the ‘enlightenment’ function of knowledge (Weiss 1979). However, even on this more nuanced account of knowledge utilization, the assumption remains that research is valued first and foremost as a means of influencing policy. Policy-relevant knowledge is produced and used in order to adjust policy output – even though it is acknowledged that its influence is somewhat less direct than the problem-solving account implies. In effect, then, such critiques modify the instrumentalist account but do not essentially break with it.⁸

This book challenges the instrumentalist account. The starting-point for my argument is that this account presents us with a puzzle. It has frequently been observed that in many policy areas, political debate and decisions systematically fail to take into account research findings. Indeed, government officials and politicians are repeatedly criticized precisely for failing to base policies on existing research findings (Clark and Majone 1985; Owens 2005). There is often a substantial gap between policies that are adopted in areas such as criminal justice, education, welfare, migration or foreign policy, and the prescriptions of research. This is the case even in instances where government agencies have commissioned or carried out such research themselves

⁸ For this reason, I use the term ‘instrumental’ to cover the various ways in which knowledge influences policy output, including the ‘enlightenment’, ‘conceptual’ and ‘catalytic’ functions. See also Weingart 1999.

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(Nutley *et al.* 2007: 18). The apparent disregard of research findings is also characteristic of administrative agencies that have set up their own in-house research units. Researchers based in ministries or government agencies often complain that they have only marginal input into decision-making. In short, there are strong indications that research being produced or commissioned by these agencies is not being used to inform policy.

What accounts for this gap? One typical explanation is that electoral pressures tend to trump the injunctions of expert knowledge. Politicians and officials are driven first and foremost by political exigencies, and so end up ignoring evidence where it fails to support more electorally appealing courses of action (Walsh 2000; O'Connor 2001: 3). This is especially likely to be the case in areas that are subject to populist styles of debate, such as crime or immigration. There is often a substantial gap between the sorts of policy advocated by experts in a field, and those that meet the approval of public opinion and the mass media. Even where ministries have commissioned research themselves, it ends up gathering dust on a shelf because of the political unfeasibility of its policy implications.

Another explanation is that policymakers are unable to make effective use of expert knowledge (Guston *et al.* 1997). The research may be relevant and potentially very helpful, but organizations lack the resources that would enable them to make use of it. This may be because of a lack of time to digest research findings, or insufficient capacity to grasp their implications. Or it may simply be that keeping abreast of research is not high on the list of priorities of the organization. Thus although there is plenty of research available, and of a kind that is highly pertinent to policy problems, it is not being picked up on by those making policy.

A third, related, explanation locates the responsibility for deficient take-up of research with the producers of knowledge themselves. On this account, the research produced may be too abstract or lack relevance to the policy problems at hand. Alternatively, it may simply not be structured and presented in an accessible way. In this case, failure to align policy to research recommendations can be attributed to a problem of knowledge transfer. It is generated by more or less endemic problems of communication between researchers and policymakers.

Each of these explanations has some truth in it, and the three accounts will be examined in greater depth in subsequent chapters. But none of

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them can offer a satisfactory answer to the puzzle. The problem is that none of the three explanations – political pressures, lack of organizational capacity, or lack of relevant knowledge – can account for the *continued* interest of policymakers in research. If policymakers really are constrained from pursuing evidence-based approaches because of electoral considerations, why do they persist in commissioning and making use of expert knowledge? Equally, if there are administrative or scientific impediments to drawing on research, what explains policymakers' motivation to continue commissioning and carrying out research?

The contention of this book is that research is in fact highly valued by policymakers, and that it plays a crucial role in policymaking and political argumentation. But the value of expert knowledge does not lie exclusively, or even predominantly, in its contribution to policy. Research does indeed play an important political function, but this is not necessarily an instrumental one. Instead, it has two types of more symbolic use. The first of these symbolic uses is what I call a *legitimizing* function. By being seen to draw on expert knowledge, an organization can enhance its legitimacy and potentially bolster its claim to resources or jurisdiction over particular policy areas. In this sense the use of knowledge can endow government agencies with what has been described as 'epistemic authority' (Geuss 2001: 18–19; Herbst 2003: 484). The perception that individual officials, departments or agencies possess reliable, relevant and detailed knowledge, or at least that they have regular access to such knowledge, creates confidence that their decisions will be well founded. This is especially likely to be the case where there is an institutional culture that places value on knowledge – as, for example, in the case of the Labour administration's emphasis on evidence-based policy.

