
Politics - Friend or Enemy?

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Let me begin with a story. It's about a meeting between the then President Lyndon Johnson and a delegation of feminists in the 1960s¹. They made their submission to the President and after he's clarified a few points he said: "Well, you have convinced me that I should do it. Now go out and make me do it". They weren't happy with his response but Johnson, the master politician, understood the importance of public pressure when it came to changing the law. Martyrdom wasn't his cup of tea but the politics of the numbers was and he corralled the majorities that gave America its Civil Rights Act (1964) and its Voting Rights Act (1965). In a divided nation, he demonstrated not only strength of purpose for that which was right but also extraordinary political nous, the latter being the subject for my address today. I will share with you some of my conclusions about politics and what they mean for those seeking to bring about that all-important transition from research findings to recommendations to public policy. I trust the call to realism I will make will be realistic enough because it's now over ten years since I retired from parliamentary politics and returned to academic life. Not surprisingly my mind has been contaminated with large doses of "theory" and my day-to-day political instincts significantly dulled as a result.

Sure, there's lots of politics in the academic community

- one particular teaching and research perspective over another - and the game is played hard over publication and promotion, but there it tends to end, the long march through the real world of ideologies and interests left to another day or for others to fight. In saying this I'm reminded of the findings that "some 90% of papers that have been published in academic journals are never cited. Indeed, as many as 50% of papers are never read by anyone other than the authors, referees and journal editors"². Writing way back in the 1920's the American philosopher and pragmatist John Dewey was alert to what this intellectual isolation could mean. He wrote: "A class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all"³. There's the danger.

There's the trap; the challenge being to find a way out of the study or laboratory into the community and its multitude of actors and interests.

Point One - recognize politics for what it is and not just how you would wish it to be.

¹ The story from Robert Caro's biography of Johnson is retold in Geoff Mulgan, *The Art of Public Strategy* (OUP, 2009), pp.6-7

² Lokman I Meho in *Physics World*, January 2007, p.32

³ Quoted in Yves Sintomer, "Random Selection, Republican Self-Government, and Deliberative Democracy", *Constellations*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2010, p. 482.

Politics is all about power and influence. Power is the ability to do things, for example to pass laws and fund programs. Influence is less direct but just as important we can influence the ideas of those with power (or who are seeking to gain it). So too I should add can we take steps to influence the lifestyle and behaviour of people, a very complex but nevertheless necessary part of public policy and not just in the health arena.

There are, of course, many views on how politics should be organized and practised. From the public interest point of view there's a good way involving firstly various layers of accountability at the peak of which are regular, fair and free elections and secondly respect for the differences that are part and parcel of any society and which become the springboards for change and progress. However, we can't be too sanguine about what actually happens as opposed to what we hope is happening.

Politicians and activists are continually exploring the outer limits of acceptability. Some play hardball and are always ready to dig up and spread dirt on opponents. They may cover up and cut corners. Some fake left while going right. Fear is often mobilised as a force drowning out reasoned consideration. Vested interests very rarely let the public interest into the door without a fight. This being said there's also the constructive way to seek power and influence - showing an interest and seeking out support, being at the right place at the right time, building up your credibility and being strategic⁴.

When it comes to politics whether we observe it at our workplaces or in government there are different types of players - the manoeuvrers expert in deception and with little regard for the sanctioned rules unless they help the cause, the street fighters who are masters of the cut and thrust, team players who will cut corners in the interests of their tribe and the purists for whom behind-the-scenes grappling for power and prestige is of no interest. Others may play politics, they don't⁵. In relation to the purists I'm reminded of the comment of the great philosopher politics Machiavelli: "A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good"⁶. He knew what he was talking about having been tortured following the collapse of the republic he had served as a public official from 1498 to 1512. In his turbulent world being ineffective in the face of an enemy meant ostracism, punishment, torture or even worse. Being political at all times - and sometimes in an ugly way - was necessary to personal let alone political survival.

