

## **The writing is on the wall for policy-making**

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THE reaction of the members of the America's 9/11 Commission when they heard that their magisterial report was going to be turned into a comic book - to mark the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attack on New York - was that they were "astounded". They were equally astounded when it worked.

Their original report already challenged stereotypes with its bestselling blockbuster thriller style. But it was packed with arcane and complex detail. As veteran Marvel Comics artist Ernie Colon put it, "by the time I got to page 60, I forgot what happened on page nine". Which is why he thought of "graphic journalism". As he put it: "We comic book writers have always been in the business and craft of clarifying things."

How many of us, I wonder, work in the same territory: the business and craft of clarifying things? Certainly large swathes of the civil service and the public sector need this as a critical skill. It is the essence of policy-making. When I served in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), we were drilled in the craft from the start. Our job as policy makers was to clarify the circumstances surrounding a problem, derive three possible options for action from the analysis, carefully weigh the pros and cons of each, and then submit a recommendation to the minister for decision.

We talk more about the evidence-base today, meaning "please include more numbers", and about likely public reactions to any decision. In the FCO this is called public diplomacy. But this approach to policy-making has not changed since Northcote-Trevelyan "modernised" the civil service in the 19th century.

Policy should be based on sound and thorough analysis, rigorous research and relevant evidence. I am not disputing that. But, like Ernie Colon, I no longer believe distilling all this information into written reports and cabinet papers for ministers is an adequate way of "clarifying things" for intelligent decision-making.

It will work for the simple things, the black-and-white issues, or the big symbolic gestures. But it is not up to the task of dealing with the multidimensional, complex, messy, contested, interrelated, fast-changing, information-overloaded environment where real economic and social policy is ultimately made.

So what can be done? A great deal, it turns out. Improving awareness, structures, processes and capacities all round is possible, but will not happen overnight. In the meantime there is a raft of small-scale interventions that can help.

One, as the 9/11 Commission latterly discovered, is the use of visual language and visual analysis as a tool for "clarifying things" and making collective sense of complicated issues. We have worked with Bob Horn at Stanford University, a pioneer in the field, to bring this approach to addressing the kinds of policy issues that otherwise wind up in the "too difficult" tray.

One such is the long-term management of radioactive waste. This involves difficult issues of ethics, science, geology, ideology in a time-frame well beyond the competence or even the imagining of most of our institutions.

Working with Nirex, the leading agency involved in nuclear waste storage, we helped develop a 16ft by 5ft mural depicting their current strategy, in all its subtlety and complexity, running from history through the present to the anticipated future out to the next ice age and beyond. The mural draws on a library of research and experience. It can be scanned in ten minutes, read in detail in half an hour.

We used a similar approach earlier this year with four departments of government - the FCO, the department of trade and industry, the department of the environment, food and rural affairs, and the Treasury - trying to get their heads around the complexities of dealing with energy security and climate change.

Officials talked to us about these issues and their policy aspirations. Our mural of multiple "labyrinths" effectively held up a mirror to the existing policy process. We asked senior officials whether they recognised it and thought it capable of delivering intelligent responses to the energy challenge. The first answer was yes. You can guess the second answer. Phase II of our work aims to address a specific policy area, consciously avoiding the traps of the labyrinth.

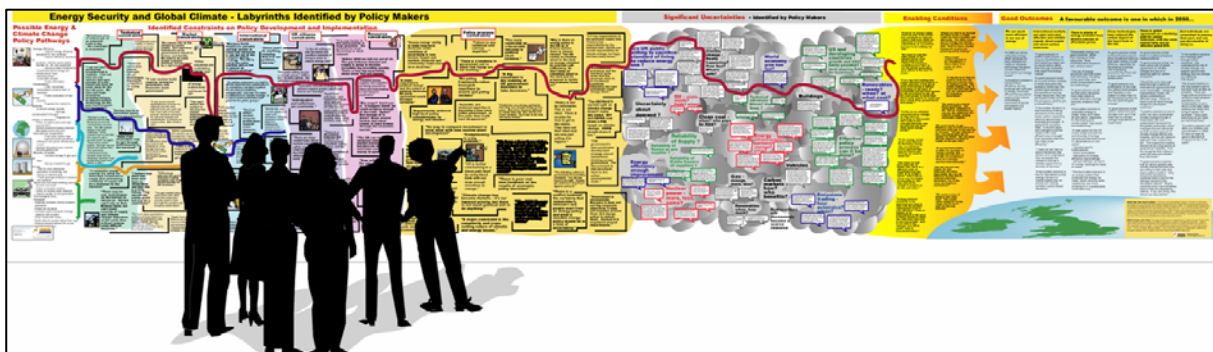


Fig. The climate change and energy security 'policy labyrinths' mural

A third example is closer to home - where we volunteered this approach working in support of the "Choose Life" suicide-prevention strategy in Fife. Here we worked with the team involved to create a "mess map" of all the agencies and the web of interconnections between them involved in preventing suicide.

This was a brave attempt to deal with the world as it is, rather than the neat organisational structures we otherwise assume. As well as additional funding for key services and organisations, Fife's strategy now pays attention to the "pathfinder" role: helping to guide people through the mess to access the support that is already available.

There was a striking remark in one workshop about the numbers of people who apparently commit suicide in order to avoid being dragged into the "vortex" of public care. This immediately conjured another vivid picture of messy reality captured in a detailed knowledge map of the vortex. The map has proven to be a powerful diagnostic tool.

It also serves as a trigger for honest conversation about how things really are. It is a prompt for reorienting public-service reform away from efficiency - making the vortex turn faster - to effectiveness, returning people to health and well-being. At a subsequent session in Dundee people responded to a discussion of the vortex by proposing the development of Love Care and Aspiration Teams (LCATs). This from a group that came ready to discuss Community Health Partnerships (CHPs).

This is not rocket science. With clipart and modern software such as Adobe Illustrator we don't all have to be graphic illustrators to use this language. Yet it immediately enhances our capacity to deal with difficult issues and to have meaningful, mature conversations with members of the public and with other multiple stakeholders. It can be done with suicide, radioactive waste, climate change, responsible drinking, mental health well-being, civic renewal - you name it.

The sceptics thought a graphic version of the 9/11 report was dumbing-down. But in fewer than 150 pages, compared with the 600 of the original, " you learn things you didn't know, and the things you did know suddenly have more clarity and relevance to other things you know". Now wouldn't that be useful for policy-making?

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**Last updated:** 05-Oct-06 00:17 BST