

Introduction: Communication with “aliens”

Advising decision-makers better

Advice: n counsel, skilled opinion

Chambers Family Dictionary

At NZIER we have been reviewing policy advice all this century. We have seen significant improvements – papers are notably shorter and tidier – but there’s still room for improvement. Even seasoned policy wonks can hone their skills to produce better crafted advice.

To support this progress we are producing a series of briefs, which we are compiling into the **NZIER Handbook of policy advising**.

Our target audience is the experienced advisor, but we expect what we say to help all drafters, and also assist peer reviewers and those commissioning and signing out papers.

We will be providing material covering three areas:

- Telling a coherent story about advising;
- Drawing on experience for best practice;
- Providing practical tips and hints.

Breaking new ground

The dominant focus of academic discussions of policy advising is on ‘solving the problem’; that is, on the analysis informing the decision. Our series of papers, however, is different. It aims to fill a gap: by being about **the complications of actually communicating advice**.

This key process takes the advisor’s information and analysis and delivers it to the Minister, and hence into action. It has been neglected as a topic.

For obvious reasons much of this communication is in writing; this both allows the target to organise their work and automatically creates a lasting record. So our discussion concentrates on improving written advice.

Scope and objective of this paper

This first note outlines why advising Ministers is really difficult. It sets the scene for the series of papers that follows by explaining the high-level challenges facing policy advisors and their main client: the Minister.

The desired outcome of this paper is for advisors to be consciously aware of why policy advice is constantly challenging and why taking your foot off the improvement pedal can be damaging.

Advisors make the world go round?

We focus our guidance on the way policy advisors communicate with decision-makers, typically Ministers. Advisors are used for many reasons, and we will be talking about this in a future brief.

Our assumption though is that the daily demands of being a Minister are too great for them to solve a multitude of problems alone. The workload demands a team, usually working on issues in parallel. The team’s efforts support decision-making and communication is therefore critical.

What sort of communication?

We know that all communication is difficult. The written word is especially challenging, as it lacks the normal interaction of oral conversation, with the typical support of body language.

And given Ministers are pressed, they must absorb key elements quickly, and without re-reading. This means shorter papers with clearly written content are unambiguously better.

As a typical policy advice process, New Zealand’s Westminster style system separates Ministers and their public service advisors. (We neglect political advisors – for a discussion see Eichbaum and Shaw).

Worlds apart?

New Zealand Ministers are politicians as they have to be elected members of parliament. Thus they inhabit the political sphere where voters and their perceptions matter a lot, where different – often conflicting interest – groups are part of the landscape, and where the consistency of stories and keeping of promises are checked by an ever-present media and now social media commentators.

Their immediate interest therefore looks toward the next election, the prestige of office and the exercise of power. To achieve and sustain this they must have available the tools of their trade: snappy soundbites; quick responses; and sensible reasons for the choices they have made.

Advisors though, are public servants. They work for other public servants. They operate in a different environment, albeit it one which overlaps with Ministers at times. Their background, role and behaviour – even where they live – vary considerably. Advisors care more about being the expert advisors Ministers expect, supporting their bosses, ticking off their to-do list and avoiding unmanageable risks to themselves.¹

This means there are limited common reference points between Ministers and advisors. And on both sides there will regularly be newcomers finding their feet, unsure of the protocols.

And while no easy ride, this is as it should be: it is the way the system is designed, and how it is supposed to work. Public servants are meant to be politically aware, but politically neutral. Nevertheless, making this set up work is an ongoing challenge to all involved.

So the two groups, driven by different forces and with inhabiting largely different worlds, have to find a methods of relating that works, and works sustainably. Hence the title of this paper: at times writing policy advice can be like communicating with aliens from other planets.

This is demanding enough in general, but add in the complexity of the issues, pressured deadlines and the often under-documented nature of public disputes and it means the craft of policy advising is a tough assignment.

So really good advising is just hard

Features of the job stretch all those doing it:

- Each paper is a one-off (though there are common types of problems)
- Problem definitions and aims are typically hard to agree
- Most advice is lacking certainty – and discussing risk is difficult to do well
- Identifying key trade-offs is hard, as is showing how they matter and estimating the scale of the effects
- There are different audiences and different purposes to write for.

The complications are multiplied when each paper – no matter the subject, purpose, audience or situation – needs to be concise, clear and easy to absorb.

