

*Energy, GM and transport all show how hard it is to develop environmental policy that works. But if traditional routes are failing, how can we create a policy that we can also implement?*

by **Richard Wilson**

# DRAFTS OF CHANGE

**WE ARE CURRENTLY WITNESSING SOMETHING remarkable, the admission by a government that its policies are failing to deliver. Of course that's not exactly the spin put on the situation by Whitehall, but the widespread revision of policy targets and the establishment of a Policy Delivery Unit in the Cabinet Office speaks for itself. In the life of this parliament policy targets have been revised down or shelved across the board in environmental, health care and crime prevention policy.**

But before we leap on to our soapboxes and accuse the Government of sacrificing substance over style and misleading the electorate, it is only fair to recognise that we have an ambitious Government, which set its targets in good faith. After all, no politician would undertake lightly the dramatic target downgrading recently witnessed, so it seems that the Labour Party simply did not appreciate how difficult policy delivery would be. Whitehall has become excellent at drafting policy and getting the most out of the very limited parliamentary time available. But in the rush to gain royal assent policy is produced that is very difficult and slow to implement. This was recognised by Andrew Rawnsley, Political Editor of the Observer who remarked: "Instead of just passing more and more legislation, Ministers need to take a deep breath and ask is the legislation usable by those who have to use it." Instead of more ministerial pondering why not ask those who have to use it directly?

Historically public participation in policy making has been avoided due to a belief that policy can only be delivered at the speed and quality required when undertaken by an elite and

expert few. What may have held true in the past no longer seems to work. Policy delivery is now more difficult than ever for two main reasons: increasing complexity of the issues and the rise of the stakeholder.

## **INCREASING COMPLEXITY**

The level of complexity and interconnectedness of the issues to which policy now has to respond is mind-numbing. This is particularly true for policies classed as 'environmental', always inherently multi-disciplinary. Consider transport. This involves trains, planes and cars; new technologies, social interaction, planning, neighbourhood renewal, foreign policy, energy policy. The list goes on and each component has its own set of links. How on earth can you build policy that accounts for all these very important issues with respect to transport policy as well as being in line with policy on all these issues?

The introduction of a blue-skies thinking 'Transport Tsar' is a case in point of what not to do. Imagine how you might feel as a

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transport campaigner or working in the sector. You have spent years trying to get your voice heard, only to find out that a man with no track record in the field was to have the ear of the Prime Minister. More sensible would be to harness the enthusiasm, expertise and support of these interested parties in making policy a success. This can be achieved through their effective involvement in the policy development process. These participants (stakeholders if you prefer) are an invaluable source of information and ideas, which can be brought together to complete a picture that would have remained otherwise fragmented and unfocused. If stakeholder involvement is done well it will also succeed in getting the support of the effected sectors, support that is absolutely essential if you hope to deliver the type of ambitious policies that the incumbent Government has set out to.

#### THE RISE OF THE STAKEHOLDER

The rise of the role of the stakeholder in governance, whether public or corporate, local or international, is now well documented and generally accepted. The reasons behind that rise are manifold. Among them we might include the astonishing growth in the level of and access to information, through the Internet and the so-called 'CNN world'. We could also point to unprecedented levels of social change linked to rising affluence, or expectation and the break down of traditional power structures at many levels. This has led, among other things, to a new set of core values. Values that may not yet be espoused by the slower changing institutions of the nation state. Institutions that, in some cases, have become so large they alienate the very people they are meant to serve.

The very complexity of today's issues, as well as giving a wider range of views to choose from, means that people will often approach an issue from a certain perspective, in order to understand it. All this, and there is much more, coupled with the closing ideological gap in politics has led to the rise of the stakeholder and the 'issue' as their central point of engagement.

Worryingly, there would appear to be a profound misunderstanding within Government of how people wish to engage with politics. As demonstrated by the recent e-democracy consultation paper, which claims "[political] parties remain the most important vehicle for the articulation and aggregation of public interests".

Yet the membership of political parties is at an all time low. The Labour party currently claims 270,000 members, down from 405,000 in 1997. The Conservatives fare little better with present membership standing at 300,000 down from 1,200,000 in 1982. In contrast the National Trust recently celebrated its 3 millionth member, the RSPB has 1,022,000 members and Greenpeace recently hit 221,000. It seems people are prepared to sign up for causes, or at least issues, they care about.

