Not just steering but weaving: Relevant knowledge and the craft of building policy capacity and coherence

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The whole process of royal weaving is comprised — never to allow temperate natures to be separated from the brave, but to weave them together, like the warp and the woof, by common sentiments and honour and reputation, and by the giving of pledges to one another; and out of them forming one smooth and even web, to entrust to them the offices of State.

(Plato 1892:517–8)

This paper explores the theory and practice of building policy capacity and coherence and in particular focuses on its epistemological and ontological aspects and assumptions. It argues that designing for capacity and coherence has been overwhelmingly concerned with improving the instrumental rationality of policy-making through a more systematic and strategic use of knowledge. However, I argue that this instrumentalism has meant that designing has worked within a very tightly constructed epistemological regime which has tended to neglect non-instrumentalist approaches to policy knowledge and learning. I review some of these non-instrumentalist approaches and suggest that they provide both a critique of the dominant paradigm and offer alternative ways of framing the problem of building policy capacity and coherence.

The relationship between knowledge and policy-making has been a central, if not the central, issue for students of public policy since the emergence of the field in the 1950s and 1960s. The policy orientation in the social sciences aimed to promote a more integrated approach to knowledge in and for the policy-making process (Parsons 1995). Thus it was that the main focus of so much of public policy and policy analysis from the 1950s onwards was the issue of improving the instrumental rationality of decision-making. In practical terms governments endeavoured to make the policy-making process better by making it more rational — through techniques such as PPBS and cost–benefit analysis. Such was the golden age of policy analysis. However, by the 1980s this argument about making government more rational was increasingly sidelined by an influential critique associated with ‘public choice’ theory. Proponents of New Public Management (NPM) absorbed this critique and argued that the problem was not one of making government more rational so much as allowing market and business rationality to operate as effectively in the public interest as it did in securing private interests. This argument was particularly effective in the Anglo-Saxon economies in the 1980s, notably Australia, New Zealand, the USA and UK. Therefore, whereas the three decades following World War II were dominated by the quest for more rational policy making, the closing decades of the 20th century were preoccupied by the redesign of institutions, processes and policies to facilitate economic or market rationality. However, from the mid-1990s there emerged a growing concern about the policy-making and strategic capacities of government in an era of governance. This shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ brought
in its wake an awareness of the apparent need to redesign institutions so as to enhance *steering*, or policy-making effectiveness. The issue of the relationship between policy-making and knowledge utilisation was back on the agenda. But unlike the 1960s, the knowledge utilisation issue as it emerged at the close of the 20th century had less to do with rational policy-making or decision-making *per se* than with improving the ability of governments to understand and manage complex realities and steer strategically. This enhancement of steering (rather than rowing) in turn involved the notion of ‘building’ governance capacity through improving policy capacity and coherence.

Definitions by both academics and practitioners of ‘policy capacity’ and ‘policy coherence’ abound. Capacity building is a very broad church. Charles Polidano, for example, observes that policy capacity involves: ‘the ability to structure the decision-making process, coordinate it throughout government, feed informed analysis into it, and ensure that the analysis is taken seriously’ (Polidano 1999). Glyn Davis, on the other hand, emphasises that outcomes also matter: it is ‘the ability of governments to decide and implement preferred courses of action, which makes a difference to society and its economy’ (Davis 2000:231). This stress on outcomes is also the focus of the somewhat more developed concept of *state capacity* as used in political economy (see Bell and Carr 2002). Related to this idea of policy capacity is the argument that government also must seek to secure policy *coherence* — or in broader terms policy coordination (Di Franceso 2001; Bardach 1998). The OECD, for example, argues that ‘coherence’ is about the ‘overall state of mutual consistency among different policies’ (OECD 1996:8) Rod Rhodes suggests that coherence is the capacity to produce ‘logically and consistently related polices’ (Rhodes 1997a:222). In practice, policy coherence is variously viewed as a strategy for ‘joined-up’, ‘integrated’ or ‘networked governance’ (IPPA 2002). Both capacity and coherence, however they are defined, are clearly terms which are subcategories of what Giddens refers to as ‘transformative capacity’: they are aspects of power in a relational sense and concern the ‘capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realisation of these outcomes depends on the agency of others’ (Giddens 1986:93).

As David Adams argues in this present journal (Adams and Wiseman 2003; Hess and Adams 2002), policy-making is increasingly being conceptualised more as a ‘craft’ than a ‘science’. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine two of the core crafts involved in building policy capacity and coherence: mapping and weaving. If I make the rather large assumption that government no longer derives its legitimacy from its capacity to row, then an important new source of its authority is the claim that it has the ability to chart the voyage, plot coordinates, set direction and take a long-term view — in short, to navigate. Building policy capacity is, in large part, about this *gubernatorial* or *kybernetic* activity of mapping and navigating through the complexities of interconnected problems, multi-level governance, multiple fault lines and multi-organisational settings, cross-cutting issues, policy networks, organisational inter-dependencies and linkages and that Scylla and Charybdis of policy-making known as the ‘knowledge gap’. The craft of policy-making (in the helmsman or *kybernetic* state) in this sense is essentially the craft of map making and navigating.

