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Effectively communicating economics to policy makers

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Abstract

Many economists are concerned with communicating the results of economic analysis or the implications of economic theory to policy makers. Our effectiveness in doing this varies widely for different individuals and different issues. This paper is an attempt to provide practical advice to enhance this effectiveness. It considers policy “adoption” in the light of literature about the adoption of innovations by farmers and evidence from social psychology about factors that enhance persuasiveness in communication. A small survey of policy makers and policy advisors was conducted. Results provide a number of practical tips and insights.

Introduction

Making government policies is like making sausages. Even if you like the product, you sure wouldn't want to watch the process.

Economists considering the decisions and choices of policy makers have tended to adopt approaches based on public choice theory, in which voters, politicians, interest groups and bureaucrats are assumed to pursue individual, self-interested preferences (e.g. Schneider and Volkert 1999; Bonetti, 1997). The emphasis in those studies is on explaining policy outcomes, rather than the policy process. While these efforts can be interesting and enlightening, they do not offer much practical help to an economist wishing to influence policy choices. This paper comes from a different though complementary perspective, emphasising engagement with the process of policy formation. It is based on a view of policy makers and policy advisors as individual decision makers, and the process of policy choice as one involving information, uncertainty, persuasion, disagreement, and networks of disparate individuals and groups. Political considerations are included as part of the mix, but are subject to similar uncertainties and disagreements as any other component and are therefore subject to being influenced by effective policy advocates.

There are two elements to the paper. The first comes from the extensive literature on adoption of innovative practices by farmers and other individual decision makers. There is a brief selective review of that literature, highlighting its parallels with the policy choice process, and identifying key findings of relevance to a policy advocate or analyst.

The second element is based on the practical experiences of those involved in the policy process. I present results from a small survey of Australian policy makers and policy advisors and draw on some previously published ideas. I also present some experiences from my recent engagement with the salinity policy process in Australia.

The paper concludes with discussions of common strengths and weaknesses of economists when engaged in the policy process, and of some important responsibilities that economists have in that process. The aim of the paper is to provide practical insights and advice to those attempting to inform and influence policy development. Some of the information is specific to economists, but much of it is more generally relevant to any participant in a policy choice process.

Before I commence, I will present a brief history of my involvement in salinity policy in Australia. I will use this issue to illustrate a number of points later in the paper.

Background to Salinity Policy

In undertaking research on the economics of dryland salinity, I realised in 1997 that there were important weaknesses in the existing policy responses to dryland salinity at both state and national levels. At the time I had no idea how to engage with the appropriate policy makers, and little idea of who they were. I knew that I needed a stronger background in the problem to ensure that my analyses were sufficiently robust and thorough to be credible.

Through 1998 and 1999 I worked on various aspects of the issue – technical, social and economic – and developed a detailed knowledge of existing and past policies. I made presentations to farmers, economists and biophysical scientists, developing a profile and getting feedback on my conclusions and ideas. Some of the conclusions were a little controversial, or at least contrary to conventional wisdom, which helped to bring attention to my work.

In the first half of 2000 I attempted to pull together the threads of my research with the latest biophysical research, to develop a detailed analysis of policy needs for dryland salinity. I sought out members of the Western Australian State Salinity Council (the peak policy advisory body, consisting of a range of stakeholders and government representatives) and discussed my ideas with them. I was invited to make a presentation to the Council. This led to an ongoing dialogue and to my inclusion on a number of committees, reference groups and the like. One outcome I helped to influence was a new “Investment Framework for Public Investment in Salinity”, which was ratified by the State Cabinet Subcommittee for the Environment in 2002.

I also attempted to engage with Commonwealth policy makers. I appeared in the national media (print and electronic) and gave numerous talks to a wide range of audiences in all relevant states, including senior public servants in Canberra. I spoke and emailed with various policy makers or policy advisors in Canberra and in several states. I learned a lot about inter-agency rivalries, State-Commonwealth relations, Ministers’ personalities, and so on. In June 2001 the new Labor State Government established a Salinity Task Force reviewing the State’s policy directions, and I was included on the Task Force, allowing me to interact further with Ministers, senior public servants, lobbyists and the community. All in all, it was quite a crash course in the way that governments work. At times it appears my influence has still been rather small, but I believe it has been non-zero, particularly at the state level. In any case, one of the key points below is how slow the process of policy change can be and how important it is to be persistent.

Policy Choice Conceived as a Process of Adoption of Innovations

When, in 2000, I commenced serious efforts to communicate with salinity policy makers, I drew on my past experiences in undertaking agricultural extension and studying farmers’ adoption of agricultural innovations. I quickly came to feel that these experiences were highly relevant and that there are many parallels between communication intended to promote the adoption of changed practices by farmers and communication intended to promote the adoption of changed policies by governments.

The literature on adoption of agricultural innovations includes thousands of articles (e.g. see reviews and overviews by Lindner, 1987; Feder and Umali, 1993; Pannell, 1999; Marra et al., 2003). Several different discipline areas have studied the topic, including economics, sociology, marketing, and psychology. Despite the differences in language, the understandings generated translate easily between the disciplines. One productive conceptual framework for considering the issue has been decision theory (Lindner, 1987; Abadi Ghadim and Pannell 1999). In this framework the adoption process consists, in large part, of the collection, integration and evaluation of information. An innovation is evaluated in terms of its ability to meet the decision makers’ objectives, based on current perceptions about the innovation’s performance compared to existing practices. Early in the process, uncertainty about the value of the innovation is high, and the quality of decision-making may be low. As the process continues, if it proceeds at all, uncertainty falls and better decisions can be made.

Viewed in this light, the adoption process is never completed, in the sense of reaching zero uncertainty. All options are continuously open to question and review, as new information is obtained and/or circumstances change. The framework allows for factors such as the quality and relevance of the information obtained (as indicated, for example, by the adoption of the innovation by a respected peer, and other social influences), the opportunity costs of adoption, and the impacts of risk aversion on adoption. Based on this framework, one can identify phases of awareness or knowledge that may or may not be reached by the decision maker.

