

M/C Journal, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2010) - 'cohesion'**Failed Fantasies of Cohesion: Retrieving Positives from the Stalled Dream of Whole-of-Government Cultural Policy**

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Stuart Glover

In mid-2001, in a cultural policy discussion at Arts Queensland, an Australian state government arts policy and funding apparatus, a senior arts bureaucrat seeking to draw a funding client's gaze back to the bigger picture of what the state government was trying to achieve through its cultural policy settings excused his own abstracting comments with the phrase, "but then I might just be a policy 'wank'". There was some awkward laughter before one of his colleagues asked, "did you mean a policy 'wonk'"? The incident was a misstatement of a term adopted in the 1990s to characterise the policy workers in the Clinton Whitehouse (Cunningham). This was not its exclusive use, but many saw Clinton as an exemplary wonk: less a pragmatic politician than one entertained by the elaboration of policy. The policy work of Clinton's kitchen cabinet was, in part, driven by a pervasive rationalist belief in the usefulness of ordered policy processes as a method of producing social and economic outcomes, and, in part, by the seductions of policy-play: its ambivalences, its conundrums, and, in some sense, its aesthetics (Klein 193-94). There, far from being characterised as unproductive "self-abuse" of the body-politic, policy processes were alive as a pragmatic technology, an operationalisation of ideology, as an aestheticised field of play, but more than anything as a central rationalist tenant of government action.

This final idea—the possibilities of policy for effecting change, promoting development, meeting government objectives—is at the centre of the bureaucratic imagination. Policy is effective. And a concomitant belief is that ordered or organised policy processes result in the best policy and the best outcomes. Starting with Harold Lasswell, policy theorists extended the general rationalist suppositions of Western representative democracies into executive government by arguing for the value of information/knowledge and the usefulness of ordered process in addressing thus identified policy problems. In the post-war period particularly, a case can be made for the usefulness of policy processes to government—although, in a paradox, these rationalist conceptions of the policy process were strangely irrational, even Utopian, in their view of transformational capacities possibilities of policy. The early policy scientists often moved beyond a view of policy science as a useful tool, to the advocacy of policy science and the policy scientist as panaceas for public ills (Parsons 18-19).

The Utopian ambitions of policy science finds one of their extremes in the contemporary interest in whole-of-government approaches to policy making.

Whole-of-governmentalism, concern with co-ordination of policy and delivery across all areas of the state, can be seen as produced out of Western governments' paradoxical concern with (on one hand) order, totality, and consistency, and (on the other) deconstructing existing mechanisms of public administration. Whole-of-governmentalism requires a horizontal purview of government goals, programs, outputs, processes, politics, and outcomes, alongside—and perhaps in tension with—the long-standing vertical purview that is fundamental to ministerial responsibility. This often presents a set of public management problems largely internal to government. Policy discussion and decision-making, while affecting community outcomes and stakeholder utility, are, in this circumstance, largely inter-agency in focus. Any eventual policy document may well have bureaucrats rather than citizens as its target readers—or at least as its closest readers. Internally, cohesion of objective, discourse, tool and delivery are pursued as a prime interests of policy making.

Failing at Policy

So what happens when whole-of-government policy processes, particularly cultural policy processes, break down or fail? Is there anything productive to be retrieved from a failed fantasy of policy cohesion? This paper examines the utility of a failure to cohere and order in cultural policy processes. I argue that the conditions of contemporary cultural policy-making, particularly the tension between the “boutique” scale of cultural policy-making bodies and the revised, near universal, remit of cultural policy, require policy work to be undertaken in an environment and in such a way that failure is almost inevitable. Coherence and cohesions are fundamental principles of whole-of-government policy but cultural policy ambitions are necessarily too comprehensive to be achievable. This is especially so for the small arts or cultural offices government that normally act as lead agencies for cultural policy development within government. Yet, that these failed processes can still give rise to positive outcomes or positive intermediate outputs that can be taken up in a productive way in the ongoing cycle of policy work that categorises contemporary cultural governance.