Allied to this craft of mapping and navigating is the capacity policy-makers have to ‘weave’. In the *Republic*, Plato compares the knowledge of government to the knowledge possessed by a helmsman, but later on, however (in the *Statesman*), he describes the kind of knowledge possessed by the effective statesman or king as comparable to the knowledge which a weaver requires to be a good craftsperson. Dror, for example, in his book *The Capacity to Govern*, argues that the capacity to ‘weave the future’, by which he means ‘the activity of using current materials and processes in order to build, or at least influence the future’ (Dror 2001:xiv), is a vital aspect building governance capacity. In this article, however, I take a broader view of ‘weaving’ than Dror and argue that it constitutes a paradigm for the craft of policy-making in the *kybernetic* or steering state. That is to say, attempts to improve governance capacity and coherence embody the craft of (what Plato describes as) ‘combining’ and ‘plaiting’. Capacity building in this sense is about the craft of integrating competing and opposing forms of knowledge and coordinating the multiplicity of organisations and interests to form a coherent policy fabric. *Coordination* and holistic
integrated governance thus becomes less of a ‘holy grail’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2003:135; Bardach 1998; Peri et al. 1999) than a core craft of the politicus. The new statesman must, like Plato’s king, aspire to be more a weaver than a herdsman. The capacity to weave the political web is, as Plato argues, the defining craft of effective government (Lane 1998). In order to steer government needs maps, and in order to weave government must have a capacity to ensure that the warp and woof of policy-making has a coherence — that the fabric of policy-making is ‘wired-up’ and is ‘holistic’ and ‘networked’ and ‘integrated’ (Peri et al. 1999; IPPA 2002). Indeed, this capacity to weave the vertical (institutional) warp with the horizontal woof of (cross-cutting) policy problems constitutes, for the capacity-building approach, the primary challenge facing governance in the 21st century (Kettl 2000, 2002).

The ontology and epistemology of building capacity and coherence

The notion that government has to build policy capacity is predicated on the claim that the end of the 20th century experienced a significant and profound paradigm shift. This shift involved a belief in a new political ontology: the ‘real world’ (Dror 2001:38) of policy-making had changed. It was a transformation captured by a buzz phrase contained in one of the more influential texts of NPM, Osborne and Gaebler’s Reinventing Government (Osborne and Gaebler 1992): government was now deemed to be about steering, rather than rowing. The effect of NPM in particular, it was argued, had been to ‘hollow out’ the state (Rhodes 1997a,b; Foster and Plowden 1996). Management reforms had, apparently, ‘diminished’ and ‘eroded’ governmental capacity to respond to policy problems (Peters 1996:38). Policymakers now faced a bewildering ‘system of governance without government, management, or control’ (Kettl 2000:492). Related to these concerns about the policy capacity of government were anxieties about the ‘incoherent’, complex, unstable and changing nature of the world which now confronted policy-makers. The OECD, for example, observed that securing coherence within and between different policies was a matter of urgency in a globalised, fast-changing world (OECD 1996). Reflecting on the prospects for policy-making in the 21st century in an Australian context, Glyn Davis concluded that the main challenges were those of the difficulties of adjustment, of finding a coherent course as change works through the economy and society. One response to policy complexity and associated pressures may be increased ‘short-termism’. Certainly policy coherence becomes a problem as policies and interrelationships become more complex, and as the electorate fractures along multiple fault-lines. Finding the institutional and political capacity to take a longer view becomes the most difficult challenge for Australian governance (Davies 2000:242).

In an era in which policy-making was increasingly being framed by the metaphor of steering, a key question which academics and practitioners focused on was: how could policy-making be redesigned so as to enhance its strategic role in (and over) a complex and diverse range of actors, levels, institutions, relationships, networks and organisational forms? If government was to steer, it had to be able to map and utilise and manage policy-relevant knowledge. The management of knowledge and organisational learning, rather than just discreetly focused data on society or the economy, thus became critical to the ability of policy-makers to improve their capacity to make and implement policy. Managing what might be termed the epistemological economy — the relationship between the supply and demand for policy-relevant knowledge — became increasingly more important to the task of building policy capacity and ensuring that there was consistency or ‘coherence’ between different policies (Di Francesco 2001).