1. Awareness of the innovation. In this context, “awareness” means not just awareness that an innovation exists, but awareness that it is potentially of practical relevance. Reaching this point of awareness is a trigger that prompts the decision maker to open his or her ears and eyes - to begin noting and collecting information about the innovation in order to inform the decision about whether or not to go to the next step of trialing the innovation.
2. Perception that it is feasible and worthwhile to test the innovation. Farmers generally will not leap into large-scale adoption of a new innovation. Rather, they usually employ small-scale trials, adjusting the scale either upwards towards full adoption or downwards towards disadoption as they gain knowledge and confidence in their perceptions about its performance. Similarly, policy makers need to develop confidence in a policy innovation and this too can be developed through evidence from a relatively small-scale trial. For example, there is currently a high interest in market-based economic policy instruments for resource management in Australia. They are being tested on a small scale in a “pilot” program for salinity management.

In agriculture, the trial phase is very important, perhaps the most important phase in determining final adoption or disadoption. If small-scale trials are not possible or not enlightening for some reason, the chances of adoption are greatly diminished. This is because farmers will be very unlikely to leap to full-scale adoption due to the real risk that the innovation will prove a full-scale failure. I believe that this applies equally well to the adoption of policy innovations. Where an actual trial is not possible (e.g. because of the urgency of a decision), evidence from a virtual trial (i.e. a detailed desktop analysis, or experience reported from another policy context or another state or country) may be sufficient.

3. Perception that the innovation promotes the decision maker’s objectives. Lindner (1987) in a wide-ranging review of the adoption and diffusion literature concluded that the objectives of individual farmers figure centrally in the adoption and diffusion process. He found that, “there is compelling empirical support for this emerging consensus that the final decision to adopt or reject is consistent with the producer’s self interest” (p. 148). Compared to a farmer, the policy maker will have some objectives that are similar (e.g. survival, efficient use of resources) and some that are different, or at least emphasised to a very different extent (political acceptability, fairness). But the basic point that the decision maker’s objectives are pivotal applies with full force. The relevance of this point to the adoption of new policy options is emphasised by the respondents to a survey of policy makers and policy advisors later in this paper. A large proportion stressed the need to understand the policy maker’s perspectives because a new policy proposal must be consistent with their political and social objectives if it is to have any chance of acceptance.

A few generalisations about adoption of innovations

Studies of the adoption of innovations have reached strikingly variable conclusions (Lindner, 1987) but there is sufficient consistency to be able to identify some important general findings. The following generalisations are selected for their relevance to policy innovations, but I believe they apply in many other spheres as well.

1. Most potential adopters considering an innovation are sensibly cautious. They don’t rush in, but they seek information to improve their eventual decision about the innovation. This is one of a number of reasons why the process of adoption of an innovation is often slow.
2. Where decision makers do not have personal experience with an innovation, they rely to some extent on external sources of information. However, in both spheres, the experiences of other adopters are only of partial relevance (and sometimes of low relevance). Therefore, as decision makers gain personal experience, this tends to have a dominant influence on their perceptions and their actual behaviour. This means that policy analysts are more likely to have an influence early in the policy debate, before perceptions are firmly formed.
3. External sources of information are given more or less weight depending on factors such the expertise and credibility of the information source, the relevance of the external information to the decision makers circumstances, and the number of external sources reinforcing the message with similar information. These points are reinforced by the literature on persuasive communication, and by the results of a survey of policy players presented later.

4. Apparently misguided decisions to adopt or not adopt an innovation can often be easily understood and seen as reasonable if one makes the effort to learn about the objectives and perceptions of the individual decision makers involved.
5. Many factors influence the speed of adoption of an innovation. Key ones include:
 - the extent to which adopting the innovation is *actually* superior to maintaining existing practice (this depends on a great diversity of issues, and is often difficult to determine);
 - the ease with which the innovation can be observed and evaluated;
 - the number of other potential adopters who have already adopted it, and the similarity and proximity of those actual adopters to those who are now considering adoption;
 - the intensity and quality of efforts to promote the innovation (see next section);

These insights help the analyst to understand, at least partly, a policy maker's likely response to information that they are given about a policy innovation, and they give hints about effective strategies for presenting such information.

Although I have emphasised the relevance to policy of the literature on innovation adoption in agriculture, it is also true that there are some important differences in the policy sphere. One difference stands out: to a much greater extent, farmers can act independently and individually, based solely on their own judgements, whereas policy makers have to be concerned about the judgements of many others. This means that the actual policy adopted is likely to be a compromise that fully satisfies very few.

Voices of Experience

In May 2002, a survey was distributed by email to 21 people in Australia, each of whom plays or has played a role in the formation of government policy. Most were economists involved in agricultural and natural resource management issues, but the sample also included senior bureaucrats, past or present politicians and a former ministerial advisor who is now a consultant. The survey was not intended to be a representative sample; all those approached were people with whom I had previously had professional contact of some type. I received 18 responses, from which a selection of ideas and advice is presented below. In general, the advice they give can be closely related to the insights presented in the previous two sections, although most respondents would not have been aware of those two areas of literature.

Some of the advice is common sense (although we would not all think of it ourselves), but some is the result of precious experience and/or deep insight into the policy process. Some points were raised repeatedly by different respondents, but some of the best points came up only once. I have attempted to present the results as advice or rules for policy advocates. The largest set of advice relates to strategy, but there are also recommendations relating to content and style.

Note that survey responses are those of the individuals concerned and not necessarily of their organisations.

1. Matters of strategy

1.1 Understand the policy maker's perspective

This was perhaps the point that was most emphasised by respondents to the survey. In my view, understanding the audience is essential to any effective communication, and never more so than in a policy context. The emphasis on needing to understand the policy maker's perspective is consistent with the strong research finding that decisions to adopt innovations are usually consistent with the adopter's objectives and perceptions. Here are several extracts that emphasise the point.

Understand what problems the policy-maker is dealing with, what objectives they are trying to pursue, and then cast your argument in a way that presents them with prospective feasible solutions. (Neil Byron, Productivity Commission).

Identify your immediate targets' self interest (votes, promotion and influence, interesting newspaper copy, corporate image, etc.) but don't deny them the self deception that they are acting in the public interest alone. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament).

Knowledge of government policy mandates is essential. (Phil Connolly, NSW Treasury).

Understand your target audience and what drives them. Remember the total socio-political context, particularly social equity. (Roger Payne, Director General, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

In every circumstance the adviser, whether economist or not, whether politician or not, has to understand the mindset of the client. (David Bennett, NRMC Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants).

