



DEPARTMENT OF
POLITICS
AND
INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

**Transcript of the Public Policy Unit
Launch Seminar: Geoff Mulgan, 'The
Academic and the Policy-Maker'**

Iain McLean: Good afternoon everybody and welcome to this launch seminar for the Public Policy Unit in the Department of Politics and International Relations. I am Iain McLean; I'm Director of the Unit. And Stuart White, who is sitting in the second row, is the Research Director. And, before introducing our speaker, I want to say a little bit about the Unit and what it is doing, what it hopes to do, and why we arranged this meeting.

First of all, I should point out that, as with any other launch, the ship has not come into existence today for the first time. The ship is being pushed down the slipway today, but it's already been under construction for some time. The Unit came into existence at the start of this calendar year and, in fact, is already on its second seminar series and today's event is, in one of its guises, today's event in this term's regular seminar series. The Unit has got a number of purposes, but they could all be summarised under the same general heading of bringing academics and policy makers closer and in touch with one another's concerns. At one level, this may seem to be a redundant thing to do in Oxford University and it's too easy to get into gloating mode. For instance, as somebody observed at a seminar that I attended the other day, of the fourteen prime ministers since 1945, British prime ministers since 1945, who attended any University, fourteen attended Oxford University. That number sounds right - I hope it is correct, but I am passing it on in good faith - and none attended Cambridge. Now, that, as I say, is something we might gloat about, but I think we should get beyond that. It is by no means certain that the next prime minister, for instance, will be an Oxford graduate. There is a fairly good chance that the next prime minister will not be an Oxford graduate.

But, to move from the purely trivial to the more substantial, what I and Stuart and some others of us have felt for some time is that here is Oxford, a full service University, with very eminent scholars and practitioners across the board of all academic subjects, and extremely bright students, many of whom are interested in going into public service careers in the UK or in other countries. But we haven't had internally in the University a forum which might bring together experts, experts in any subject, by no means just politics or political science, but we do have natural scientists across the board, medics, physicists, geographers, you name it, who give advice to governments, or international organizations, or NGOs on policy issues. And we would like to be available to policy makers in as many ways as is mutually convenient and likewise we want to hear what policy makers have to say to us. And some of the ways are familiar ways that academics are used to working in. For instance, we apply for research grants. Some of the research granting bodies have got programmes which are related to public policy research. For instance, currently the Economic and Social Research Council has a public services research programme, in which this Unit has a research project, on the reliability and validity of the comprehensive performance assessment regime for British local authorities. Alternatively, government departments and others invite tenders for research contracts and, before the formation of this Unit, I held a research contract with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and we want to have a channel for future such contacts. Thirdly, quite informally, and, in some ways, at least equally importantly, informal and unfunded requests for advice come to us all the time. Like many colleagues, I have been for instance an adviser to a Parliamentary Select Committee or people simply ring up. Not excluding well-informed journalists or in fact journalists who are not so well-informed also ring up and sometimes that is a piece of public good provision of rather patiently

trying explain what they have failed to understand with very meagre hopes of a coherent story appearing in the next day's paper.

So, there is a whole range of public policy work which is done and our aim for this unit is that it should be coordinated so that we can approach policy makers, policy makers can approach us, and we can see if there is scope for either funded or unfunded research. We also run a seminar series of which this is part. There should be details out in the back of the remainder of this term. There is a programme next term run by David Hine. And in the summer term, there will be a repeat of a programme that I have run in the past with an economics colleague on the political economy of public policy.

I'd now like to introduce our launch speaker. We are very pleased indeed to have Geoff Mulgan as our speaker in today's event. Geoff began life as an academic and later working for the European Commission on telecommunications policy, but he has been in public policy working with or for politicians for a long time. He was the head of Gordon Brown's office back in 1992, when Gordon Brown was Shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Geoff then went off to found and direct the extremely influential think-tank, Demos, from then until 1997. At the change of government in 1997, Geoff came into government and has worked since then, at different times, as a politically nominated special adviser and as a civil servant, but in both cases in policy roles, recently as director of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit. And he now heads the Young Foundation, which was founded by and is named in memory of Michael Young, one of the most influential and important public policy entrepreneurs, going back to his authorship of the Labour Party Manifesto for the 1945 General Election and going through numerous innovations in public policy.