#### THE POLICY CHALLENGE

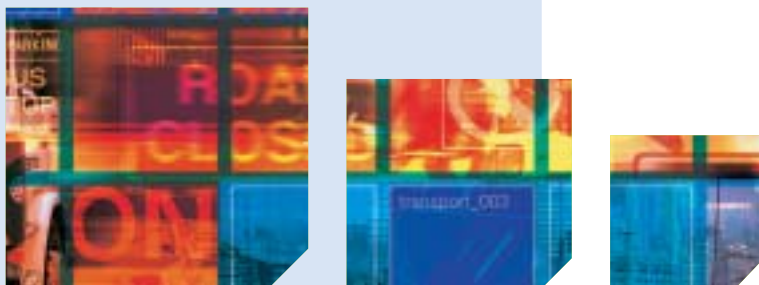
That said there has been a noticeable shift in Government's attitude to engaging their stakeholders: Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for environment, food and rural affairs recently recognised that "partnerships are essential if we are to achieve the targets we have set ourselves" and that "Government can't deliver [improved access to clean water and energy] on their own." Tony Blair put it succinctly when launching the Cabinet Offices new consultation tool 'View Finder': "good consultation produces good policy". The production of View Finder (a very useful resource) is testimony to the increased appreciation within certain parts of government that public involvement should amount to more than the established six-week consultation period. But if not by traditional consultation, how should government engage people?

The challenge is to design a system of governance that engages people on their terms and inspires faith, whilst delivering good policy. How? The short answer is we don't know, but we have learnt a lot and adhering to the following principles will help a great deal.

### exec summary

**Workable policy is becoming ever harder to produce in the face of rising complexity of the issues and the growth of stakeholder society. If politicians are to have a real chance of addressing the issues, understanding them and responding to them in effective ways they need to learn to use participation. Bringing interested parties into the creation of policy will focus goals, join up thinking and give crucial support when it comes time to implement. The world has changed, it is time that politics changed to accommodate it.**

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### 1\_Consider policy from initiation to delivery

Too often civil servants and politicians believe their job is finished once the white paper has been written or the act gained royal assent. At this point it has only just begun, as it is the implementation, or not, of that policy that really counts.

### 2\_Be transparent and communicate clearly

It is essential that the Government say very clearly what is on the table for discussion and what is not. It will cost time and money for people to be involved in any engagement process and they need to be given every opportunity to make an informed decision about whether they want to be included. If there is one thing worse than excluding people from decisions they care about, it is poor management of their expectations.

### 3\_Be independent and be seen to be independent

The Government must be seen to be quite independent of any organisation or group with a vested interest in the policy area. If, for whatever reason, Government fails to do this it will become much harder to involve some groups effectively, and it is often these more volatile constituencies whose support is central to effective policy delivery.

The need for explicit independence extends beyond the policy-making and delivery process to the R&D that supports policy. Especially in areas of contested science, facts or reports that support one view will habitually be challenged or repudiated by groups with a differing view, often by questioning the provenance of the report in question (who did it, their motivations, who paid) or its methodology. In these circumstances the best option is getting the parties to collectively agree what research is needed, how it will be undertaken and by whom.

### 4\_Know What You Want

Organisations often seek to engage with their stakeholders without asking themselves why they are doing it. This can result in engagement processes being run which have no clear purpose and do not produce useful results. Such practice is extremely damaging, wasting the time of busy people who will be reluctant to participate in future engagement activities. Answering the question: 'What is it that I want to have after the process that I do not have now?' is a useful starting point in ensuring you get the most out of the process.

### 5\_Use the right method

There are a range of techniques available from opinion polls to collaborative stakeholder dialogues. Each has value and is effective provided the right approach is used in the right circumstances.

### 6\_Involve people as early as possible.

This ensures that participants feel satisfied by having an input before the direction of later work has been set, and that the rest of the decision-making process is as well informed as possible. If undertaken well, early involvement can act as a warning system for highlighting uncertainties and future controversies.

### 7\_Get Help

At the end of the day there is really nothing better than experience for ensuring that the engagement process works. People and society are dynamic and sometimes difficult to engage effectively. Making use of the expertise and experience of organisations with a strong track record in this field is often invaluable.

The complexity of many modern issues means that new approaches to policy development are required to ensure effective delivery. In such cases success often depends upon the cooperation of key stakeholders, a difficult thing to achieve. It is made much easier by the knowledge and support that effective engagement brings. Many politicians consider such participatory processes a threat to representative democracy. They are not. Politics, and politicians will still be making the crucial decisions; turning the, often messy, output of a consultation or dialogue, into something tangible. Participation will make the politician's job much easier by providing them with the support and information they need to help create imaginative policy solutions to complex issues. Policies that will have the best possible chance of success. Indeed the Strategy Unit, effectively the accident and emergency department of government policy, may not be required if robust policy was developed in the first place.

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