Understanding the particular mindset of the relevant policy makers for your policy issue is not necessarily easy, particularly if you do not already have good access to them. There can be a Catch 22 here. Getting access to policy makers requires that you have something to say that seems worth hearing. If you do get an opportunity, you may have to deliver your message before you have had a chance to interact with them and gain a full appreciation of their perspective. It is a good idea to discuss the policy maker's perspective with others who are likely to understand it. Whatever strategy you adopt to gain that appreciation may require time and considerable effort, as is apparent from the earlier brief outline of my efforts to influence salinity policy.

I observed that among policy players there can be uncertainty or misperceptions about what the political pressures really are, and political differences between states that confound development of a national policy. For example, on a number of occasions, people commented to me that my criticisms of a national program, the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), for spreading money too thinly and non-strategically would conflict with the political desirability of providing funds to as many voters as possible, implying that voters would support the program in its current form. However, my interactions with the relevant voters (potential recipients of funds under the program) indicated that the opposite was true in many cases. Particularly in Western Australia, many farmers have learnt through bitter personal experience that the types of "on-ground works" supported by the NHT are usually ineffective against dryland salinity, which was one of the main issues targeted by the program.

Although every debate requires some effort to understand a particular set of policy makers, there are some characteristics of ministerial and bureaucratic mindsets that apply reasonably generally.

From my experience as a Ministerial adviser, "Yes Minister" is a very good introduction to the whole ministerial scene. Politics is the art of survival and you would prefer to survive in government than out of it. So if you are likely to lose votes then you buy them (as with the US Farm Bill and the Natural Heritage Trust). (David Bennett, NRMC Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants).

Good advice on economic policy is often about convincing others that short-term responses are inappropriate. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist).

For a Minister you may only have a few minutes to deliver key points; for a senior bureaucrat you may have half an hour (Ross Kingwell, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

Issues come haphazardly, whether you want them or not. The major concern is to act first (like the British Government with foot and mouth disease) and think later. (David Bennett, NRMC Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants).

Time to consider issues thoroughly is one resource in short supply among policy makers, but there are likely to be others as well, including finance, human resources, and legal powers. Feldman et al. (2001, p. 314) commented that "effective communication recognises the glut of information facing policy makers and the lack of time they have to digest it."

The advice must be given in a full understanding of the powers and resources of the relevant government department. There are lots of good ideas but if they don't fit into the contextual complexity that policy makers face then they will rarely be adopted. Many policy makers are under immense time and resource pressures and anything that needs a lot of digesting gets left on the plate, so to speak. This is just common sense to anyone who has advised busy people. You need to look at the world through their eyes and come up with suggestions that help them to meet their immediate and medium-term needs. Few [policy makers] are courageous enough to make major changes which add significantly to their work and resource pressures. (Don McFarlane, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

Except at budget time, a process in which [most] ministers and their advisors have little part, rational allocation of funds can seldom be made. You either decide to do something relatively dramatic ("David - write another cabinet minute to get us another \$1 million for Fenitrothion; we are running out!"), or not, then move on to the next issue. The Minister or his/her adviser only gets the opportunity to make rational decisions when a bucket of money is being allocated. As we saw with the [Ros Kelly] white board affair, the rationality is usually political, not economic. (David Bennett, NRM Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants).

1.2 Go beyond financial outcomes in your analysis and discussion

Economics is necessary but not sufficient without the socio-political negotiation awareness/skills. (Roger Payne, Director General, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

Should consider economic, social and environmental outcomes. At this level [i.e. advising ministers and their personal advisors] it is easy to be discounted unless your advice takes in the above. (David Hartley, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

This is really an aspect of point 1.1. Policy makers are interested in financial/economic aspects of policies, but also in a variety of other considerations (political attractiveness, budgetary cost, agency resource requirements of a change, etc.). Even if an economic analyst does not explicitly include these other issues in the analysis, he or she can benefit considerably from a general awareness of them, so that they can at least be acknowledged in discussion. It gives policy makers a signal that you are aware of issues beyond the economics, and may enhance your credibility and perhaps the perception that you are similar to the policy maker, at least in terms of this understanding.

1.3 Dealing with opponents

In entering a topical policy area, you may find that you acquire some clearly identifiable opposition, attempting to undermine your position and counter your arguments. Harries (2002) has several pieces of good advice for this situation:

- Know your opposition's case. "Understand the position of your adversary not in a caricatured or superficial form but at its strongest, for until you have rebutted it at its strongest you have not rebutted it at all."
- Forget about trying to convert your adversary. It is fruitless to expect that an opponent in a policy debate will concede that you are right and they were wrong. "In any serious polemical confrontation (as opposed to genuine intellectual discourse) the chances of success on this score are so remote as to exclude it as a rational objective," (Harries, 2002). So get used to the idea that if you succeed, there will be people who believe that your success is a dreadful mistake and that you personally are hopelessly misguided, narrow minded, or worse.
- Pay great attention to the agenda of the debate. "He who defines the issues, and determines their priority, is already well on the way to winning," (Harries, 2002).
- Address the case, not your opponent's motives. Harries (2002): "Avoid trading in motives as an alternative to rebutting the opposing case. ... This admonition is routinely ignored by many Australian opinion journalists and intellectuals. ... Motives are irrelevant to the soundness of an argument. Anything that is said by someone whose motives are suspect or bad could equally well (and in all probability will) be uttered

by someone whose motives are impeccable, and an answer will still be required.” Also relevant is Bjorn Lomborg’s philosophical response to some of the abusive critiques of his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist*: “If your case is good, pound your case. If not, pound the table.”

Here is a similar point from the survey.

Argue from your opponents’ values (philosophical preferences) where ever possible. As the more fundamental values are almost universal this is not as difficult as it sounds. If the advocate’s hard head is mistaken for a hard heart, few will listen. (David - You instinctively argue from environmental “values” and you are right to do so.) THIS POINT IS IMPORTANT. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament).

1.4 Be solution-oriented

Economists sometimes have a tendency to adopt a critical stance, highlighting problems they have identified with a policy. The following quotes emphasise that we should not forget to also consider solutions to those problems. Without this, policy makers are likely to see us as people who would make their life more difficult.

Too often we [economists] don’t make positive suggestions to show the way to the solution. (Colin Mues, ABARE).

Give the advice in a “solution solving manner”. (Don McFarlane, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

Ideally advice should take this form: Your problems are due to A, B and C. Here are three things, X, Y and Z, which will work and substantially improve the situation. (Neil Byron, Productivity Commission).