Herein, I detail the development of *Building the Future*, a cultural policy planning paper (and the name of a policy planning process) undertaken within Arts Queensland in 1999 and 2000. (While this process is now ten years in the past, it is only with a decade past that as a consultant I am in apposition to write about the material.) The abandonment of this process before the production of a public policy program allows something to be said about the utility and role of failure in cultural policy-making. The working draft of *Building the Future* never became a public document, but the eight months of its development helped produce a series of shifts in the discourse of Queensland Government cultural policy: from “arts” to “creative industries”; and from arts bureaucracy-centred cultural policy to the whole-of-government policy frameworks. These concepts were then taken up and elaborated in the *Creative Queensland* policy statement published by Arts Queensland in October 2002, particularly the concern with creative industries; whole-of-government cultural policy; and the repositioning of Arts Queensland as a service agency to other potential cultural funding-bodies within government. Despite the failure of the *Building the Future* process, it had a role in the production of the policy document and policy processes that superseded it.

This critique of cultural policy-making rather than cultural policy texts, announcements and settings is offered as part of a project to bring to cultural policy studies material and theoretical accounts of the particularities of making cultural policy. While directions in cultural policy have much to do with the overall directions of government—which might over the past decade be categorised as focus on de-regulation, out-sourcing of services—there are developments in cultural policy settings and in cultural policy processes that are particular to cultural policy and cultural policy-making.

Central to the development of cultural policy studies and to cultural policy is a transformational broadening of the operant definition of *culture* within government (O'Regan). Following Raymond Williams, the domain of culture is broadened to include the high culture, popular culture, folk culture and the culture of everyday life. Accordingly, in some sense, every issue of governance is deemed to have a cultural dimension—be it policy questions around urban space, tourism, community building and so on. Contemporary governments are required to act with a concern for cultural questions both within and across a number of long-persisting and otherwise discrete policy silos.

This has implications for cultural policy makers and for program delivery. The definition of culture as “everyday life”, while *truistically* defensible, becomes unwieldy as an imprimatur or a container for administrative activity. Transforming cultural policy into a domain incorporating most social policy and significant elements of economic policy makes the domain titanically large. Potentially, it compromises usual government efforts to order policy activity through the division or apportionment of responsibility (Glover

and Cunningham 19). The problem has given rise to a new mode of policy-making which attends to the co-ordination of policy across and between levels of government, known as whole-of government policy-making (see O'Regan).

Within the domain of cultural policy the task of whole-of-government cultural policy is complicated by the position of, and the limits upon, arts and cultural bureaux within state and federal governments. Dedicated cultural planning bureaux often operate as "boutique" agencies. They are usually discrete line agencies or line departments within government—only rarely are they part of the core policy function of departments of a Premier or a Prime Minister. Instead, like most line agencies, they lack the leverage within the bureaucracy or policy apparatus to deliver whole-of-government cultural policy change.

In some sense, failure is the inevitable outcome of all policy processes, particularly when held up against the mechanistic representation of policy processes in policy typical of policy handbooks (see Bridgman and Davis 42). Against such models, which describe policy a series of discrete linear steps, all policy efforts fail. The rationalist assumptions of early policy models—and the rigid templates for policy process that arise from their assumptions—in retrospect condemn every policy process to failure or at least profound shortcoming. This is particularly so with whole-of-government cultural policy making

To re-think this, it can be argued that the *error* then is not really in the failure of the process, which is invariably brought about by the difficulty for coherent policy process to survive exogenous complexity, but instead the error rests with the simplicity of policy models and assumptions about the possibility of cohesion. In some sense, mechanistic policy processes make failure endogenous. The contemporary experience of making policy has tended to erode any fantasies of order, clear process, or, even, clear-sightedness within government. Achieving a coherence to the policy message is nigh on impossible—likewise cohesion of the policy framework is unlikely.

Yet, importantly, failed policy is not without value. The *churn* of policy work—the exercise of attempting coherent policy-making—constitutes, in some sense, the deliberative function of government, and potentially operates as a force (and site) of change. Policy briefings, reports, and draft policies—the constitution of ideas in the policy process and the mechanism for their dissemination within the body of government and perhaps to other stakeholders—are discursive acts in the process of extending the discourse of government and forming its later actions.