None of this should lead you to conclude that the ends can always justify the means - they are too inextricably linked for that to be a good rule and in a society like ours there are a range of ethical constraints, legal and otherwise, such that being unethical may in fact be highly unpolitical and disadvantageous to the ends you seek. However, it does mean you need to bring political nous to the tables of power and influence. In saying this I'm reminded of Albert Einstein's take on politics. He was once asked: "Why is it that when the mind of man has stretched so far as to discover the structure of the atom we have been unable to devise the

⁴ For the constructive versus the destructive way of being political see Kathleen Reardon, *It's All Politics* (Doubleday, 2005), pp.86-87.

⁵ See Kathleen Reardon, *The Secret Handshake* (Currency, 20012), Ch 3.

⁶ *The Prince* (New American Library Edition, 1952), p. 84.

political means to keep the atom from destroying us?" He replied: "That is simple, my friend. It is because politics is more difficult than physics"⁷.

Its complex and it's personally difficult to practice politics but it is important - remember blind faith, ambition and self-interest are in there all the time battling against science, self-restraint and altruism. It's not just the strength of an argument that guarantees victory in these contested spaces - it's political skills like self-awareness (and self-control in the face of challenge), being aware of the driving forces bringing about change in society, being able to read people and situations, building alignments and alliances and being able to listen and communicate at a range of levels, including in new and old media. Political astuteness as Professor Jean Hartley has pointed out, is "about working with contest and conflict to achieve organizational and social goals"⁸.

Point Two - recognize the limitations as well as the power of science in a world of idealism and realism

Let me ask you to reflect upon the World Health Organization's inspirational 1948 definition of health:

"A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

It's a balanced mix of the positive and the negative but one that still leaves us a little short of the starting-post. Indeed, we are led to ask: Just what is meant by well-being and just what counts as disease? Some provide what I would call an idealistic or utopian answer to that question and a fundamentalist politics to back it up, others a more realistic answer from which a pragmatic politics emerges. The utopians, whether left or right, want perfection and are willing to fight a war on its behalf whilst the realists are looking for the best that can be achieved in what is always a messy and complicated situation. They too have values but adopt a pluralistic perspective and that means working out how to bring together multiple objectives rather than assuming that if one value is achieved all the rest will fall into place. They are neither left nor right, neither radical nor conservative; sometimes favouring more intervention sometimes less, the key factor being what the circumstances dictate needs to be done to produce a better world.

I'm sure you would recognise these two positions in the work you do in the alcohol and drug field. What's actually at play are two sets of beliefs about human nature and human freedom and two ways to look upon the political and public policy projects. Each side brings its own facts to the table to support their political positions on the questions related to alcohol and drugs.

Not surprisingly the findings of properly conducted scientific research favours the pragmatists. After all that is the aim of the exercise - to find out how things actually work as opposed to how we would hope they work. Indeed, so aspirational is the view of the drug-free advocates amongst us that they battle to cope with the facts about human desire and human weakness, just as the teetotalers and prohibitionists did with alcohol. They over-play their hand on fundamental beliefs, over-estimate the power of the will and under-estimate the negative consequences of

⁷ Quoted in Reardon, *It's All Politics*, p. 2

⁸ www.nrmagazine.co.uk/static/political-astuteness-essential-skill-workplace

prohibition. They are buoyed by the few personal transformations that occur but not fazed by the many that don't. In their view, there are enough facts to keep their hopes alive and justify the war in which they are engaged. It's a war, in fact, that justifies the use of all sorts of weapons most importantly the criminal law, a beacon that makes clear to fill what is expected of all.

The pragmatists on the other hand look into society now and in the past and see humans using drugs and alcohol sometimes in the search for pleasure and sometimes to avoid pain, sometimes habitually and sometimes infrequently. They assume that people don't always think clearly, that they take risks and that this is how things are, the use of the criminal law but not all laws and regulations being inappropriate and problematical from a rights and health perspective rather than a beacon of hope. The hope they have is for a world that is always improving not one that is perfect.