For Ministerial advisors, be clear about the issue/problem and ensure that the responses clearly articulate the impacts of options, short- and long-term. For Ministers, the advice must provide a feasible option for resolving the issue. Ministers do not have time to consider convoluted descriptions of issues. They need the benefits and costs of options. (Graeme Robertson, Director General, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

There were some differences of opinion among respondents on whether you should make an explicit recommendation. Some respondents suggested that the economist’s job is solely to put forward options with information about the performance of those options. Others take a different view.

It is particularly important to be able to make a recommendation with reasons. The decision maker will make their own decision but still like to have a recommendation. (David Hartley, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

To support this, Feldman et al. (2001, p.314) found that “policy makers report frustration with researchers’ unwillingness to articulate clearly the policy implications of their research – to ‘go out on a limb’ and make policy recommendations based on their findings.”

1.5 Be practical and pragmatic

Compromise is frequently an important part of policy development.

Understand the politics of the situation and be prepared to be a bit flexible. This could mean sacrificing some principles on occasions. (Economists generally seem less at home in politics than do members of the legal profession.) (Trevor Wilson, Department of Primary Industries, Queensland).

In seeking policy change in salinity, I have found myself to be constantly struggling with where to compromise and where to hold the line. I have on some occasions suggested changes that are less extreme than the changes that I actually believe should occur because of judgments that the full change would be too far from current policy to be acceptable, at least in one step. It is as if one is using a thin rope to pull a heavy boat. If one pulls too hard in a completely different direction, the momentum of the boat moving in its current direction will cause the rope to break.

1.6 The importance of timing

Cialdiani (1993) outlined the psychological tendency for people to maintain a consistent stance, particularly once that stance has been made public. He discussed the potential for this trait to be used to enhance personal influence, but it may also inhibit attempts to achieve change, particularly in the short term. No doubt, this is behind the following recommendation on the question of how to be influential with policy makers.

Do it early (before a position is established). (Colin Mues, ABARE).

If you join a mature policy debate, or you are recommending reforms to established policies, you may have to wait some time for a realistic opportunity for change to occur. Such opportunities may arise, for example, following a change of government, a change of Minister or senior public servant, an episode of strong media focus, or the release of substantially new and different scientific data.

In my own experience, despite the existence of well-established salinity policies in Western Australia, there appeared to be some prospect for change at the time when I began my efforts to advocate. Factors contributing to this state of relative openness to change included:

- New scientific information revealing that the level of intervention needed to address salinity was much greater than previously appreciated, and that the extent of off-site benefits from on-farm treatment of salinity are much smaller than previously believed.
- Deep dissatisfaction among some members of the WA Salinity Council about processes followed in a set of funding decisions. There had been heavy-handed interference in those decisions by a ministerial advisor and my recommendation for a more systematic and science-based process was embraced by some as a means to avoid that in future.
- Deep dissatisfaction by many members of the farming community about the ineffectiveness of existing policy measures against salinity, particularly those such as the Natural Heritage Trust that spread funds too thinly and non-strategically and without adequate appreciation of the close links between commercial considerations and farmers' land conservation decisions.
- Later, the prospects for change were enhanced by a change of State Government, with a pair of new responsible Ministers who had not presided over the development of the existing policies.

This highlights that you should not sit back and wait for an opportunity to arise. Such opportunities may occur without warning, or may have already occurred behind the scenes (e.g. the heavy-handed Ministerial advisor), so that you need to put your proposals on the table as soon as you believe they are sufficiently well developed to withstand scrutiny and debate. When opportunities arise, they need to be grasped.

“Researchers who would influence policy must recognise that preliminary but timely results are more likely to have an impact than more definite findings published long after a policy must be formulated or a program implemented.” (Feldman et al. 2001, pp. 313-314).

Even if an opportunity is slow in coming, it is necessary to be patient and persistent (see 1.7 below) and wise to use the time to build support (see 1.8 below). Usually, striving for policy change is a long-term project.

In my own case, this has particularly applied to national (as opposed to state) salinity policy. Apart from the emergence of the new scientific information, none of the above circumstances favouring policy change have been present at the national level. Indeed my timing at the national level turned out to be rather poor, with a major new policy program (the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, or NAP) being announced by the Federal Government just as I was commencing my efforts to communicate the need for a substantial shift in approach. While I remain critical of the design of the NAP, I hold little hope of a fundamental change in national policy direction for the time being, probably not until the current plan completes its seven-year life.

Here is another point about getting in early, on an even longer time scale.

Get to know [policy makers] before they are in positions of influence. Once policy makers are in place, they have numerous people trying to catch their attention. Most of these people have axes to grind. Moreover, people in positions of responsibility are extremely over-worked. They rely on contacts and information they have acquired beforehand. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist).

Given the difficulty of anticipating who will become influential policy makers in future, perhaps the appropriate response to this recommendation is to establish and maintain strong professional networks generally.

1.7 Be persistent

I have already mentioned the likely need to maintain policy-advocacy efforts for some considerable time. Presenting a good argument is often not sufficient to change people's minds. Often you must repeat the argument again and again in different forms and in different environments to slowly bring the audience around. The decision-theory approach to understanding adoption helps to explain this; a single hearing of an argument may slightly reduce one's uncertainty about an innovation, but hearing the argument repeatedly, especially from different sources, is likely to reduce uncertainty and increase confidence to a much greater extent.

Harries (2002) emphasises the need for persistence. "When you have a good point to make, keep repeating it. Success in ideological polemics is very much a matter of staying power and will." Several survey respondents made similar and related points.

Persistence is one of the important attributes of a policy economist. If you think that you have a strong case it is more likely that you will outlast someone with a weak case. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

Hang in. The policy advocate must accept that he will at times be boring, repetitive and a pain in the butt. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament)

Be patient. (Scott Davenport, NSW Agriculture)

Recognising that few people read my refereed journal articles on salinity, in the past two years I have given numerous verbal presentations, media interviews and prepared popular press and magazine articles. In the course that campaign, I certainly tired of repeating myself, but realised that it is essential to do so.

Even if one seems to be making progress in shifting perceptions on a policy issue, there is always the risk that hard-won ground will be lost. There are certain to be individuals and organisations with vested interests in the continuation of the existing policy, and they will resist your proposals for change, making counter-arguments probably with some energy and persistence of their own. Therefore, some considerable persistence of effort may be required just to prevent an active policy debate from slipping "backwards" (from your perspective).