The second function of knowledge applies not so much to how research can endow organizations and their members with legitimacy, but rather the way in which expert knowledge can lend authority to particular policy positions. Expert knowledge can help substantiate an organization or political party's policy preferences, and undermine those of rival agencies or organized interests. This way of using knowledge can be termed the *substantiating* function of knowledge. It will be especially relevant in highly contested policy areas. In the cases of both legitimizing and substantiating knowledge usage, drawing on expert knowledge can be said to have a symbolic rather than a substantive

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value: it enhances the credibility of agencies or policy positions, rather than improving the quality of an organization's output. It is not so much the content of knowledge that is being valued, as the signal it conveys about the credibility of an organization or its policies.

The purpose of this book is to explore these alternative functions of knowledge in policymaking. The book develops a theory of the conditions under which knowledge is likely to be valued for these three different functions: instrumental, legitimizing or substantiating. And it explores a number of cases in which knowledge has been used in these respective ways in the context of policymaking and party political mobilization.

Explaining the political uses of knowledge

Prevailing theories

The notion that research can play alternative functions in policymaking may not sound particularly radical. It is a theme that is taken up in a number of seminal contributions to science and technology studies. Notable among these is Sheila S. Jasanoff's exploration of the problematic role of experts in both informing and legitimizing policy in US regulation and court decisions (Jasanoff 1994, 1995b). Other authors have analysed how scientific credibility is constructed and contested in public policy debates (Gieryn 1999; Weingart 1999). Yaron Ezrahi provides a compelling historical account of how scientific knowledge has been harnessed to legitimize political power in the twentieth century (Ezrahi 1990). These and other contributions explore broad issues relating to the social and cultural construction of epistemic authority, and how this affects the role of science in public policy.⁹

Yet these themes have received surprisingly little attention in mainstream political science and political sociology literature. There is almost no scholarship systematically linking these insights to theories of the policy process. Most studies examining the uses of knowledge from the perspective of public policy display a bias towards problem-solving theory. This is most obviously the case with self-professed rational choice accounts (Berman 1998; McNamara 1998). But one finds similar assumptions in the wider literature on knowledge transfer.

⁹ For overviews of these debates, see Weingart 1999; Williams *et al.* 1998.

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The sociology of knowledge transfer emerged as an important area of research from around the mid-1970s, with a number of scholars analysing determinants and patterns of knowledge utilization in policymaking. Many of these pointed to various shortcomings in instrumentalist accounts, observing that policymakers were not using knowledge in the way predicted by problem-solving theories. However, as I shall show in Chapter 2, most contributions explained this deviation in terms of a culture gap between policy and research communities, which impeded the transfer of knowledge. The assumption remained that research is valued for its potential to inform policy, although in practice there may be impediments to applying it. There was little recognition that research may be serving alternative functions.

To be sure, a few authors acknowledged *en passant* the possibility that research might be playing a more symbolic function. For example, it was recognized that research may be used strategically, as ‘ammunition’ for substantiating political or organizational preferences (Nelkin 1975; Weiss 1986; Sabatier 1978; Majone 1989). However, there has been little attempt to develop a convincing theory of these functions of knowledge, setting out the conditions under which different types of usage may be expected to emerge. There is a similar lack of systematic empirical research exploring these alternative functions of knowledge in the practices of government agencies.

The instrumentalist account also more or less explicitly informs recent contributions trying to ‘bring ideas back in’ to political analysis,¹⁰ as well as literature on the impact of ‘epistemic communities’ in policymaking.¹¹ And it underpins most of the comparative historical literature on the impact of social knowledge on policy.¹² Diverse as these contributions are, they share a similar explanatory goal: they focus on the impact of knowledge and ideas on policy decisions. They tend to be structured around cases in which knowledge has had a discernible impact on the substance of policy. Cases in which knowledge has been influential are contrasted with counter-examples in which new

¹⁰ See, for example, Schmidt and Radaelli 2004; Bleich 2002; Berman 2001; Goldstein and Keohane 1993. More recently, Peter Scholten has charted the role of research in shaping ‘frame-shifts’ in the construction of the immigrant integration problem in the Netherlands. See Scholten 2007.