Among the many national and international organisations concerned with the issue of building up governance capacity was the Club of Rome. This was an organisation which had come to prominence in the 1970s with the publication of The Limits to Growth (published in 1972). At the close of the 20th century, the club became anxious about the limits of government and in particular the ‘inability of government to take a long-term view’, and the apparent impotence...
of governments throughout the world to deal with what the club terms the ‘world problematique’, namely the hypothesis that the ‘crucial problem’ confronting governments and NGOs was the sheer ‘interdependence’ and ‘complexity’ of the problems facing humanity (Club of Rome 2003). One of the old ‘war horses’ of public administration, Yehezkel Dror, was commissioned to write a report on the problematique facing a globalised world (Podger 2002). His brief was to analyse the root causes of the ‘problem of governance’ and suggest ways in which it might be improved. The result, published in English as The Capacity to Govern, well reflects the widespread fear that the redesign of governance was necessary because of the increasingly complex nature of the world and its various problems combined with the sheer rate of change, instability, uncertainty and flux. If governments and international organisations are to deal with ‘constraints on predictability, the ubiquity of uncertainty and the growing domains of inconceivability’, he argued, they have to upgrade their capacity to steer, guide, and ‘weave’ the future. The challenge facing policy-makers in the 21st century was not, as in the past, the crisis of ‘ungovernability’ (Parsons 1982) so much as a dangerous ‘incapacity to govern’ in the face of new realities such as: rapid non-linear change; increasing uncertainty and inconceivability; globalisation; and multiplying complexity (Dror 2001:39). Complexity, in particular, requires that: ‘Governance must upgrade its capacities to understand, map, analyse and cope with complexity’ (Dror 2001:43). Governance redesigning for Dror is, therefore, about upgrading the capacity of government to govern so as to influence or weave the future for the better. This means that redesigning has to focus on ‘the higher-order tasks’ of governance as opposed to the ‘ordinary’ tasks which were the focus of ‘reinventing government’ and NPM. The key features of his model of ‘high-quality governance’ include capacities such as: a willingness to ‘weave the future’; a commitment to the long term; ability to cope with turbulent environments; knowledge-intensive policy making; and the capacity to learn, think
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Dror’s aim is primarily to enhance the capacity of policy-making elites to make best use of knowledge and to improve their ability to learn. This requires a high quality of policy-maker and a more ‘professional’ approach to long-range strategic decision-making. In turn this means that redesign should serve to promote ‘deep policy reflection’, improving the ‘central minds of government’ and ‘augmenting’ the capacity for ‘oversight’. For Dror, governance is holistically and engage in ‘deep thinking’. governance is about the capacity to map the complex shifting realities confronted by policy-makers and impose an ‘architecture’ (Dror 2001:169) on a reality which is perceived to be essentially messy and chaotic (and increasingly so) and is thus in need of being steered in the right direction and designed. Knowledge is the instrument of securing a new kind of order over a world which threatens to overwhelm traditional forms of policy-making. The more interconnected and interwoven become policy problems, the more policy-making must be about interweaving knowledge and modes of policy-making. In the language of the British approach: if it is to deliver, policy-making has to become wired up and joined up.

Capacity and coherence: The experience of the UK

The UK (along with Canada and New Zealand) was to be very much in the forefront of redesigning, modernising or ‘professionalising’ policy-making in response to the new realities of governance (Curtain 2000). On coming to power one of the Blair government’s first initiatives was to set up the Social Exclusion Unit (in 1997) to facilitate a more joined up approach to a range of cross-cutting interconnected policy issues. ‘Joined upness’ was to become the main leitmotiv of New Labour’s approach to modernising government (SEU 1998). The following year the Performance and Innovation Unit and the Centre for Management and Policy Studies were created to take forward the agenda of making government more joined up and evidence based. In 1999 the government published its White Paper Modernising Government (1999a). This was followed by a report by Cabinet Office team, Professional Policy-making in the 21st Century — also known as the French report (Cabinet Office 1999b). This document put forward a model of what professional policy-making ought to look like in a policy process focused on outcomes and results. Blairite modernisation has focused on the need for policy-making to be informed by ‘evidence’ and ‘learning’ in order to make ‘better’ policy in the face of uncertainty, change and complexity. New Labour’s approach to redesign begins with a definition of ‘problem-atiq’ which is on similar lines to that set out by the Club of Rome. The ‘professionalisation’ of the policy-making process is necessary because, the French report argues: ‘The world for which policy makers have to develop policies is becoming increasingly complex, uncertain and unpredictable’ (Cabinet Office 1999b:2.3). Policy-making gets ‘better’ the more it approximates to a strategic model designed to facilitate a ‘professional’ approach in conditions of complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability. Policy failure is rooted, according to this model, in the poor design of policy processes (Cabinet Office 1999a: 2.1). If policy-making is to ‘deliver’ then government has to be: driven by evidence; orientated towards ‘learning’; ‘joined’ and ‘wired’ up. The ‘professional’ model of policy-making is characterised by ‘a culture of continuous learning and knowledge sharing’. Better policy-making is better managed policy-making: that is, it involves developing systems through which knowledge production and utilisation and policy learning can be managed (Cabinet Office 1999b:10.1). ‘What works’ is the ‘principle mechanism for learning purposes’, and hence the task is to design institutions and processes which can effectively manage knowledge of what works and facilitate the dissemination of this knowledge and thereby promote learning. Knowledge management is aimed at improving the strategic steering capacity of government to secure policy delivery and specified outcomes. These objectives can be realised through instituting systems for best practice learning, developing ‘knowledge pools’ and ‘hubs’ to promoting ‘evidence-based policy’ (EBP).

The EBP strategy is designed to facilitate the weaving of knowledge and knowledge networks into a more integrated and connected whole. The professional model which informs the Blair government’s approach is about developing key features and competencies
which if followed will (it is claimed) improve policy-making and delivery. Naturally, if government is to steer, it must have a clear destination: it must ensure that policy-making is informed by specified targets, objectives and outcomes. Defining outcomes is essentially plotting where policy is meant to go. There is little point of being able to steer if government cannot navigate. This means that policy making has to be coherent, holistic, future orientated and outward looking. It also means that the process of mapping has to be based on good evidence and informed by a process of continuous learning. Knowledge- and learning-based policy-making, however, is not just about mapping. The great task is to reweave the fabric of governance itself so that knowledge evidence is inextricably interwoven into the policy-making process. The UK professional approach views the problem of policy-making, therefore, as essentially to do with increasing steering, mapping and weaving capacities of the ‘central minds of government’ (Dror 2000:158).