You are not here to hear me. You are here, I hope, to hear our speaker and to participate in the discussion afterwards. Let me just say that there will be refreshments after this seminar, which are for everybody, or everybody who gets there in time. And they should be in the room next door, so everybody is welcome to join us at the end of the Seminar. So, Geoff the floor is yours. Sorry, I haven't announced your title. It is 'The Academic and the Policy-Maker'.

Geoff Mulgan: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen I want to share some thoughts about the relationship between academia and government and change. I worked in local government, in national government, in European government and in politics and accumulated a whole series of prejudices along the way, and have some sense of the mutual prejudices there are between different bits of government and academia. And the institution I now run, as Iain said, was set up by Michael Young who, in some ways, was a very classic policy maker. He was an academic; he set up what is now the Economic and Social Research Council. But he also had a rather different view of how change should be done, as much through setting things up in practice, as through research. And he tried, in a sense, to triangulate practice, research, and government, in ways which I found particularly interesting.

I want to start off by saying I think it's inevitable that the relationship between academic work and government and politics is going to be messy, imperfect, problematic on both sides, in part because the starting points for both sides are different. Academia should be concerned with the pursuit of knowledge and truth, in sometimes quite long time scales, primarily retrospective, hopefully sober and thoughtful. Politics has to be governed by decisions, it has to be in real time, it has to often jump ahead of research and faces a whole series of constraints, most of which are about the public or politics rather than anything else. And in some ways it is not surprising that the nature of the relationship has gone through a series of very different phases. And one of the things I would like to conclude with is some speculations about perhaps what the next five or ten years will bring.

In the Second World War, there was a very, very close relationship between academia and government—I suspect the closest ever—as very large numbers of people went into Whitehall, to plan the economy and do espionage and all sorts of things. In the '60s, Whitehall was full of people from Nuffield and LSE. That was perhaps another sort of high point of the relationship between academia and government. Harold Wilson, of course, had been an Oxford don. I think he was the last Oxford don to be a prime minister. And, then, there was a very different phase in the '80s, when one wing of academics became very, very influential with the Thatcher government. And, infamously, 364 economists denounced everything she stood for and was doing and the relationship became quite fraught. We had a lecture at the Young Foundations two days ago by George Steiner, who's mainly a literature specialist. And he claimed that someone is now doing a PhD studying the dinner party lists at Number 10 over the last eight years. And he mentioned this because on those lists there are rather few academics and intellectuals and a rather large number of tabloid journalists, pop stars, business tycoons, and so on. And he took this to be a sign of a very unhappy period in the relationship between intellectual pursuits and government. Yet, in other respects, and I'll give some facts in this as I talk, the relationship has been as close, if not closer than in those previous high points of the '60s and the '40s, certainly in terms of the scale of the relationship between academic work and public policy and government.

Many of you will be familiar with the famous comment from Keynes that there's nothing governments hate more than to be well informed, because it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult. And I think one of the questions for Iain and his colleagues is how do you overcome that barrier because most research, most knowledge, problematises things before it simplifies things. And I want to suggest a number of the reasons why I think governments at the moment are somewhat more willing to engage with that difficulty. Why there are rather fewer leaders today doing as Ronald Reagan and Indira Gandhi did - both of them depended mainly on astrology for their advice (and it did very well for them too and they won lots of elections and many of their policies appeared to work). I think that the main reasons why I think we are in a relatively propitious period for the exercise underway, is I think both in terms of demand for knowledge and supply for knowledge, a lot has changed in the last ten or twenty years. In relation to governments' demands for the sort of work which Oxford can produce, the demand is greater than in the past for several reasons.

One is the political climate. Any era where the dominant political forces are strongly ideological, strongly dogmatic, basically believe they have insights into how the world works are going to be less interested in hearing work from economists, or sociologists or political scientists. And, whether you think it is entirely good or bad, we have a government at the moment here, rather unlike the government on the other side of the Atlantic, which is pretty pragmatic, says that what matters is what works, claims at least to be very interested in evidence and an explanatory approach to government. So that is the starting point of why there is demand. I think globally that has been very greatly reinforced by the influence of global institutions: the OECD, World Bank, the European Union. Both the formal work they do in overseeing what is happening in terms of policy on labour market reforms, or privatization or regulation of utilities. The formal benchmarking of how well different countries do: and one of the most powerful tools we tried using within the British government was systematic benchmarking of how well we did against other countries—rather than assuming that we would be the font of all wisdom—and then trying to see who was doing best and who we should learn from. And usually that showed that, although Britain tends to look to America for lessons, America was usually the worst place you should look for lessons because it is the worst performer on a whole series of areas: crime, environmental policy, social policy and so on. And usually, the best sources are countries which don't promote themselves very well and often don't even speak the English language in many of their documents and therefore you have to work a little bit harder to learn. But the general point, I think is that this greater globalisation of knowledge and a

recognition that, in response to pressure from things like the European Union and the Open System of Coordination, governments have to be a little more pragmatic about knowledge, has been helpful as well.