¹¹ See Adler and Haas 1992; Haas 1992.

¹² See Evans *et al.* 1985; Weir and Skocpol 1985; Lacey and Furnier 1993; Hecl 1974; P. A. Hall 1993; Ikenberry 1993.

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developments in research were ignored by policymakers (Weir and Skocpol 1985; Walsh 2000). In both cases, the focus is on why, and to what extent, knowledge influences policy. The dependent variable is the impact of knowledge on policy choice. This systematically screens out the possibility that knowledge is deployed for other purposes; that knowledge is indeed being used by policymakers, but not necessarily to inform the substance of policy.

Of the few contributions attempting to explain the symbolic functions of knowledge, most have drawn on rather reductionist theories of knowledge utilization. A number of contributions have adopted rational-choice assumptions about how knowledge is harnessed to lend credibility to pre-given preferences (Pfeffer 1981, 1984; Nordlinger 1981). Individual or group interests are held to be independent of or prior to the knowledge that is employed to vindicate them (Amara *et al.* 2004). Ideas then serve as ‘hooks’ for rationalizing material interests that were defined separately from these ideas (Walsh 2000: 487–8). Foucauldian and neo-Gramscian accounts have offered a more subtle analysis of how knowledge and experts can structure and perpetuate power relations (Smith 2002; Sinclair 2000; Neal 2008). However, they share a focus on how expert knowledge is harnessed to sustain or expand power.

Alternatively, scholars have argued that knowledge is employed as a strategy for expanding organizational influence, bolstering the organization’s authority *vis-à-vis* rival agencies or interests (Sabatier 1978). Again, actors are assumed to be motivated to use knowledge by a rational interest in maximizing power. As I shall argue in Chapter 3, there are obvious problems with these accounts. Most of them refuse to attribute any power to ideas in their own right, precluding the possibility that they can shape beliefs or interests (Radaelli 1995). They under-determine the content of organizational interests and goals, failing to explain why organizations or individuals choose particular ‘hooks’ over others. And they are unable to explain why drawing on expert knowledge should be recognized as an effective strategy for gaining legitimacy. In order for knowledge to enhance the power of an organization or lend weight to policy preferences, we must assume the existence of a culture in which knowledge is valued as a source of legitimacy. Such theories have no way of accounting for this.

While the literature dealing directly with the functions of knowledge in policymaking may be thin, there are other strands of political sociology that can provide some useful insights. A substantial body

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of research within organizational sociology points to the inadequacy of the problem-solving approach in explaining how organizations function.¹³ The basic insight of these theories is that administrative agencies are not driven exclusively by a logic of addressing societal problems, nor is such a goal internalized in any consistent or reliable way within organizational structures and practices (Blau 1955: 263–4). Organizational preferences are likely to be influenced by a range of interests and practices that are not determined exclusively by performance goals. One of these is the goal of securing commitment from members of the organization, which is essential for ensuring loyalty and motivating action. This will involve developing a cogent set of norms and beliefs about the organization – a shared cognitive frame, which helps the organization to make sense of its environment and goals, and provides guidance for action. Organizations also develop certain rituals, roles and practices to help reduce uncertainty and stabilize social relations among members. These various norms, beliefs and practices may generate patterns of organizational action that diverge considerably from what might be considered ‘rational’ action to realize ascribed organizational goals (Meyer and Rowan 1991: 57–8).

However, organizations do not operate in a vacuum. A second insight of neo-institutionalist literature is that organizations are fundamentally concerned to secure legitimacy from relevant actors in their environment – be these political leaders, organized interests or customers. In some cases, they may believe they can best achieve this through ensuring they are meeting mandated goals. But most administrative agencies derive their legitimacy from their adherence to certain norms and ideologies – or formal structures – rather than through their performance, or the observable impact of their societal interventions. As Nils Brunsson puts it, they are legitimated through their talk and decisions, rather than their actions (Brunsson 2002). As such, knowledge is likely to be valued as much, or even more, for its symbolic functions as it is for its instrumental role in improving performance. Organizations can enhance their legitimacy through adopting the trappings of rational decision-making styles. And this, as we shall see, can involve being seen to draw on expert knowledge.

Parallel arguments can be advanced about the functions of knowledge in political debates. As individuals or party members, most

¹³ For overviews, see DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 1995.