For their part, however, pragmatists often battle to cope with the existence of fundamentalists in their midst. The fundamentalists have been successful in appealing to understandable fears people have and are not reluctant to use whatever means it takes to mobilise public opinion. For those who have been carefully studying human nature in a social setting for many years this all too often successful approach to political campaigning can be very frustrating and can lead to the results uncovered by the Pew Research Centre in 2009 "that while Americans tend to have positive views of the scientific community, scientists tend to consider the public ignorant and the media irresponsible"⁹. The required response here of course would not be to throw in the towel but to develop and implement a political strategy. Consider the two ways a politician might approach an issue requiring a response - they may "decide, announce and defend" or they may "engage, interact, and cooperate". A researcher when on the public stage is trained to the former even though in the process of research he or she will rely heavily on engagement, interaction and cooperation to produce solid findings. What is needed is an engagement strategy relating to the marketing of the findings as well - and not just late in the piece. As Chris Mooney has noted, there needs to be regular public engaged by the scientific community on "potentially controversial subjects" and moreover, engagement "before truly fraught conflicts are allowed to emerge"¹⁰. He calls it a research and response infrastructure, good advice I believe for harm reductionists keen to advance their cause.

Point three - politics is first and foremost about campaigning and timing

There are so many factors that determine success or failure in the political world but one stands out above all else - the effectiveness of a campaign. Indeed, it's not easy to identify significant political achievement without a campaign that's backed it up. Acknowledging this is not only important in itself but also for what it tells us about public opinion. How often is it that we see significant polling support for a proposition fall away when subject to the blow-torch of a well-organized and orchestrated campaign? The Australian Republican Movement learnt this lesson the hard way in 1999 when the referendum to change our constitution to a republican one failed. The polling was good but not good enough to survive the brutal campaigning of the monarchists.

⁹ Quoted in Chris Mooney, *Do Scientists Understand the Public?* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2010), p. 3

¹⁰ Mooney, p. 3

Campaigns take us from the science of public policy to the sciences of power and influence. Those who seek some change or another come face to face with their enemies and a struggle of ideas and images ensues. It can be ugly and almost always creates passions previously unseen. These passions then create temptations, particularly the temptation to cover up any cracks in an argument or to exaggerate the findings. When the case for change is being made on the basis of scientific research the credibility of the researcher is central to the case for change. Cutting corners or spinning the case beyond a reasonable interpretation of the findings isn't good politics. Indeed, in a campaign it won't escape scrutiny and becomes food for a media forever hungry for conflict.

One would hope that when such temptations present themselves the researcher now researcher/activist would resist. However, not so easy for those well versed in the research, conclude and defend way of thinking is the challenge of prioritisation and the necessity for unity. Sometimes we have to swallow toads without making a face as Carlos Fuentes pointed out¹¹! Look at many of the major breakthroughs in research based policy and they have carried their compromises or come at the expense of other highly valued objectives. There's no one perfect model of harm reduction for example and plenty of different ways the cause can be progressed, some smaller and some larger and structural, such as a broadly-based decriminalisation. In a serious campaign, all of these differences and all of these possibilities would need to be sorted out and more specific objectives arrived upon. Not all of what's been researched and thought through would make the grade and that could mean bruised egos and frustrated ambitions.

A narrative around that objective would also need to follow and that too would need to prioritise in order to keep the message simple and marketable. A harm reduction campaign, for example, might as a matter of politics emphasize differing elements of the case - the individual rights/ personal health elements or the community-wide safety/ public health elements or indeed, all of the above. These are choices political campaigners cannot avoid. There's also the question of whether an issue is framed in a conservative or a radical way, an issue we see playing out in the same sex marriage debate. Strange as it may seem the so-called conservatives in the drugs debate are actually "don't compromise with reality" radicals while the reformers are the "let's be real about human nature" conservatives. This way of presenting the difference can be contrasted with the "let's be real on drugs and their effects" rhetoric of the prohibitionists which gives them a conservative look as opposed to the "let's be real on the drug laws and their consequences" rhetoric of the reformers which sounds radical. It's all about whose best at framing the issue in a way that has enough currency to bite.

This takes me to the question of timeliness. Are the "times" such as to require defence of existing achievements or the pursuit of new ones? Are you working in an area where there has been change, where the consultative processes have been exhausted and the hornet's nest calmed for the time being at least? On the other hand, you may be working in a time of crisis where new ways of thinking and acting are needed. It's in those situations you will need to be armed and ready not just with an argument but also a political strategy.