Minding what and whose gap?

Capacity builders argue that policy-makers face a strange new fragmented world subject to dangerous centrifugal forces. Anthony Giddens, the chief academic apologist for New Labour’s ‘third way’, captured this anxiety in his 1999 Reith lectures: it was, he opined, a ‘runaway’ world in which institutions are losing their capacity to influence events and are ‘inadequate to the tasks they are called upon to perform’. We face a global order which is ‘anarchic’ and ‘haphazard’ and is in need of ‘control’ (Giddens 1999). In this new runaway world the role of government appears to be to act as the strategic deep thinker, the map maker, the great weaver; that which joins up and acts as a centripetal force to counteract a growing centrifugalism and incoherence. Capacity designers argue that it is the command over instrumental knowledge and rationality which is critical to securing control over a runaway world and to the prospect of better (more professional) policy-making (Sanderson 2002; Marston and Watts 2003). In order to ensure that government can deliver specified objectives or ends, policy-makers have to become more systematic about the acquisition and utilisation of policy-relevant knowledge. In this respect the policy capacity project is a particular manifestation of what Deborah Stone termed the ‘rationality project’ (Stone 1988). Improving policy-making is about redesigning the policy process so that it can approximate more closely a sequence of clearly defined rational steps. The capacity-building project like the wider rationality project assumes that it is the information or knowledge gap — the gap between policy-making and policy-relevant knowledge — which is fundamental to the possibilities of better decision-making, implementation and evaluation. The gubernatorial crafts — steering, mapping and weaving — require a capacity to manage the epistemological economy of modern governance. This desire to manage knowledge carries with it the risk of the ‘control freakery’ (closely associated with the Blair government) and a preoccupation with central control which gives rise to a loss in the very flexibility and adaptability which is so necessary for effective and innovative policy-making (OECD 1996). Indeed, it could be argued that the focus on building the capacity for instrumental rationality — so as to secure specified outcomes and targets — risks actually reducing the capacity for flexibility, innovation and adaptability which is vital for policy-making in a runaway and uncertain world.

Even if we grant that the real world of policy-making has been transformed as is claimed by Dror or in the French report in the UK, it does not follow that the solution to the governance problematique is to redesign policy processes so as to facilitate the kind of instrumental model of rational policy-making advanced by advocates of capacity building. Indeed, it could be argued that policy-making in conditions of uncertainty and complexity call for the abandonment or leastways a radical revision of the instrumentalist approach. As Maarten Hajer and Hendrick Wagenaar point out:

There is a widespread appreciation that governments cannot legitimately keep up the idea that decisions can only be made once appropriate knowledge is available. Quite the contrary, the new condition is one in which politics has to be made under conditions of ‘radical uncertainty’ while social protest cannot be controlled with a tradi-
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In which case, the knowledge gap which needs to be addressed may not (in Aristotelian terms) be about *episteme* (scientific knowledge) and *teche* (practical instrumental knowledge), so much as *phronesis* (knowledge derived from practice and deliberation) and *metis* (knowledge based on experience) (Flyvberg 2001; Scott 1998). Of course, this would mean in turn recognising that policy-making is more about conflicts of value and meaning and building trust than 'solving problems' and building policy capacity (Hajer and Wagnenaar 2003b:14). It is these conflicts over values and meaning and forms of knowledge which give rise to the complex paradoxes facing policymakers. This shift from instrumentalist ways of thinking towards post- or non-instrumentalist approaches to design involves understanding forms of knowing and modes of knowledge which are more tacit, emergent and embedded in specific contexts, practices and local experience.

Given the position of knowledge and learning the discourse of capacity and coherence building, it is appropriate that we should first turn to the work of someone who made a major contribution to thinking about these very issues: Donald Schön. It is interesting to compare the argument of Schön’s Reith lectures (given in 1970) with Giddens’s lectures given at the close of the 20th century. Both are concerned about change and the ability of institutions to deal with growing instability and uncertainty — issues which, according to the governance narrative(s), are defining characteristics of the transition from government to governance — but they come up with very different answers. Giddens sees the problem as how to achieve ‘greater control over a runaway world’, whereas Schön believed that the ‘unstable’ state was less about imposing control than facilitating a process of public learning. Giddens’s lectures see the problem of the runaway world as to do with the control or ‘transformative capacities’ of institutions (very New Labour), whereas Schön’s lectures argued that the ‘unstable state’ involved facilitating ‘self-transformation’ (very non-New Labour).

It is significant that those who argue the case for capacity building are so dismissive of Schön’s approach to thinking about public and private learning in a changing society (Parsons 2002). Geoff Mulgan, for example, argues that:

The new environment in which governments operate in a far more knowledge rich context, and serves a far more informed public is unlikely to be reversed. Donald Schön’s account a generation ago in which evidence existed only in fields that didn’t matter much to the public is no longer relevant. There is plenty of knowledge and evidence in fields as vital as unemployment, crime, health and migration, and fierce debate both inside and outside government about its uses and meanings. None of this makes the job of using knowledge straightforward. There are inherent complexities at work which derive both from the nature of government and from the nature of social knowledge – particularly its contingency and reflexivity (Mulgan 2003).

