

Tigers, hawks and sharks: re-imagining public leadership

by Barry Quirk

The 2008 crash not only shook the global economy, it has also led to substantial public sector retrenchment around the developed world. Like several other governments in Europe, the British government is embarked on a deficit reduction strategy to rein back public spending and lower national indebtedness. In my own local authority in London (that serves a population of some 270,000) we are implementing expenditure cutbacks of £33 million this year with plans for a further £55 million over the following three years - on a total annual revenue budget of £280 million. Our main areas of spending involve social care for the elderly, child protection, school support services, environmental maintenance and leisure services – and so cutbacks at this scale are difficult to choose and difficult to implement. The politics involved in deciding how to save the money is very difficult and the management challenge to implement the savings is equally hard.

Reducing the scale and scope of the state is demanding of public leadership. Politicians are at the forefront – giving voice to public concerns and taxpayer sentiment – but also by leading the way out of the heavily indebted position in which many Western governments now find themselves. But politicians do not act alone – all public servants need to re-imagine their leadership roles to help lower the cost of the state by redesigning public services so that they can be delivered for future generations at lower cost. Policy professionals and public managers need to help politicians discover lower cost ways of delivering public services – ways that are more relevant to public service users and which are also cheaper for the taxpayers that fund them (in whole or in part). This means that we need to re-imagine public leadership roles so that we can re-imagine government itself.

Governing well requires an open and competitive political culture; it requires effective policies and strategies that are designed to solve social problems cost-effectively; and it requires efficient approaches to delivering public services. The fabric of effective government is therefore made by weaving together the threads of good politics, good policy, and good management. Good leadership needs to be exercised across the inter-linked domains of politics, policy and management. Well-intentioned politicians can receive the best advice, use the right decision process and yet choose the wrong strategy. But even good intentions and the right strategy does not protect against failure if public institutions are poorly organised and resourced – and if public managers have insufficient competence, capability, and confidence to deliver.

The three domains of politics, policy, and management overlap but involve different activities and require different styles of leadership. This is because they draw upon different traditions of enquiry and use different ways of thinking and operating. Moreover, the people who occupy these roles tend to blinker themselves – believing that good decisions are vital; or that great strategy (such as specific policy instruments) is key; or that effective execution is all that matters. The truth is that politicians invoke change, policy professionals articulate the design of the change that is needed, while public managers are responsible for executing the necessary change.

The challenge to politicians in diverse modern societies is to find ways to honour everyone's past, capture the best spirit of the moment and then attempt to crystallise hope in stories about the future. In this way, they seek to give voice to collective results about future economic growth or community well-being. Policy professionals and advisors (including political advisors, subject experts, professionals, generalist policy advisors and management consultants) have a narrower focus. They tend to work very closely with these

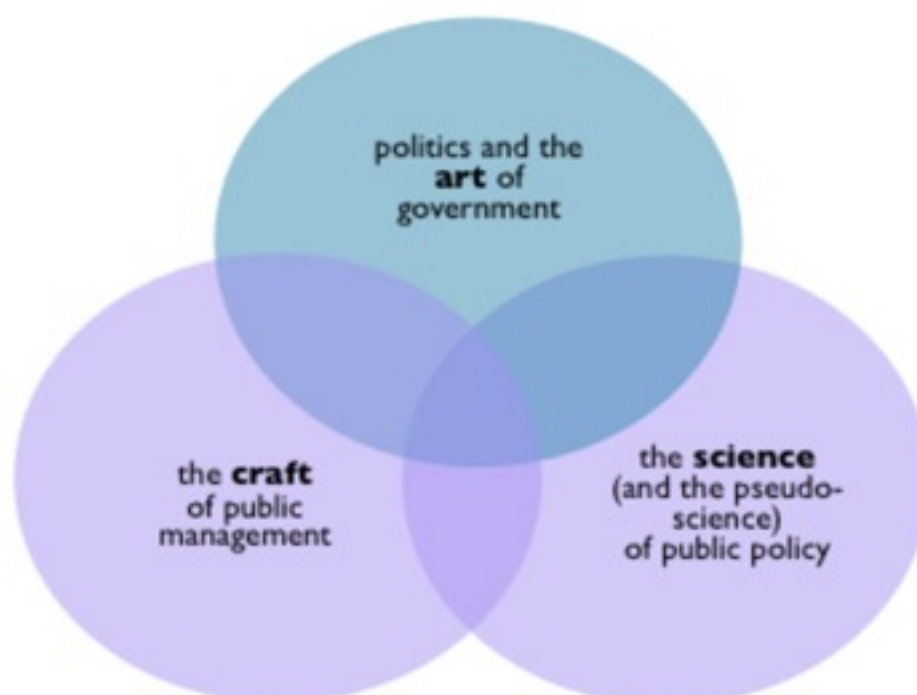
politicians and they try to craft strategies or policies to deliver the desired results. By contrast, public managers operate in the practical world of simply making things work. They make sure that what is delivered is what was originally intended, and that the numbers add up – in terms of people, money, and outcomes.