Being there for the long haul is as important a political asset as the short burst of activity and publicity. It means building relationships with the power holders that matter; earning their trust

¹¹ Quoted in Geoff Mulgan, *Good and Bad Power* (Allen Lane, 2006), p. 5

with the strength of your research and your recognition of the constraints they work under. Rarely do any significant changes in policy happen quickly and inevitably the hard grind of research, meetings, manoeuvrings, shifting alignments of support between stakeholders and unending attempts at persuasion will be needed. Only the survivors have the chance to be the victors.

Chris Mooney in his booklet *Do Scientists Understand the Public?* Argues that to make all of this long-term collaborative work possible and to give it effectiveness requires collaboration between "research scientists, social scientists, public engagement experts, and trained and skilled communicators. The latter may or may not be scientists, but they should be ready to move, on a moment's notice, to address controversies and concerns. Meanwhile, in the absence of any pressing conflagration, public engagement initiatives could help sculpt a citizenry that will be less likely to distrust the scientific community, or reject its expertise, and more willing to understand the scientific perspective (so long as scientists approach the public openly and take citizens on their own terms"¹².

Point Four - evidence-based change is possible even if the constraints are many

For all of the political constraints placed in the way of good policy, it can be achieved. Australia's embrace of aspects of a harm reduction approach to alcohol and drugs is a good demonstration of that. Crises have helped, for example the AIDS crisis in the 1980's or the heroin crisis in the 1990's or the violence in the streets crisis in Sydney in more recent times but still the argument needed to be had - and won in the corridors of power and the suburbs of public opinion. Politicians had to ward off vested interests on their own side as well as win the war that is public and parliamentary opinion. This they did to good effect.

One of the factors assisting politicians keen to make changes was the use of broadly representative summits to consider issues and make recommendation. I mention two - the Drug Summits in New South Wales in 1999 and in Western Australia in 2001. Out of the former came the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre and out of the latter cannabis law reform (now overturned I should add). These Summits gave confidence to the politicians who saw merit in reform and the confidence to push ahead despite the opposition of ideologically or interest-inspired activists.

In respect of any future changes in law and practice it is likely that similar institutions will need to be created, perhaps even citizens' assemblies of randomly selected citizens requested to examine an issue and make recommendations following properly facilitated deliberations. This was done on Sydney's lockout laws through a collaboration between the NSW Government, the City of Sydney and the New Democracy Foundation¹³. A Mini-Public of 43 was randomly selected and asked the question: "How can we ensure we have a vibrant and safe Sydney nightlife?" After three months of deliberation they found value in the lockout law and supported it subject to an earlier review than was intended and a "good behaviour exemption". Neither of these two recommendations were taken on board by the government. This being said I believe Juries or

¹² Mooney, p. 11

¹³ See Luca Belgiomo-Nettis, "Sydney lockout: A groundswell of opinion isn't the considered view of the silent majority", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 2016.

Assemblies of this sort are well placed to provide a considered view from the public as to the merits or otherwise of particular proposals derived from properly conducted research.

Point Five - There's an alliance to be formed between the research community and advocates of deliberative democracy.

There is a nice symmetry that can be observed between the scientific approach to inquiry and deliberative democracy. Its knowledge about how the world works and what that means for the way we live together that is of interest to the community of scientists. Unlike others in the business of explaining the world - ideologists and myth-makers for example - the scientist will focus attention on what the facts will say. As Bryan Magee put it in his book *The New Radicalism*, 1962: "The way to test theories is to subject their assumptions and structure to critical examination, to view them carefully in the light of other theories, and to test their factual content. This sums up the essence of the scientific method".¹⁴ It's taken a long time but such an educated approach to finding things out has gained credibility and is trusted about much if not all that the universe delivers. I say this whilst acknowledging that firstly not all scientific work meets the standards expected of it and success has bred a degree of complacency¹⁵ and secondly that there is a worrying trend in contemporary society that is questioning the disciplines associated with the scientific approach and which is having a corrosive effect on political debate and public policy. *The Economist*¹⁶ magazine has labelled it post-truth politics. One way to deal with it is to find new and constructive ways to involve people in the decision-making process such as deliberative democracy.

