MPA 834 – Defence Decision-Making

UNIT 1: LESSON COMMENTARY

Aim:
The purpose of this outline is to describe a way to think about how public policy is created and to present a way to analyze policy.

Let's begin with some questions:

- Why does Canada have armed forces?
- Why are they organized as a unified force and not as three separate forces?
- Why is "unification" seemingly always under attack?
- Why did Canada organize a unified military and civilian headquarters (NDHQ) when most other countries keep these things separate?
- What is the basis for Canadian defence strategy?
- How much spending on defence is enough?

These questions have been answered and the answers are reflected in past and current policy. But why do the answers vary from time to time? Often long standing policies are challenged and even changed, but this process as often meets resistance – what accounts for resistance to change?

What is Public Policy?
This course is focused on public policy, but what is it? Indeed, what is "policy" generally? If you think about it there are many interpretations of the term, policy. For instance, it might be thought of as rules, standards, the way things are done – "we do this because that's the policy". Consider for a few moments what we mean by policy in the everyday use of the word.

> William Jenkins defines public policy as:
> *a set of inter-related decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specific situation where these decisions should, in principle, be within the power of these actors to achieve.*
>
> (Doern and Phidd, p 33-34)

Military scholars, though they use many definitions, usually describe strategy as sets of decisions taken by authorities aimed at joining ends and means. Thus, it is easy under these definitions to relate strategy to public policy as Jenkins defines it. Try it.

We can begin by assuming that public policy involves a relationship between

- Actors with authority
- The decisions they take, and
- Outcomes or policy.

What we need to know to understand public policy generally, or defence specifically, is who are the actors and what is their authority; where do they get their authority; how do they relate to each other; and how do actors in organizations make decisions?

At this stage we can conclude that defence policy *is the product of sets of* ***decisions*** *concerning* inter-related national defence goals *and the means of achieving them taken by political, military, and public service* ***actors*** *working in a defined* ***organization*** *employing a dynamic formal and informal (but regularized)* **decision making process.**

The Structure for Decision Making

Although people sometimes think of an institution like NDHQ as an "organization", its true influence and power can only be understood when it is seen as a multi-dimensional amalgam of people, organizations, and processes.

Nevertheless, it is important that **organizations are properly arranged** because it describes the formal relationships between authorities and indicates how decisions might be made, at least formally. It also depicts who have what levels of authority and who is accountable to whom for what actions and decisions.

It is important at this point to review very briefly some terms that are used to describe how actors in organizations make decisions. There are generally three models that describe how decisions are made: (see for background, Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971]).

The rational actor model: according to this model actors attempt to discover the most rational answers to policy problems and to act on them. It is assumed that the process is free of prejudice, unitary, centrally controlled, completely informed, and value maximizing. Those who believe this model usually believe also that there is one, and only one, reasoned answer to a problem, and that the duty of public administrators is to find it and implement it. (See Allison, Chapter 1).

The organizational process model: in this model policy can be explained as "deliberate choices and more as *outputs* of large organizations functioning according to standard patterns of behaviour". (Allison, Chapter 3) Organizations – like the navy, for example – are interested in specific issues, semi-independent, have their own written and unwritten rules, boundaries between levels of decision makers and most important, sets of organizational interests.

These types of **organizations have policy "tendencies"** and often act to protect their interests and values. Policy, therefore, can be explained in organizational terms. Although organizations and groups of organizations like the federal government may change, change that significantly influences a traditional organizations' positions or that might produce unforeseen consequences to the status quo are often stoutly resisted.

The bureaucratic politics model: according to the vast literature on this model, (which Allison, Chapter 5, terms the "government politics model") policy is determined by "bargaining along regularized circuits among actors in organizations". The currency in this market is **discretion** to make decisions, information, and access to higher authority, among other things. Policy, therefore, reflects the outcome of a struggle between individuals and organizations or bureaus and it is essentially political – the politics of groups and their interests.

According to these models, given the same set of "facts", will decisions be the same under each type of regime? Think about examples from your own experience.

From Whence do Policies Come?

What is the source of policy? Where does policy come from? What drives the process of stability and change? Literature and experience suggest that policy originates in fundamental ideas or concepts – have you ever seen an "idea-less" policy – policy that has no idea behind it?

According to Doern and Phidd (p 41), "policy is populated by ideas in action". It is ideas embedded in institutions and in policy fields that guide actors, support and block change, and motivate individuals in political parties, government institutions, and the Canadian Forces.

Policies may be supported by a single grand idea or by a framework of supporting and related ideas—that is, **a conceptual framework**. Today, it is popular to speak of *paradigms*, but the term merely identifies an older notion that policies are often built on a framework of related ideas. *Paradigm shifts*, therefore, is just another way to describe changes that occur as sets of ideas change.

What do ideas do in public policy? Ideas set agendas and objectives; layout road maps for the way ahead; clarify goals; provide the boundaries of debates; identify players and stakeholders; and reinforce policy outcomes, especially when they become embedded in institutions.