Of course there is overlap and even movement between these three roles. Some politicians become managers. Some managers become policy advisors; and a number of policy advisors move into politics. It is also usually possible to detect a degree of cross-dressing. Some managers routinely steal public interest decisions that should be taken by politicians, some policy professionals approach their subjects like zealots, and some politicians cannot stop themselves meddling in operational management.

In a brilliant tour through the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, Harvard professor Jerome Kagan suggests that there are three distinctive cultures that use fundamentally different approaches to understand the world. [1] He argues that these three cultures each use different criteria for establishing the truth, they interpret events differently, they use different mental models, and they have different vocabularies. In my view, a parallel argument could be made for politicians, policy advisors, and public managers.

Politicians tend to use an approach steeped in the humanities. They compose their arguments through rhetoric and metaphor. They use semantics to search for meaning in human affairs as well as trying to impose meaning on the world. Many individual politicians are drawn from the sciences but what they practice in their daily political life is more akin to the arts. They exercise leadership through semantics not through the sciences. By contrast, public policy advisors use schematic models or causal diagrams to understand the problems of the world; and then try to introduce order by representing the fabric of economic and social reality. Their diagrams attempt to display the relationship between factors and variables to suggest what should be done to improve economic and social outcomes. They exercise their leadership through developing policy constructs that are intended to make the world better: new ways to stimulate economic growth; new ways to tackle serious crime; and new ways for societies to cope with fracturing families and social dislocation. By contrast, managers tend to use a more mathematical and pragmatic approach. Their job is to make sure that resources are adequate and well organised and that outcomes are delivered. In short, they try to make sure that things 'add up'.

The parallel with humanities, social sciences and natural sciences is, of course, not entirely correct: politics is an art, policy advice is closer to a pseudo-science, whilst public management is a craft. Nonetheless, it remains a useful device for explaining the importance of these three distinctive contributions to building good governance.



In his tour of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, Jerome Kagan uses a memorable metaphor of 'tigers, hawks and sharks' to describe and encapsulate these three traditions. Likewise, this metaphor could be used for politicians, policy advisors, and public managers. Politicians are tigers: they seek to improve the world by use of semantics. Public policy advisors are hawks – through diagrams and schematics they try to show how the world can be improved. By contrast, managers are sharks – they operate in the concrete world of practice. The metaphor suggests that whilst tigers, hawks, and sharks are potent in their own territory each is impotent in the territory of the others.

But this is less the case when it comes to politicians, policy advisors, and public managers. Some politicians may be capable of being advisors or managers; although most politicians will not find these occupations to be comfortable territories for the fulfilment of their instincts. Some advisors may be capable of being politicians or managers – although they may prefer the relative anonymity that accompanies the world of advice-giving. And some managers may also be capable of being politicians or advisors – but again they may find that the worlds of semantics and schematics are too abstract for their liking.

Public problems are multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, and usually stubborn and persistent. They are open to varied interpretations. This is why views differ as how best to get economies to grow; how best to tackle environmental decay; and how best to foster cohesive communities? At a time when the price of government and the cost of the state must be reduced dramatically, governments need effective but distributed leadership across politics, policy, and management. Strong public leadership is needed to re-imagine government itself. Politicians, policy advisors, and public managers are not competing for territory; instead they bring different truths, different interpretations, and different ways of operating in the world. Rather than dispute each other's respective truths it may be more profitable for them to acknowledge the distinctive capabilities they each bring to solving problems in the three territories of politics and community leadership, policy development, and managerial leadership.

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[1] Kagan J (2010) *The Three Cultures*, Cambridge University Press