Despite the ‘complexities at work’ Mulgan believes strategic ways of organising and managing knowledge and learning are vital to the possibility of better policy-making. However, his argument that because we (apparently) have the kind of knowledge which did not exist in the 1970s means that Schön’s account is now ‘irrelevant’ fails to grasp the central thesis of Beyond the Stable State — and indeed his subsequent work. For the sake of argument, we might agree with the extravagant assertion that we do indeed have an abundance of policy knowledge, but the kind of argument advanced by Mulgan still misses the point at the heart of Schön’s critique of rational policy-making and of the post-positivist school of policy analysis which was to emerge in subsequent decades. The challenge Schön identified in the 1970s was to redesign government so that it was better at learning in the face of rapid and complex social, economic, technological and other forms of change. That is to say, more evidence about health or crime and better use of this knowledge was not the
issue for Schön: there was not an ‘information gap’ so much as a learning gap. Public policy-making is about problems which are ill-defined, messy and the outcome of a process of construction and framing. It is an activity in which instrumental rationality and expert evidence are profoundly limited.

When ends are fixed and clear, then the decision to act can present itself as an instrumental problem. But when ends are confused and conflicting, there is as yet no ‘problem’ to solve’…We can readily understand, therefore, not only why uncertainty, uniqueness, instability, and value conflict are so troublesome to the Positivist epistemology of practice (Schön 1983:41–2).

The instrumentalist approach may well be of use to the ‘high, hard ground’ of policy-making, but it is highly inappropriate in ‘the swampy lowland where situations are confusing “messes” incapable of technical solutions’ (Schön 1983:42). Mulgan’s belief in managing ‘plenty of knowledge and evidence’ may well work in a world where policy-makers confront clear and well-defined problems, but in the swampy real world policy-makers have to deal with messy ‘paradoxes’ which are not amenable to ‘solutions’ and the exercise of instrumental rationality, however refined (Stone 1988). And although more evidence or data may help our feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, and give us a sense of stability and control, closing the information gap will do little of itself to enable us to learn, adapt and innovate in a world in flux. The challenge is to design systems with a capacity to learn, that is, be able ‘to bring about their own continuous transformation’ (Schön 1973:23). Even if we concede the hypothesis that we have a greater ability to acquire data in the 21st century than in the 1970s, there still remains the big question of what such data means, how it is used, by whom, when and how. Schön maintained, however, that designing policy-making around rational/scientific knowledge would be inadequate to the task of improving public and private learning in situations of ‘uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict’ (Schön 1983:49).

At the organisational and governmental level this would, he maintained, require a move from centre–periphery modes of learning — that dominate centrist capacity-building design strategies — towards greater reliance on periphery–periphery, or periphery–centre modes and less conformity to policy formulated centrally. Fostering public learning, he insisted: cannot take the form of pre-defining policy and causing it to fan out from the centre. Central may provide first instances or policy themes which are take-off points for chains of transformation in localities. It may help local agencies learn from one another’s experience. It may even lend its weight to shifts in power structure which seem likely to lead to social discovery at the lower level. Also, the transformations of local systems influence one another and may be supported in doing so. Moreover the gradual transformation of the system as a whole influences the context in which each local system experiences its own transformation. The broad process can ‘go critical’ as ideas underlying the family of transformations come into good currency and as the number of learners and extenders multiply. A system capable of behaving in this manner is a learning system. Within it central’s role is that of initiator, facilitator and goad to local learning. Such a process comes inevitably into conflict with demands for stable adherence to specific policies, and for demands for uniformity in the application of policies (Schön 1973:151).

If government is to be effective in a unstable and changing world, it had to focus on promoting a wider process of innovative and adaptable learning organisations rather than building ‘knowledge silos’ (Rooney et al. 2003:xxi). The centre was not to aspire to be the great helmsman, map maker and weaver for the system as whole.