This is one of the reasons why it is so important to "get in early", to prevent the establishment of poor policies that are, by virtue of their very existence, difficult to change.

1.8 Network and build support

If you practise the kind of persistence advocated to in 1.7, an additional positive result can be the building of support from a wide constituency. Through my time-consuming efforts to communicate frequently and widely, I hoped to build support for change among both policy makers and interested members of the wider community.

Whenever possible make your recommendations on the public record. Policy makers are influenced by public opinion probably more than by expert opinion. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament)

Strategy is important. Develop a specific strategy to ensure that economic views are widely understood. We have found, for example, that it is important to anticipate who senior policy makers will consult and to have made contact with these people so that they understand the economic perspective. Organising third party endorsement is very important. Inviting experts from overseas, often to give the same message as local economists, can be helpful. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

As well as Government Ministers/advisors, seek support from Opposition members of Parliament, who may be able to ensure that the Government takes notice. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

Must be prepared to take the initiative and make a point of communicating with the policy makers. Cannot sit back and wait to be asked. (Trevor Wilson, Department of Primary Industries, Queensland)

In proposing new schemes, it is the amount of emotional support the scheme has, or how much media attention is created. To influence a political decision you have to do your homework, consult widely, know the opposition's position (David Bennett, NRM Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants)

As well as my more public efforts to build support, I engaged with policy makers and policy advisors directly and as mutual members of several committees.

Establish an inter-agency network of friends who can influence, establishing respect within government agencies and ministerial staff. (Scott Davenport, NSW Agriculture)

Once again Harries (2002) has some excellent advice on the topic of building support when the debate is adversarial.

“Preaching to the converted, far from being a superfluous activity, is vital. Preachers do it every Sunday. The strengthening of the commitment, intellectual performance and morale of those already on your side is an essential task, both in order to bind them more securely to the cause and to make them more effective exponents of it.”

“Never forget the uncommitted: almost invariably they constitute the vast majority. ... What works best in throwing opponents off balance - cleverness, originality, pugnacity, ridicule - is often counterproductive with the neutral or undecided, who are more likely to be impressed by good sense, decency and fairness.”

“Be aware that, at least potentially, you are always addressing multiple audiences. Decide whether ... you want to make a broad appeal to many different groups, which will usually involve compromise and restraint in presentation, or to make a sharply focused pitch to a particular audience, even at the risk of alienating others. Either decision - or one to strike some sort of balance between the two - may be right.”

1.9 Credibility is important

Feldman et al. (2001, p. 313) found that “policy makers seek and prefer to use information obtained directly from trusted sources, preferably from sources with immediate knowledge of their state's circumstances, priorities and needs.”

Several senior people have commented to me that my independence from agencies and interest groups has been helpful in enhancing my credibility in the salinity policy debate. I have been able to speak out openly and honestly in a somewhat controversial policy area where many of the best-informed people are constrained by their employment situation from doing so.

I think that reputation is very important. This may involve taking unpopular positions but if policy makers know that your advice is independent, in the public interest and that you don't play underhanded games then advice is more likely to be respected. Policy makers are often confronted with many views and will go with reputation. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

Refer to credible sources likely to be recognised by the policy makers in question. (Phil Connolly, NSW Treasury).

Over time, I have increasingly faced a dilemma on this point: how can I maintain my perceived independence while agreeing to join voluntary policy advisory committees and a state government task force. I have also worried that my position as a Program Leader in the Cooperative Research Centre for Plant-Based Management of Dryland Salinity will diminish my perceived independence. In reality I chose these associations after, and as a

result of, my analysis of policy and institutional needs, but in this game, perceptions matter. My only option is to strive to be scrupulously honest and balanced and hope that this is recognised.

Husband your credibility. Accuracy is more important than originality. The advocate can afford to be boring (although its better not to be) but he cannot afford to be often wrong even about matters not central to his argument. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament).

Never defend a model. Focus the discussion on the ways that changes in the assumptions change the recommendation. Do it openly and honestly. (Mike Young, CSIRO Land and Water).

This recommendation from Mike Young to make use of what I would call “sensitivity analysis” is a very important one. I have commented elsewhere on the positive value of using sensitivity analysis to aid communication of technical information to an audience of decision makers (Pannell, 1997).

1.10 Don't tell your target audience that they are wrong

Several survey respondents proposed this rule, which personally I have not always obeyed. People do not like having to change their position on a matter, particularly when they have publicly expressed their current position (Hogan 1996; Cialdini 1993, 2001). If you are critical of that position, particularly in public, you run the risk of alienating your target audience. On the other hand, one must not stick to this rule too scrupulously, or bad policies would not receive the criticism they deserve (and see the later discussion on the responsibility of economists to defend the public interest). One way to partially avoid the conflict is outlined below in suggestion 3.5.

This does not imply that a policy advisor should not admit a past error or mask the need for a change of position that he or she has previously advocated. Given the dynamic nature of a policy debate and of the scientific or other evidence that informs it, there will certainly be times when a change of position is appropriate.

It is not possible to know the full implications [of a policy proposal] until you speak to the people likely to be affected. (Don McFarlane, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

This might be interpreted by some as undesirable inconsistency. Depending on the circumstances and the audience, such inconsistency in your position may risk a reduction in your credibility if the change is not well enough argued. On the other hand, your honesty and openness in admitting past errors may equally well enhance your perceived honesty, independence and credibility. In any case, there is only one ethical option.

Matters of knowledge and content

2.1 Understand the policy process

In the context of aged care, Feldman et al. (2001) found a mismatch between what information policy makers say they need and what researchers provide. They observed that a number of scholars (e.g. Weiss 1977, 1989; Albaek 1995; Shulock 1999) have argued that the mismatch is due “in large part to the tendency of social researchers to assume that policy makers follow a linear ‘rational choice’ decision making process,” whereas the reality is that “formal analysis feeds into a much larger nonlinear political process of decision making where the influence of evidence-based information is heavily dependent on its perceived relevance to political debate and public discourse,” (Feldman et al. 2002, p. 318)

Part of understanding the perspective of policy makers and policy advisors is understanding the environment in which they operate, and the processes of policy making.

Have a good understanding of the ‘policy process’ within government. (Scott Davenport, NSW Agriculture).