What do We Mean When We speak of Ideas?

There are several ways to describe ideas or concepts; they may be one or, or a combination of:

- Broad normative views of the truth – not necessarily what is so but what is accepted in the public domain as true;
- Agreed perceptions of reality; and
- Beliefs – essentially untested ways of thinking about issues as held by individuals, groups, institutions which often span long periods of time. Ideologies are special sets of beliefs, the support of which often becomes the mark of fidelity to "the cause".

We can classify ideas as three general types:

World views – deeply embedded concepts in the culture that affect modes of thought and public discourse. National myths, identity, emotions, and loyalties. Such powerful ideas as religious maxims, individual liberty, equity, national sovereignty, and ethnical superiority are types of "world views".

Principled beliefs – ideas that specify criteria for judging right from wrong, and form unjust. For example, the idea that women are equal to men in all regards is not necessarily a world view, but it is the statement of a principle in some states because it is judged by society to be right. Such an idea changes policy once it has wide support and a measurable criterion for implementation. Principled beliefs are often expressed in law, rules, and norms.

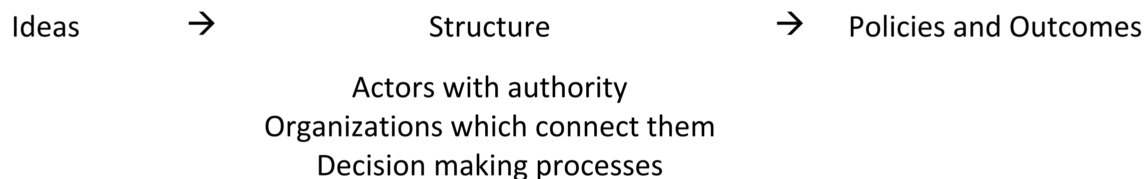
Casual beliefs – ideas about cause and effect that derive their power from the shared consensus of elites or authority figures like politicians, generals, religious leaders, teachers, and rock stars. Casual beliefs get their power from the size of the consensus behind them and their effect on social policies can be seen in the changing attitudes towards such notions as smoking, drinking and driving, "spar the rod and spoil the child", and the place of women in the Canadian Forces.

It is important to recognize that some ideas, no matter how strongly held, have no reliable criteria by which they can be measured or argued. For example, what is "art", and what is "pornography"? By what measure can you decide which is which, what is to be passed, and what confiscated? When does life begin, inside or outside the womb? These types of **essentially contested ideas** – ideas contested in their very essence – present very difficult problems for society and public servants because there is no unbiased way to measure their truth. Wars have been fought, and hundreds of thousands of people have been killed in contests over essentially contested ideas.

Second, it is important to understand that ideas based on *perceptions* may have little to do with reality, but this observation is besides the point in most policy decisions. *Perceptions*, especially those held by a strong consensus, have a reality of their own and can significantly influence policies and outcomes. For example, many Canadians believe that Canada and the Canadian forces are, always have been, and will be mainly involved in unmilitary-like peacekeeping operations no matter the history of the armed forces and facts of defence policy and operations. Though it may be inaccurate this perception powerfully influences governments' decisions on defence spending, military capabilities, and its eagerness to accept peacekeeping missions.

The Decision Making Framework

Cleary, ideas by themselves are not self-actuating and need some type of mechanism to change ideas into actions or policies. The structure described earlier is this mechanism. We can now construct a type of policy schematic – a picture about how policy id developed in government and in the Canadian Forces.



In other words, ideas shape structures and structures produce outcomes – thus we have ideas working through structure resulting in desired policies.

Consider, for instance, that once the idea that women could hold any position in the armed forces was accepted, and once this idea was reflected in the promotion and placement of women in positions of high authority, policies to give effect to the idea developed. Would the same effect have occurred if the structure of authorities had not changed?

However, we understand also that structures built on institutions like the three services in the Canadian forces for example have their own embedded ideas and they have opportunities to thwart intruding ideas that threaten their preferred interests. In other words, there is always a possibility that "declared policy", especially one built on new ideas, can be manipulated by the structure to produce "actual policies" that are much different from those intended by governments or senior leaders.

Conclusion

In this course, the search is for the ideas that drive defence policy – here we are dealing wit h mostly principled beliefs and casual beliefs, over-layered by world views particular to society, warfare, the wider military profession, and the Canadian Forces. We are going to explore the **Canadian way in warfare** and the ideas, old and new, that have determined what kinds of defence structures we build for Canada. The prime questions are, therefore, who has authority for what; how are these authorities related, and how do they make decisions? Moreover, we wish to know how each of these matters have changed over time and why, and what effect, if any, these changes have had on Canada's national defence.

References:

Graham Allison, E*ssence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Boston, Little Brown, 1971.

G.B. Doren and R.W. Phidd. *Canadian Public Policy*: *Structures and Process.* Toronto, MacMillian, 1961.