For government to be a learning system, both the social system of agencies and the theory of policy implementation must change. Government cannot play the role of ‘experimenter’ for the nation’…The opportunity for learning is primarily in discovered systems at the periphery, not in the nexus of official policies at the centre…Central comes to function as facilitator of society’s learning (Schön 1973:165–6).
Indeed, if we wish to see a policy-making process which fosters innovation, creativity, ingenuity, diversity and the capacity for self-transformation, then we should shout ‘three cheers for incoherence’ (see, for example, Rooney et al., 2003:94). The danger is, as Schön concluded in Beyond the Stable State, that the continued adherence to the instrumental rationality model of public learning carries with it the risk of ‘putting all our eggs in one basket’. What happens when the basket proves not to be up to the task? ‘If scientific knowledge is the only valid kind and we turn out to be unable to achieve it in public matters, where are we?’ (Schön 1973:214). Schön’s analysis suggests that building policy capacity in the rationalist model is predicated on an erroneous conceptualisation of the problems facing an unstable and uncertain world. Knowledge and learning in complex societies involve such issues as facilitating reflection and knowledge-in-action rather than instrumental rationality; local adaptation; periphery to periphery learning; network modes of knowledge growth and diffusion; the recognition that problems are in a constant state of flux; and being attuned to the less ‘visible’ forms of knowledge. Knowledge and knowing for Schön are embedded in values and competing ‘fames’ (Schön and Rein 1994). Innovative and creative policy-making, contrary to the UK’s professional model, implies that we recognise policy-making is not ‘a process of problem solving governed by criteria of technical-rational analysis’ (Schön and Rein 1994:vii). It requires different kinds of weaving and mapping. Messy, complex, intractable policy issues involves: ‘the intertwining of thought and action’, a ‘dialectic within which policy makers function as designers and exhibit at their best, a particular kind of reflective practice, [or] ...design rationality’ (Schön and Rein 1994:xi). This emphasis on practice is central to the approach taken to the challenges of governance by deliberative designers following the lead given by Schön (Wagenaar and Cook 2003). Schön’s arguments about the need to shift from policy-making based on rational instrumental or technical knowledge to knowledge-in-action also suggest that what needs to be mapped are values, meanings and contexts rather than the kind of knowledge intended to enhance the capacity of the ‘central minds’ of government to steer and weave the future. Mapping local knowledge and how problems and policies mean rather than simply ‘what works’ thus becomes a vitally important aspect of redesigning the policy process (Yanow 1996:2003). The Pathways Mapping Initiative (PMI) in America, for example, is a prototype of an attempt to find new ways of weaving together local knowledge, wisdom and practice with broader empirical research evidence. As Lisbeth Schorr explains:

The PMI approach to assembling and distilling knowledge does not limit its explorations to identifying individual programs whose success has been proven; it casts a wider net to assemble evidence on ‘what works’. In our efforts to expand the search for — and inform the design of — social policies, programs, and strategies that will lead to improvements in specified outcomes, we have relied primarily on a consensus process that we call ‘mental mapping’. We convene groups of highly knowledgeable, experienced individuals, including researchers and practitioners, who are steeped in their respective fields but diverse in their perspectives and beliefs. We ask them to draw on their accumulated wisdom to make explicit their ‘mental maps’ of what works to reach the outcome under consideration (Schorr 2003).

These kinds of initiative in mapping and weaving knowledge of both a practical and local kind, together with empirical evidence of ‘what works’, illustrates one possible way of building a social learning process which is, as Schön argued, facilitated by the centre, but not dominated or controlled by it.

Schön’s ideas about the unstable state and the limits of instrumental rationality find echoes and resonances in more recent non-instrumentalist approaches to institutional design based on complexity and self-organisation (Lichtenstein 2000). Capacity builders make much of the notion that the world faced by policy-makers is highly complex, ‘non-linear’ and unpredictable. Writers such as Dror and Mulgan, for instance, reference ‘complexity’ and the ‘complexity sciences’, but deduce from these ideas the conclusion that greater complexity calls for increased capacity to map, steer and weave. Dror, for example, ‘acknowledges’ the need to ‘cope with complexity’ and that ‘governance tends to be very poor at coping...
with growing complexities, because of the cognitive limitations of the human mind', but that 'progress is possible, thanks to available and emerging knowledge including some beginnings of a science of complexity' (Dror 2001:148). Dror actually sidesteps the question of how deep 'complex policy reflection' and enhancing governance capacity actually enables 'high-order' policy-makers to 'cope' with complexity, non-linearity, uncertainty and unpredictability. Indeed, one could argue that complexity suggests that far from focusing on 'high-level' strategic 'weaving', policy-makers should be primarily concerned with more 'low-level' forms of emergence and how to connect or weave the two together.

Mulgan is also quite keen to embrace complexity theory, but far from deducing from these ideas a sense of the dangers of weaving the future, concludes that complexity actually shows the need for strategic-level thinking (Mulgan 1997). A complex unpredictable world calls for a strategic hand to guide it. In this respect, governance-based designing is far more about what Postrell terms 'stasis' as opposed to 'dynamism' (Postrell1999). That is to say, capacity design tends to view knowledge as 'manageable', and facilitating control. Learning is what happens in strategic policy units and knowledge 'pools'. Complexity-based designing is, on the other hand, about recognising the profound limits of instrumental knowledge, and the importance of understanding the tacit, fragmented, decentralised and dispersed nature of knowledge. In other words, the ontological implications of complexity, uncertainty and flux point towards diversity, decentralisation and dynamism, rather than an epistemology which is about command and control (Jessop 1997). It also suggests that redesigning policy-making in conditions of network modes of governance ought to place less emphasis on strategic steering and address the challenge of promoting collaborative policy-making and 'authentic dialogue' (Innes and Booher 2003). This means that good policy-making in complex social, economic and political systems is about letting go, fostering innovation, creativity and diversity rather than just improving steering and weaving capacity (Chapman 2002; Bentley 2002). As Rooney et al. show, the implications of complex systems for the design of policy processes which are capable of generating innovation and adaptation point towards less emphasis on building steering capacity than on the importance of recognising that:

The fundamental role for policymakers is to shape and create contexts in which appropriate forms of self-referencing, self-organisation, and self-transformation occur so that desirable patterns that are broadly compatible with the character of organisational patterning of the system can emerge (Rooney et al. 2003: 73).