In our established system of representative democracy governments are accountable to the people first and foremost by way of elections. In between times activity continues from below as interest groups of all sorts press their case in a range of ways, some transparent some not so transparent. In deliberative democracy, an effort is made to use random sampling techniques to create mini-publics that replicate the population at large. These mini-publics are either elected politicians or self-selected activists - and this is their strength as deliberative bodies¹⁷. The assemblies – or indeed juries – so created then consider the evidence presented to them by expert opinion and seek to find common ground amongst themselves as to what the public interest would say is the right way to go.

You could put it this way - our scientists provide us with the best that proper inquiry can find and our deliberative assemblies the best that proper public consideration can produce when it comes to the application of those findings to human society. Take, for example, the current debate over whether or not to decriminalise drug use and possession as they have done in Portugal. There's plenty of scholarly evidence to say it would be the next best step forward for harm reduction¹⁸. Like all evidence it's not as absolutely conclusive as an advocate might wish (that's how it always

¹⁴ *The New Radicalism*, p. 32

¹⁵ See "How science goes wrong", *The Economist*, October 19, 2013.

¹⁶ "The Art of the Lie", September 10, 2016.

¹⁷ On the case more generally see Geoff Gallop, "Helping our democracy to work better", *Meanjin Quarterly*, Vol 74, Spring 2015, pp 146-9. See also David Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections - the case for Democracy* (Bodley Head, 2016).

¹⁸ Decriminalisation of drug use and possession in Australia-A briefing note (NDARC, Drug Modelling Program).

is in a world of imperfection and contradiction) but it does, as Professor Alison Ritter has pointed out, "provide users with a more humane and sensible response for their drug use"¹⁹.

What needs to be tested here are the two claims, one that it would be "more humane" and two that it would be "sensible". At the moment, it's hard to see how these claims are going to be given a test beyond the hails of academia and conferences like this.

They are - as we see - not on the agenda of the political class. What the political class see when looking in on the current research-driven debates in and around decriminalisation are divisions within the ranks of those seeking change on what the objective should be and an unholy alliance between the alcohol industry and drug-free advocates in which the latter lie low on alcohol use and abuse in exchange for the former playing their part in the War on Drugs. This works beautifully for both - indeed there's nothing like a good drink after a hard day's work campaigning against the sinners and their harm reduction friends! Add to all of that the stigma associated with illegality; it restricts users and other participation in campaigning as does the marginal and disadvantaged status of many who use.

On the positive side of the agenda the news from our friend "Public Opinion" is not without its encouragement. Research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare²⁰ found a nuanced view - support for the higher penalties for those who sell or supply but for users the most popular responses were referral to treatment or education programs, a caution or warning or no action at all. Surveying the results from this and other polling Alison Ritter²¹ notes there's been "a clear shift towards viewing drug use as a health and human rights issue" but as yet there's been no systematic response from the political class. There are vocal supporters of decriminalisation but they are in a minority. It's seen either as a bridge too far or a hornet's nest into which you shouldn't go. I can hear the tortured plea of the more anxious of our politicians now. If you think same-sex marriage and constitutional recognition for indigenous Australians have proved too hard - so far as least - they are a picnic in the park compared to what drug decriminalisation will deliver. There's still plenty of homework to be done and perhaps it might be best to promote it at this stage as a subject for a parliamentary or crowdfunded Citizens' Assembly so that we could get a proper gauge of what the public really think when given the chance to consider and deliberate.

Let me conclude by asking you to reflect on the number of public policy recommendations that will or could flow from this conference. Each and every one will not be without their drawbacks but when lined up as a whole they will surely show how we could improve our collective wellbeing and that of those in special need. Now ask yourself how many will actually get into the system for active consideration and how many will survive that process to become public policy? Some but not enough I suspect. That's not good, the work you do being too important to be left to the conferences and the journals. Make no mistake those who don't like the way you do things and many of the findings you make are embedded in the system and

¹⁹ "Decriminalisation or legalisation: injecting evidence in the drug law reform debate", The Conversation, 12 April 2012

²⁰ AIHW National Drug Strategy, 2013 quoted in Tom Gotsis et al, Illegal drug use and possession: current policy and debate, NSW Parliamentary Research Service Briefing Paper, No 4/2016, pp.

²¹ "Australia's recreational drug policies aren't working, so what are the options for reform". The Conversation, 2 March 2016

playing politics as hard as it gets. My conclusion - politics is your enemy only so far as you don't make it your friend.