I think the other reason governments do have greater demand now is, compared to the '40s and '60s (and others can correct me as I was not around in either of those decades), the extent to which the media are permeated with news stories which essentially have the structure "research says X" and then a minister has to respond with a "Y". This is a very modern phenomenon, partly driven by the extensive research but I think as well a much more educated public who take it for granted that people making decisions—whether they are ministers, or officials or regulators—should be basing that on research and knowledge.

And that growing demand has been met to some extent by supply, not just from academia in the classic sense, not just from the foundations, US, UK, the Fords, the Rockefellers, the Rowntrees, and so on who continue to be absolutely critical in providing a steady flow of insights and ideas. But, I think, also, perhaps more interestingly and more novel-ly, through the new ways of organising knowledge in academia. Very visible in the health field through the Cochrane collaboration, the range of different methods there are now for aggregating and assessing the quality of new research and evidence, and their equivalence in other fields of social policy, the Campbell collaboration, the ESRC centres on evidence, and so on, all of which in some ways go alongside the effective *Google*. *Google* has probably been the most important change in the last five years for most civil servants, because it means that within 0.14 seconds – crudely – you can Hoover up quite a lot of research on the question you have just been asked to do a brief on by your minister or your boss. Now *Google* and *Google Scholar* do not yet quite have tools which assess research according to quality, reliability, etc. But I suspect it maybe not long until they do because in fact they are not that hard to design. And, one of the surprises, I think, is how academia has been slightly slow in actually trying to influence the design of those search engines to do that. So in all of those respects I think supply is definitely growing and alongside demand.

I want to say a little bit about how public policy knowledge then feeds in to government because I think this is slightly non-obvious. I think people are pretty aware of the political complexities of how knowledge comes into government, and I will say a bit about them, but what is perhaps less clear from outside is the extent of the knowledge organising, processing capacities there are within a modern state. The British government employs nearly a thousand social researchers, about a thousand economists, rather more statisticians, a large number of operational researchers, all of whom are doing work not dissimilar to work being done in universities. Government's funding of research: we don't actually know the numbers – I spent three or four years trying to actually get a proper number - but it's almost certainly larger than the ESRC's funding of research in economics and social science. And, seen from within government, actually rather than there being a sort of linear process from pure academic research through to action, in most fields what becomes very clear is that there is, in a sense, a cosmos of different types of knowledge, which to some extent compete.

There is statistical knowledge. There is policy knowledge; let's say, what works in cutting vehicle burglary. There is scientific knowledge, for example on climate change, or oxytocins' effect on trust levels - another interesting recent example. There is professional knowledge, the knowledge which is organised within the teaching profession, the medical profession, usually who have their own guardians within government, like the chief medical officer. There is public opinion, knowledge of what the public thinks (quantitative, qualitative); again, another body of people within the public sector. There is political knowledge, knowledge of what will play within the ruling party, knowledge which perhaps this week has been slightly lacking in the ruling party. There's classic intelligence, both overseas intelligence, but also domestic intelligence, so the questions of what is happening

within the UK urban young Muslim population; that is a question in which, in a sense, academic research, media research, and intelligence, and policing compete in terms of the quality of their insights and understandings. And that list can go on.

What's striking is each of those types of knowledge has its own professionals, its own guardians, its own methods, its own sort of definitions of what counts as good knowledge, and to some extent they compete. And one of the issues for public policy, as a sort of academic discipline, is, is it seeking to be a 'meta-discipline' for all of those and, if so, what does that require in terms of skills. This is also an issue within the civil service, where we've been trying to skill up civil service to be better users of all these array of different kinds of knowledge, rather than not being able to interrogate a mathematical model or a claim about criminal justice.