The use of complexity to justify strategic mapping and weaving as opposed to the kind of models which emphasise self-transformation and self-organisation well illustrates the ambivalent attitude of capacity builders towards the relationship between central minds and localised knowledge. It is an ambivalence which is also manifested in the way in which building policy capacity and coherence see citizen participation. Dror argues, for example, that designing to enhance governance capacity involves 'empowering the people with public affairs enlightenment'. But he notes, however, that 'even in the most educated societies [people] are ill equipped to exercise power over complex political issues' (Dror 2001:105). Nonetheless Dror believes that if democratic societies are to enhance their capacity to 'weave the future', the upgrading of the public’s understanding of complex public affairs ‘is absolutely essential’. Although this is fine in theory, Dror believes that in practice more direct and deliberative modes of democracy have to wait 'for order-of-magnitude increases in public affairs enlightenment', and even then the 'scope for direct democracy is quite limited for the foreseeable future' (Dror 2001:111). His own preference is therefore to ‘constrain’ the power of the people while at the same time maximising efforts to ‘upgrade’ their public affairs enlightenment. Complexity, he reasons, is best addressed in the ‘refashioning of governance elites’. Although capacity designers acknowledge the role of the ‘dialogical’ or deliberative approaches to institutional design, it primarily focuses on the task of ‘decisional’ engineering (Dryzek 1996:107). This means that it recognises that democratic renewal is important, but it is not clear about how the kinds of knowledge which emerges from deliberative processes relates to the instrumentalist orientation of
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governance designing. Upgrading the steering capacities of policy elites and upgrading the deliberative capacities of citizens are manifestly highly problematic, if not incommensurate — as advocates of deliberative policy analysis would contend (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). Schön, for example, argues that the change in epistemological orientation implies a change in power relationships. ‘Debunking’ policymaking as a rational enterprise suggests the need to empower the relatively powerless (Schön 1983:341) rather than just improving the central minds of government. Knowledge and rationality is indeed power (Flyvberg 1998): a more deliberative, more participative mode of policy design would inevitably mean greater diversity and less uniformity and coherence. It is not apparent how the policy capacity paradigm would reconcile (in theory or practice) strategic steering and control with the kind of diversity welcomed by non-instrumentalist approaches to knowledge and learning. Indeed, the danger with enhancing the instrumental rationality of policy elites/wonks and networks is, as Bakvis has noted in respect of the Canadian experience, that it tends to exclude rather than include the participation of parliamentarians and other political actors (Bakvis 2000).

New Labour's modernisation project, for example, has found the task of joining up strategic policy-making and democracy as problematic in practice as it is in Dror's theoretical framework. Devolution (to Scotland and Wales) has proved the exception rather than the rule in the Blair government’s approach to ‘better policy-making’. For the most part, the government has sought to ensure that policy is delivered, and stakeholders are brought on board, rather than promoting a broader civic engagement in framing problems and solutions. The experience of building policy capacity and coherence in the UK has been to foster centralisation and uniformity rather than diversity and localism: New Labour’s ‘control freakery’ and the nanny state (Jones 2002) rather than the empowerment of citizens and decentralisation. The culture of target setting, for example, may actually serve to incapacitate the ‘delivery’ capacities of organisations rather than facilitate the kind of innovation necessary to solve problems in a complex and changing world (Leadbeater 2002). Critics of the control freakery which has accompanied the enhanced steering capacity of central government under New Labour argue that British policy-making has to be prepared to embrace a 'new localism' (Corry and Stoker 2003). Although what 'new localism' actually means in practice appears to be less about 'letting go' than granting parole: that is, allowing greater freedom to institutions which have demonstrated that they can be trusted to deliver policy as specified. The men from Whitehall still know best: ‘professional policy-making’ takes place in one of the most centralised democratic political systems (Travers 2001). Given the centralised nature of British policy-making there is an inevitable tension between weaving coherent strategic policy-making and equity and allowing or fostering diversity (Walker 2002). Furthermore, as Wanna and Keating have noted in the context of Australia — a political system far more decentralised than the UK — policy capacity qua policy coherence usually goes hand-in-hand with uniformity and standardisation (Wanna and Keating 2000:241). But, as Schön argued, in conditions of complexity and flux, command and control/centre–periphery designs are hardly conducive to effective public learning or promoting organisations capable of their own self-transformation. Hence, as Wanna and Keating note:

Governments are now having difficulty handling complexity when they cannot resort to uniformity. Today, even where governments have clear policy goals in mind, they are nevertheless finding that they have to proceed through non-command ways and even have to progress through indirect means. The risk of policy incoherence tends to rise as government intrudes into ever more detail that inevitably increases the complexity. An alternative would be for national governments to set the policy framework with a focus on the key interrelationships affecting different interests. If others were then allowed to make the detailed decisions within this policy framework, consistent with how best to meet their individual needs, there would be less overall risk of inconsistent and contradictory decisions (Wanna and Keating 2000:241).

The move away from a one size fits all approach to public policy does, however, presuppose a change in epistemological regime of the kind
suggested by Schön in the 1970s and by more recent scholars of complexity and deliberative modes of policy analysis and policy-making.