Understand the Government decision making process, where Cabinet ultimately makes decisions but with agencies providing input by way of Cabinet comments. So run proposals by agencies in the first instance. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

Figure 1 (based on Swift, Izac and van Noordwijk, 2002) illustrates the evolution of a policy issue through the following phases: pioneer, action groups, policy issue, policy implementation and monitoring policies. It suggests that the public and policy prominence of many issues follow a typical pattern, with a peak during the period leading up to policy implementation, and then a substantial decline in prominence as new policies and institutions mature and are allowed to operate.

Above the line, the authors suggested the key questions of concern to policy makers at different times during the evolution of the policy issue. Initially, the question is, “Is it a problem?”. Presuming a positive answer to this, there is a progression through “Who is at fault?”, “Who will pay?” and “Will everyone play ball?”, before policy makers become concerned with monitoring the outcomes of the implemented policies.

Below the line are suggested the broad areas of technical information needed to inform policy decisions (in a natural resource management context). These progress through understanding the cause and effect mechanisms, estimating the extent and cost of the issue, mitigation options, the costs of those options, and the development of indicators to assist with policy monitoring.

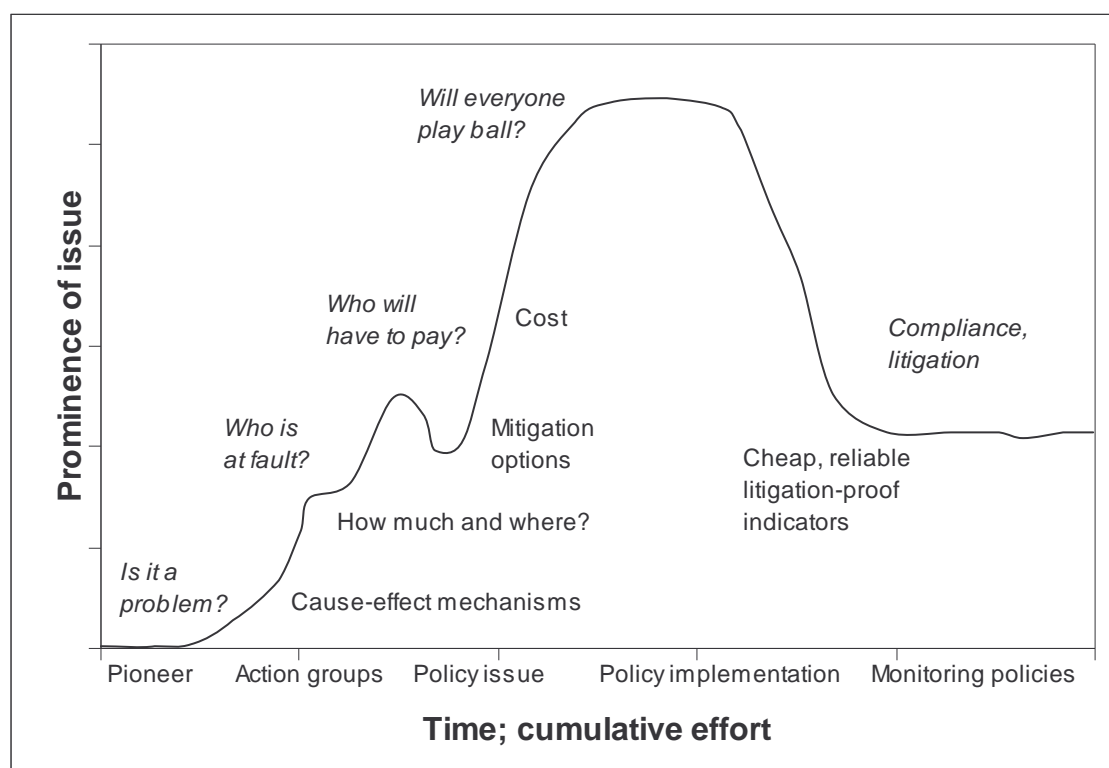


Figure 1. The life cycle of a policy issue (Source: Swift, Izac and van Noordwijk, 2002)

Another reality of the policy process is that positions on an issue change over time. For example, this may result from new knowledge (see 1.10), political pressure, or changes in personnel.

2.2 Develop a deep and broad knowledge of technical aspects of the issue

Harries (2002): “Make sure that you know several times more about a topic than you can conceivably use or show. This is important, for one thing, because you will not know in advance what precisely you will have to use on any given occasion. Even more important, the fact that you have much in reserve (which will usually become evident through an accumulation of small touches) will give a resonance and authority to what you do use.”

After point 1.1, this was the most emphasised point among survey respondents. They stressed the need to be seen to be expert in the subject, and not merely on economic aspects.

Engage other disciplines; attempt to harness their expertise. Doing homework on the problem at hand is important. A detailed knowledge of the industry in question and a good set of industry (situation) statistics always helps ones credibility. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

Spend as much time talking to non-economists as to their economist colleagues. Understand the issue comprehensively. Be sure to scope alternatives before becoming analytical. (Graeme Robertson, Department of Agriculture Western Australia)

Good communication requires confidence in the subject matter, so all aspects of issues need to be thoroughly thought through beforehand. (Scott Davenport, NSW Agriculture)

Where possible, trial the advice with others who are outside your professional group. (Ian Wills, Monash University).

Economists should not spread themselves too thinly because there is a limit to the empirical information that can be brought to bear on policy judgements. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist).

This is not just a matter of strategy, but one of social responsibility. I particularly appreciate the following insightful survey response:

Much of the problem with bad policy comes from smart, articulate people who are operating out of their skill zone. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

And I cannot resist including the following thought-provoking comment:

Remember that facts without theory is slightly better than theory without facts. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist)

Matters of style

Is style more or less important than content? The survey included the following question.

From the point of view of having an influence over policy decisions, rate the importance of effective and persuasive communication relative to the importance of the information content that is communicated. (Communication is much less important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Communication is much more important). Your rating (1-7):

Most responses centred around 4.

4: If either is poor then the proposal is likely to fail. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

4: They are equally indispensable; one cannot compensate for deficiencies in the other. (Neil Byron, Productivity Commission).

4: Communication has exactly the same importance as content. (Graeme Robertson, Department of Agriculture Western Australia)

However, some emphasised communication as being pre-eminent. For example:

You only have to watch the films of Hitler's speeches, especially the Nuremberg rally, to know that communication is far more important than content. The same applies to Churchill's speeches, though the style was a little different. Apparently Churchill restricted himself to very few speeches and would practice his timing for hours beforehand. The media adviser is always the person closest to the Minister. (David Bennett, NRM Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants)

In either case, it is clear that success in influencing policy requires not just excellent information, but also excellent communication.