For arts and cultural policy agencies in particular, who act without the leverage or resources of central agencies, the expansive ambitions of whole-of-government cultural policy makes failure inevitable. In such a circumstance, retrieving some benefits at the margins of policy processes, through the churn of policy work towards cohesion, is an important consolation.

Case study: Cultural Policy 2000

The policy process I wish to examine is now complete. It ran over the period 1999–2002, although I wish to concentrate on my involvement in the process in early 2000 during which, as a consultant to Arts Queensland, I generated a draft policy document, *Building the Future: A policy framework for the next five years (working draft)*. The imperative to develop a new state cultural policy followed the election of the first Beattie Labor government in July 1998. By 1999, senior Arts Queensland staff began to argue (within government at least) for the development of a new state cultural policy. The bureaucrats perceived policy development as one way of establishing "traction" in the process of bidding for new funds for the portfolio. Arts Minister Matt Foley was initially reluctant to "green-light" the policy process, but eventually in early 1999 he acceded to it on the advice of Arts Queensland, the industry, his own policy advisors and the Department of Premier. As stated above, this case study is offered now because the

passing of time makes the analysis of relatively sensitive material possible.

From the outset, an abbreviated timeframe for consultation and drafting seem to guarantee a difficult birth for the policy document. This was compounded by a failure to clarify the aims and process of the project. In presenting the draft policy to the advisory group, it became clear that there was no agreed strategic purpose to the document: Was it to be an advertisement, a framework for policy ideas, an audit, or a report on achievements? Tied to this, were questions about the audience for the policy statement. Was it aimed at the public, the arts industry, bureaucrats inside Arts Queensland, or, in keeping with the whole-of-government inflection to the document and its putative use in bidding for funds inside government, bureaucrats outside of Arts Queensland?

My own conception of the document was as a cultural policy framework for the whole-of-government for the coming five years. It would concentrate on cultural policy in three realms: Arts Queensland; the arts instrumentalities; and other departments (particularly the cultural initiatives undertaken by the Department of Premier and the Department of State Development). In order to do this I articulated (for myself) a series of goals for the document. It needed to provide the philosophical underpinnings for a new arts and cultural policy, discuss the cultural significance of "community" in the context of the arts, outline expansion plans for the arts infrastructure throughout Queensland, advance ideas for increased employment in the arts and cultural industries, explore the development of new audiences and markets, address contemporary issues of technology, globalisation and culture commodification, promote a whole-of-government approach to the arts and cultural industries, address social justice and equity concerns associated with cultural diversity, and present examples of current and new arts and cultural practices.

Five key strategies were identified: i) building strong communities and supporting diversity; ii) building the creative industries and the cultural economy; iii) developing audiences and telling Queensland's stories; iv) delivering to the world; and v) a new role for government. While the second aim of building the creative industries and the cultural economy was an addition to the existing Australian arts policy discourse, it is the articulation of a new role for government that is most radical here.

The document went to the length of explicitly suggesting a series of actions to enable Arts Queensland to re-position itself inside government:

- develop an ongoing policy cycle;
- position Arts Queensland as a lead agency for cultural policy development;
- establish a mechanism for joint policy planning across the arts portfolio;
- adopt a whole-of-government approach to policy-making and program delivery;
- use arts and cultural strategies to deliver on social and economic policy agendas; centralise some cultural policy functions and project;
- maintain and develop mechanisms and peer assessment;
- establish long-term strategic relationships with the Commonwealth and local government;
- investigate new vehicles for arts and cultural investment;
- investigate partnerships between industry, community and government; and
- develop appropriate performance measures for the cultural industries.

In short, the scope of the document was titanicallly large, and prohibitively expansive as a basis for policy change. A chief limitation of these aims is that they seem to place the cohesion and coherence of the policy discourse at the centre of the project—when it might have better privileged a concern with policy outputs and industry/community outcomes.

The subsequent dismal fortunes of the document are instructive. The policy document went through several drafts over the first half of 2000. By August 2000, I had removed

myself from the process and handed the drafting back to Arts Queensland which then produced shorter version less discursive than my initial draft. However, by November 2000, it is reasonable to say that the policy document was abandoned.