**Of eggs and baskets**

The case for building capacity and coherence in the policy-making process derived from the argument that so-called NPM had ‘hollowed out’ and reduced the policy-making/steering capacity of government. In the UK and elsewhere governments have sought to arrest the erosion of the state and enhance its ability to ‘weave the future’: that is, to reassert the primacy of political control over the forces driving and shaping governance. If the state is to ‘build’ a new capacity to control and weave a coherent fabric out of an incoherent world, then the policy-making process has to be a lot smarter. Government has to become more ‘creative’, and more in the know. As is clear from the British case, ‘professional policy-making’ is seen as a way of remediying some of the deficiencies of the public sector reforms in the 1980s in which ‘little attention was paid to the policy process and the way it affects government’s ability to meet the needs of the people’ (Cabinet Office 1999a:para 2.4).

From the standpoint of Schön’s original model or the sciences of complexity or deliberative designing, it could be argued that, far from remediying the deficiencies of managerialism, capacity- and coherence-building governance strategies have simply served to reinforce the hegemony of centralist and managerialist approaches. The UK, for instance, has not been a political system which has witnessed more diversity and periphery–periphery or periphery–centre learning (since 1997) but significantly less. Policy is highly prescribed from the centre, and positively discourages rather than promotes innovation and local creativity (Corry and Stoker 2002; Walker 2002). Schön argued that the unstable state had to be capable of innovation and adaptation. This means that epistemological regimes had to be more open to the possibilities of non-instrumentalist modes of knowledge and less reliant on central steering if, in the words of the OECD, ‘a culture of flexibility and adjustment, a culture of innovation’ (cited in Dror 2001:68) was to flourish. The instrumentalist orientation of the capacity-building approach, however, seems to point in the opposite direction. Innovation appears to be the task of (Dror’s) ‘high-order’, ‘high-quality’, ‘deep-thinking’, ‘future-weaving’ holistic policy-making. This is where thinking outside the capacity-building box is so important. Harold Lasswell argued that students of public policy should be always alive to emerging ‘prototypes’ (Parsons 1995), and experiments such as the PMI in the USA (PMI 2003) and Consensus Conference held in Australia to discuss gene technology in 1999 (Mohr 2003) illustrate the possibilities of ‘joining up the dots’ between local knowledge and research (Schorr 2003) and building new kinds of knowledge networks which are less instrumental and more participative, deliberative, and bottom up. Deliberative approaches to policy analysis have — in the spirit of Lasswell — been far more active in exploring such new prototypes of non-instrumentalist modes of policy-making than have the positivist mainstream, which has tended to predominate in government as in academia (see Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

In his book *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott is highly critical of policy-making driven by instrumental rationality. All too often, he contends, policy disasters have been the result of an overblown and uncritical faith in scientific and technocratic approaches to knowledge (episteme and techne) combined with a wilful disregard for other more tacit forms of knowing. It is, as Schön argued, really a case of putting all the eggs in one basket. When instrumental rationality fails, what then? The hegemonic position of instrumental rationality in policy-making, Scott argues, leads to the neglect of practical and local knowledge, informal processes and the role of improvisation in an uncertain, complex and unpredictable world. Scott contrasts knowledge which is localised and embedded in experience — *or metis* — with the instrumental kind which predominates in policy-making as a rational or ‘high modernist’ project. It is *metis* which is appropriate for those problems which are complex, uncertain and ‘foggy’ (Baumard 1999) — in other words the very conditions which constitute the problem-atique of the governance approach. Policy failures oftentimes are due to the fact that *metis* has been designed out of institutions and processes — rather than being designed in. This
means that a core task for capacity designers is to design 'metis-friendly institutions'. That is: ‘institutions that are multi-functional, plastic, diverse, and adaptable’ (Scott 1998:353). In other words, it may be that the real governance problematic is how to promote the development of political, social and economic systems which are capable of learning, adapting and engaging in ‘self-transformation’ and which allow ‘micro diversity to flourish’ and ‘privilege innovation and flexibility’ (Rooney et al. 2003:136), rather than how to strengthen the mapping and weaving capacities of the ‘central minds’ at the helm of government.

Capacity and coherence approaches combine a highly critical perspective on the impact of bureaucratic hierarchies on the possibilities of more joined up (coherent) policy-making (Kettl 2000, 2002) with a curious belief in epistemological hierarchies. Instrumental (top-down) knowledge — knowledge which helps government to map, weave, steer, command and control — is given a pre-eminent and privileged position in the policy process whereas (bottom-up) metis, practice and local knowledge and experience is disadvantaged. And yet the more we enter into the fog of the real world of policy-making and seek to innovate, the more we rely on metis: imagination, intuition and experience rather than the great ‘tool’ of coherence building, information (OECD 1996). Indeed, as Mr Blair noted in an interview to mark his birthday, experience had apparently taught him to value ‘judgment over intellect’ (White 2003). Students of public administration might observe, of course, that it was Sir Geoffrey Vickers who argued a long time ago that (in his words) the ‘warp and weft’ of coherent administration might observe, of course, that it ‘intellect’ (White 2003). Students of public administration might observe, of course, that it ‘intellect’ (White 2003). Students of public administration might observe, of course, that it

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