But we are here to help. We have been working and thinking about these issues for years and this series aims to pass our experience on.

Crafts are learnt as you go: experience is critical

Our references say *a craft is an art, or skilled trade. It also includes a notion of cunning ('crafty')*.

Policy advising demands individual responses to individual challenges. Each piece of work is tailor made, with limited systemisation possible. So to reflect the many faceted challenges, many varieties of advising are needed.

This requires a wide-ranging set of skills to address the breadth of issues. Building up this toolkit is not easy. And knowing when each approach fits the situation comes typically from seeing it used.

So there is a significant learning by doing aspect, which comes from using experience as the basis of building up skills.

As John Martin's work suggests assessing the scope of what is sought by Ministers to ensure the advice is practical and useable is a key part of the mandarin's craft.

And as noted there is little useful applicable writing, and limited extant theory.

¹ We exaggerate and simplify here for the sake of exposition. We know advisors are driven by many things, including a

genuine desire to make New Zealand a better place and to influence the direction of policy – as are Ministers of course.

Takeaways and tips

The discussion above says it's hard, so policy analysts have endless scope to improve. And all good advisors are on the lookout for ways to get better.

Often this may just include picking up a useful trick used in a paper, or a presentation device that worked well. The local policy landscape is awash with other advisors and many are trying new things; good advisors are always learning. **Find ways of tapping others' experience** – it is usually much more effective to absorb their stories and ideas than to work through the whole process yourself.

Part of the learning cycle is assessing ideas after they have been tried so good practice in a policy shop is to have **informal reviews of advice**. "Post mortems" of the process, its successes and the failures are useful ways for all participants to hone their set of useable methods and approaches.

One simple hint we have learnt is that it is important to get the allocation of resources right. Too often we see papers that are clearly based on a lot of research and thinking about the issue, but cannot effectively communicate the problem definition, the best way to attack the dilemma and, even more worryingly, just what might best be done.

Our diagnosis is that such papers have spent too much time on 'cracking the problem' and not enough on 'getting the message across.' We often talk about **the 50:50 rule** that an effective shop spends as much effort on the communication as it does on the analysis.

One area all shops have available to profit from is that they typically are producing for a small number of readers. And it's a repeat game: the same Minister(s) have to be briefed and prepared for meetings, many times.

This means there is plenty of opportunity to carry out "market research." There are a variety of ways to check the reception of types of material (does the Minister prefer charts or tables?) and incorporate the preferences of the audience directly into the drafting. Ministerial advisors can be very helpful with this feedback. If the opportunity arises **experiments can be undertaken** to test ideas under real life conditions.

Further reading

New Zealand

Eichbaum, C & Shaw, R (2007) "Minding the Minister? Ministerial advisors in New Zealand government." *Kotuitui; The New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 2(2) 95-113.

Gill, D (2012) *Improving policy advice: What does the literature tell us about the capability needed for providing value added policy advice?* NZIER working paper 2012/02

Martin, J (1988) *A profession of statecraft?* IPS Wellington

Wolf, A (1999) *Building Advice: The Craft of the Policy Professional* Working Paper No 7 SSC and other papers in this useful series which have not dated.

Higher theory

Austen-Smith D (1990) "Information transmission in debate." *American Journal of Political Science* 34: 124–152

Kartik N, M Ottaviani & F Squintani (2007) "Credulity, lies, and costly talk." *Journal of Economic theory* 134 (1), 93-116,

Lazareviciute I & T Verheijen (2000) "Organising the delivery of policy advice." Paper prepared for the 8th NISPAcee conference, Budapest 13-15 April.

Morris S (2001) "Political correctness." *Journal of Political Economy* 109: 231–265.

This paper was written at NZIER, March 2016.

For further information please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

John Ballingall at john.ballingall@nzier.org.nz

Cathy Scott at cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz

John Yeabsley at john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz

Todd Krieble at todd.krieble@nzier.org.nz

NZIER (04) 472 1880

While NZIER will use all reasonable endeavours in undertaking contract research and producing reports to ensure the information is as accurate as practicable, the Institute, its contributors, employees, and Board shall not be liable (whether in contract, tort (including negligence), equity or on any other basis) for any loss or damage sustained by any person relying on such work whatever the cause of such loss or damage.