Significantly, after May 2000 the working drafts began to be used as internal discussion documents with government. Thus, despite the abandonment of the policy process, largely due to the unworkable breadth of its ambition, the document had a continued policy utility. The subsequent discussions helped organise future policy statements and structural adjustments by government. After the re-election of the Beattie government in January 2001, a more substantial policy process was commenced with the earlier policy documents as a starting point. By early 2002 the document was in substantial draft. The eventual policy, *Creative Queensland*, was released in October 2002. Significantly, this document sought to advance two ideas that I believe the earlier process did much to mobilise: a whole-of-government approach to culture; and a broader operant definition of culture. It is important not to see these as ideas merely existing “textually” in the earlier policy draft of *Building the Future*, but instead to see them as ideas that had begun adhere themselves to the cultural policy mechanism of government, and begun to be deployed in internal policy discussions and in program design, before finding an eventual home in a published policy text.

Analysis

The productive effects of the aborted policy process in which I participated are difficult to quantify. They are difficult, in fact, to separate out from governments’ ongoing processes of producing and circulating policy ideas. What is clear is that the effects of *Building the Future* were not entirely negated by it never becoming public. Instead, despite only circulating to a readership of bureaucrats it represented the ideas of part of the bureaucracy at a point in time. In this instance, a “failed” policy process, and its intermediate outcomes, the draft policy, through the churn of policy work, assisted government towards an eventual policy statement and a new form of governmental organisation.

This suggests that processes of cultural policy discussion, or policy churn, can be as productive as the public “enunciation” of formal policy in helping to organise ideas within government and determine programs and the allocation of resources. This is even so where the Utopian idealism of the policy process is abandoned for something more graspable or politic. For the small arts or cultural policy bureau this is an important incremental benefit.

Two final implications should be noted. The first is for models of policy process. Bridgman and Davis’s model of the Australian policy cycle, despite its mechanistic qualities, is ambiguous about where the policy process begins and ends. In one instance they represent it as linear but strictly circular, always coming back to its own starting point (27). Elsewhere, however, they represent it as linear, but not necessarily circular, passing through eight stages with a defined beginning and end: identification of issues; policy analysis; choosing policy instruments; consultation; co-ordination; decision; implementation; and evaluation (28–29). What is clear from the 1999–2002 policy process—if we take the full period between when Arts Queensland began to organise the development of a new arts policy and its publication as *Creative Queensland* in October 2002—is that the policy process was not a linear one progressing in an orderly fashion towards policy outcomes. Instead, *Building the Future*, is a snapshot in time (namely early to mid-2000) of a fragmenting policy process; it reveals policy-making as involving a concurrency of policy activity rather than a progression through linear steps.

Following Mark Considine’s conception of policy work as the state’s effort at “system-wide information exchange and policy transfer” (271), the document is concerned less in the ordering of resources than the organisation of policy discourse. The *churn* of policy is the mobilisation of information, or for Considine:

policy-making, when considered as an innovation system among linked or interdependent actors, becomes a learning and regulating web based upon continuous exchanges of information and skill. Learning occurs through regulated exchange, rather than through heroic insight or special legislative feats of the kind regularly described in newspapers. (269)

The acceptance of this underpins a turn in contemporary accounts of policy (Considine 252-72) where policy processes become contingent and incomplete. Policy. The ordering of policy is something to be attempted rather than achieved. Policy becomes pragmatic and *ad hoc*. It is only coherent in as much as a policy statement represents a bringing together of elements of an agency or government's objectives and program. The order, in some sense, arrives through the act of collection, narrativisation and representation.

The second implication is more directly for cultural policy makers facing the prospect of whole-of-government cultural policy making. While it is reasonable for government to wish to make coherent totalising statements about its cultural interests, such ambitions bring the near certainty of failure for the small agency. Yet these failures of coherence and cohesion should be viewed as delivering incremental benefits through the effort and process of this policy "churn". As was the case with the *Building the Future* policy process, while aborted it was not a totally wasted effort. Instead, *Building the Future* mobilised a set of ideas within Arts Queensland and within government. For the small arts or cultural bureaux approaching the enormous task of whole-of government cultural policy making such marginal benefits are important.

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