3.1 Work on your general communication skills

Many of the best communicators (e.g. Ronald Reagan) have an acting background. If you are not an actor then simulations, such as lawyers get in their training, can be very good. Join the debating society, or Rostrum. Brevity, relevance, accuracy and timing are also important. You have to find the right phrase to appeal and the right time to give the advice. (David Bennett, NRM Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants).

The example of Ronald Reagan suggests that in extreme cases, communication skills can compensate for an almost complete lack of content, reinforcing the previous quote.

3.2 Be clear and brief

The need for clarity, brevity and simplicity featured in many of the survey responses.

Keep policy proposals simple/intuitive and concise. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

Do it simply (implications easily understood). (Colin Mues, ABARE).

Keep communication brief and limited to a few salient points. (Ian Wills, Monash University).

Be brief in your advice, as you never have much time with a minister. (David Bennett, NRM Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants).

Keep it very short and focussed. (Neil Byron, Productivity Commission).

Use simple "plain" english. Ministers generally do not have the time to wade through a lot of technical detail. (Phil Connolly, NSW Treasury)

To judge from the following responses, economists may have a general problem with over-use of jargon, and communicating in a way that is too technical or too narrowly based in economic theory.

Economists need to communicate well with a minimum of economic jargon (as do all professionals I guess). (Trevor Wilson, Department of Primary Industries, Queensland).

Avoid jargon. (Don McFarlane, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

Avoid using jargon. (Mike Young, CSIRO Land and Water).

Make sure they are talking to the audience and not their colleagues over the heads of the audience. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist).

What sounds perfectly acceptable to a fellow economist might be incomprehensible or even offensive to a policy maker with a different background. Therefore, it is essential that economists develop their ability to describe their proposals in a manner that is comprehensible to economists and non-economists alike. (Phil Connolly, NSW Treasury).

3.3 Present real-world examples

Two respondents suggested that it is useful to illustrate your proposal with real-life examples. On the other hand, Harries' (2002) warned against the use of historical analogies. "More often than not, their illustrative value is outweighed by their distracting effect."

3.4 Quantify the impacts of options

There were a number of suggestions from survey respondents that economists should provide quantitative evidence to support their arguments. Such quantification is likely to increase the apparent objectivity and independence of your argument.

Have data/evidence to back assertions about what the proposal will achieve. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

Do it with numbers to back-up your arguments. (Colin Mues, ABARE).

I like to get advice which is sound and objective, under-pinned with detailed analysis. I will make the “political judgements”. (David Hartley, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

Quantify effects rather than relying just on abstract argument (Kym Anderson, University of Adelaide).

Having a good understanding of the impact of the proposed change is also an advantage particularly where this is based on quantitative analysis. With dairy deregulation, for example, we were able to use the results from models to explain what the impact of reform would likely be on our state and other states/sectors. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

Develop objective and credible arguments that avoid speculative assumptions. Too often issues are presented in a subjective manner that ignores the big-picture. (Phil Connolly, NSW Treasury).

On the other hand, the process of quantification does not necessarily have to be very sophisticated or complex. Sometimes the result is clear enough that a relatively simple analysis is sufficient. For example, one of the most successful pieces of quantitative evidence I have used in my presentations on salinity is an analysis of the economic value of salinity prevention resulting from changes in agricultural land use. Given the recent shift in scientific knowledge, revealing much smaller off-site benefits and much longer time lags, plausible values per hectare of salinity prevention are much smaller than the preconceptions of most interested people, and a simple graph based on illustrative data was sufficient to convey this strongly. More generally, my contribution to the salinity policy debate has been mainly through the integration of diverse types of information (each of which individually is relatively clear and straightforward), rather than through the conduct of detailed and sophisticated economic analysis. Much of the “economics” I used was little more than common sense, or at least so it seemed to me.

3.5 Relate your recommendation to Government's stated policy objectives

People have a well-documented psychological tendency to choose decisions and actions that are consistent with their past decisions and actions (Cialdini, 1993). Notwithstanding the propensity for governments to break election promises, they do seem to attempt to at least reconcile new policy advice with existing policy commitments.

Relate the proposal to the Government's stated policy objectives. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

I had not appreciated the importance of this point when I first made presentations to the State Salinity Council. In my mind, I was proposing quite substantial changes in policy. When some of my proposals began to be accepted, I was surprised at the efforts that were then made to paint the new position as being already embodied in the old position. In retrospect I see that there were a number of sound reasons for doing this. For one thing, it meant that the existing policy document, which had had a difficult genesis, did not need to be re-negotiated with the Minister and the community. For another, it reduced the need to admit that the existing policy was deficient.

Taking this approach conveniently helps to obey suggestion 1.10 to avoid telling people that they are wrong. On the other hand, taking it to extreme may create its own problems. How can you convince policy makers that there is a need for genuine change if you portray your proposed new position as being the same as the existing position?

Strengths and Weaknesses of Economics in the Policy Domain

In the hope that identifying weaknesses is the first step towards their rectification, survey respondents were asked, “In your view, what are the common weaknesses of economists in their attempts to influence policy?” There were two strong themes in the responses. The first relates to the narrowness of the economics paradigm and of the advice its practitioners provide. There were so many responses around this theme that it ought to focus policy economists’ attention firmly onto this issue.

Too isolated from other disciplines. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

Too little appreciation of the broader administrative, legal, political, etc., context within which decisions have to be made. (Ian Wills, Monash University).

A tendency to be too academic rather than pragmatic. They may be seen as not in touch with the real world. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

Message is too complicated, and often lacking in practicality (Kym Anderson, University of Adelaide)

Too abstracted from real situation, (Ross Kingwell, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

Too often economic advice is one-dimensional. [Economists] try to promote a “pure” economic thesis and do not readily try to deal with non-quantitative information or intangibles. This usually results in a narrow range of options. (Graeme Robertson, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

The inability of many economists to understand and well explain the diversity of values and issues which can be taken into account within a micro reform framework. For example, too often we hear that economists are not interested in certain non-monetary values i.e. lifestyle, welfare, equity, environment, ethics, etc. (Scott Davenport, NSW Agriculture).

They take for granted the liberal foundations of at least micro-economics. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament).

Their reform suggestions, if they get to Boards of Management, can be seen as being narrowly defined. (Don McFarlane, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

A belief that efficiency is a necessary precondition rather than something that can be traded off against other objectives. (Mike Young, CSIRO Land and Water).

They think “economics” is self evident and sufficient in itself. (Roger Payne, Director General, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

Tendency to under-emphasise non-quantitative information. (Phil Connolly, NSW Treasury).

Being too inflexible. Not being prepared to negotiate. (Trevor Wilson, Department of Primary Industries, Queensland).

Too little attention to private and public transaction costs. (Ian Wills, Monash University).

The second large set of responses related to the quality of economists’ communication. In summary, respondents felt that economists tend to use too much jargon, and to communicate in ways that are too elaborate and technical for non-economists

They argue for other economists. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament).

Then there was a variety of other comments, most of which reinforced points raised earlier in this paper.

Being dogmatic when caution is justified given the facts and circumstances of the case. Not recognising that the argument is usually about means not ends. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist).

Too little time commitment to building relationships, spread too thin across issues to be “expert” or “authoritative” in the policy issue at hand. (Ross Kingwell, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

Too impatient. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

Respondents were also asked, “What are the strengths of economists (relative to other disciplines) in providing advice or analysis on policy?” All of the responses, without exception, highlighted positive aspects of the economics paradigm and approach to analysing problems. Positives identified included its potential for breadth, its use for integrating diverse technical information, its focus on trade-offs and opportunity costs, its rigour, quantifiability, and robustness.

They provide discipline and rigour that other areas often lack. Economic measures are generally well understood and many disciplines are qualitative. They allow comparisons to be made in a more objective manner. Other discipline areas tend to have threshold or are “drop dead” issues (unacceptable consequences, standards being exceeded, politically unacceptable, etc.) (Don McFarlane, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

The discipline provides a robust and fairly comprehensive analytical framework for assisting policy makers to make informed decisions. The strength of economics is that it facilitates clear and consistent policy formulation, advice and analysis. It must be noted that economics has its limitations (particularly as regards non-market goods). However, a good economist should clearly recognise and work within these restrictions. (Phil Connolly, NSW Treasury)

Logical application of basic economic concepts: opportunity costs, recognition of decision makers’ incentives to maximise net benefits. (Ian Wills, Monash University).

Economics is in my opinion by far the most rigorous of the social sciences. (I am not saying that the others have nothing to teach us.) (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament).

Ability to integrate information from a range of disciplines, some powerful analytical tools, often genuinely interested in policy issues, at ease with “constrained optimisation”. (Ross Kingwell, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

A sound, consistent, quantifiable theoretical framework (Kym Anderson, University of Adelaide).

The most significant is that they can provide a way of clarifying or measuring the level of agony, use of resources and tradeoffs in a systematic way. (Roger Payne, Director General, Water and Rivers Commission, Western Australia).

Economists have a tremendous advantage in being able to understand the “bigger picture”. And we should not underestimate the advantage of having an understanding of basic economic principles. Having concepts in the back of one’s mind like “public goods”, “externalities” and “market failure” give economists an advantage over others in the policy area. (Trevor Wilson, Department of Primary Industries, Queensland).

Ability to analyse within the context of a rational framework. (Graeme Robertson, Department of Agriculture Western Australia)

Economics is about interdependence and opportunity costs. Economists are stronger on uncertainty than other disciplines. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist).

A focus on broader issues and outcomes. (Mark Altus, Department of Treasury and Finance, Western Australia).

General equilibrium/an economy wide focus, not just individual isolated sector. (Neil Byron, Productivity Commission).

Responsibilities of Economists

To conclude, I would like to highlight two areas where economists have particular responsibilities and opportunities. Firstly, economists (like any other professional group) have a responsibility to ensure that the advice they give has a sufficiently robust and broad technical basis. Some of the survey responses indicated that economists do not always form strong enough links with other disciplines for this responsibility to be met. In the case of my experience with salinity, on working closely with hydrologists I found that the usual diagnosis of the issue by economists, as primarily an externality problem, was like a cartoon version of a complex reality (Pannell et al., 2001). In reality, for some dimensions of the salinity problem there are other sources of market failure more serious than externalities (Pannell, 2001a). Consequences of our earlier misdiagnosis persist even now, such as in the creation of unrealistic expectations among some policy makers regarding the role and contribution of market-based economic instruments for salinity management (Pannell, 2001b).

Secondly, economists have a responsibility and an opportunity to contribute to the policy debate in ways that others in the community can not or will not do. The economic paradigm provides us with a unique capacity to do this. Perhaps, for this reason, there is a tradition of providing independent advice in defence of the public interest that seems to be stronger within economics than in most other disciplines. This point was made strongly and repeatedly in the survey responses.

The profession of economics is at its best when it is defending the public interest in the widest possible sense. But there are very few economic advocates of the public interest in the profession. There are many who beaver away, but few who will stick their necks out. (David Bennett, NRMC Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants)

I think that there is a need for economists to try to reduce “pork-barrelling” and insert a degree of economic argument into political allocations. In the end society benefits more from Governments making sensible investment decisions, rather than using money to keep the current government in power. But it is an uphill battle. (David Bennett, NRMC Pty Ltd, Natural Resource Management Consultants)

A strength of economists is our tendency to focus on public interest outcomes. (Gary Stoneham, DNRE Victoria).

Economists are less likely to be captured by special interest groups. (Ross Kingwell, Department of Agriculture Western Australia).

Politics is overly dominated by self-interested groups. By focussing on efficiency, we can contribute to better social outcomes. (anonymous by request).

Professional economists should not been in the popularity business. (Alistair Watson, Freelance Economist).

Born with talent, having acquired specialist knowledge at public cost and probably enjoying very satisfactory lifestyles at public cost, economists are not justified in ignoring public policy issues while they count the angels on pinheads. Of course, it would be extremely inefficient for individuals to devote large licks of effort to things they are not good at, but being privileged members of an open democratic society they should try to contribute to it. (John Hyde, former member of Federal Parliament).

It should be acknowledged that satisfying these exhortations to action will involve significant costs, including time, energy, stress, frustration, risk of conflict, and absence from home. A crucial factor in my own attempts to engage in the policy debate was my change in employment away from being an academic with responsibilities for teaching, administration, supervision and research, into a predominantly research and extension oriented position funded by an external agency (the Grains Research and Development Corporation). It would have been vastly more difficult to maintain an effective involvement in current policy debates while meeting the diversity of university responsibilities faced by most academics.

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