Now, one of the things that struck me again and again when we talked about evidence-based policy making in government was that there were some fields where this was clearly a very meaningful idea, and others where it wasn't. And I want to share with you, very briefly, a sort of rough typology, which I found quite useful in making sense of the relationship between knowledge and action (and I'd be happy to have this deconstructed by others here). Crudely speaking, I thought there were some fields where knowledge was reasonably stable; there was pretty broad consensus about what was known; about how new knowledge could be created. Usually these were fields where it made sense to do a lot of piloting, a lot of testing, with very clearly specified hypotheses - fields like much of microeconomics, labour markets, some areas of medicine - where policy science was not that different from a natural science. And knowledge was generally fairly cumulative in nature, and where good new innovations or good new knowledge tended to, therefore, diffuse fairly widely across the field. And, in some ways, those are the fields which are most clearly evidence-based in terms of policy making (macroeconomics, to some extent, would fit in that category as well).

There's a second, though, much larger field, where there was much greater fluidity than that; where many of the best informed people actually had profound disagreements about what was known, about what worked, about even defining the key concepts, where there was not any agreement about what a research agenda should be, what counted as a success, and where the evidence - really reliable evidence which could last over ten or twenty years - was pretty thin. Much of education, I think, falls into that category. A fair amount of criminal justice or criminology policy, much of the knowledge about public services and how they should be organised (the subject of a very big ESRC programme), I think, probably falls into that category, where there's likely to be swings of fashion as much as cumulative development of new knowledge. And, in those fields, many of the practitioners are very strongly attached to particular beliefs and assumptions, and pretty good at resisting new claims and new knowledge, if they don't happen to fit their existing beliefs. Now there are some methods for trying to change that and improve that at the margins, like the collaboratives in health, but my sense is that most policy fields probably are in this category.

Then, thirdly, there's another category which is rather different, where it's inherently impossible to have any very solid knowledge about what will work or what won't. This is clearly the case in relation to technology, so e-government, a topic on which the British government is spending £30 billion on health alone, let alone other fields. There is no settled knowledge about what works in terms of the use of the Web, the technology to restructure services, because everyone around the world is experimenting in tandem, and all are making lots of mistakes in tandem. The regulation of reproductive technology and bio-technology I put in the same category - there simply isn't enough experience to have firm knowledge - and much around globalisation is in this category too; how to create viable institutions around climate change, or indeed around conflict prevention, or weapons of mass destruction. It's quite hard to have anything like the kind of knowledge you can have on

Welfare to Work programmes in these fields because they are so inherently new and there simply isn't the track record.

I want to just very briefly, then, throw out just a handful of issues perhaps for Iain's Unit and others to think about in relation to where public policy research goes. One of the issues which most frustrated me in government was that most people in academia thought we wanted policy, whereas actually often I felt we needed better theory. What we were really lacking was good theory, which was giving new insights into how the world was working, generating testable hypotheses, and helping us think our way through intractable problems. And because quite a large proportion of our problems were in the second category I described, we almost needed more theory as much as we needed more evidence. And I know there's been a strong bias against theory for the last ten or twenty years from the funding councils and so on, but in some ways this is a sort of praising conclusion and I'd be interested to hear your responses to that.

The second sort of general comment is about the relationship between practice and theory. One of the striking features of the last century or so is how often good ideas actually were tried out in practice before they were properly theorised. There's obviously a long argument about whether Keynesianism began in practice in Scandinavia and New Zealand before it was theorised, but you can actually tell the same story about many, many other areas of public policy. And one of the reasons Michael Young became so obsessed with moving very quickly from ideas into practice was his conviction that part of the job of academia and social science was to make sense of emerging practice, not, as in the very classic view, to sit up in an ivory tower, dream a brilliant idea, and then some lower mortals down the food chain would sort of go and implement it. And my guess is that a lot of the most important new knowledge being generated today is actually being generated in practice, but not being adequately observed, theorised, synthesised by academics.

And that relates to a third point, which is again rather relevant to my current organisation, which is that in many of the fields which are probably the most difficult for public policy at the moment—areas like chronic disease management, urban conflict, and so on—the most competent interpreters of what is happening will often include the participants themselves. And any methodology which doesn't actually involve the people living through changes, any methodology which is too top-down, too technocratic, too detached, and does not use methods like ethnography, and so on, to understand the fine grain of daily life, will almost certainly make mistakes, and systematic mistakes. Again, this is not a new observation (Michael Young was saying this thirty or forty years ago) but, again and again, public policy methodologists forget this point, come up with proposals which look very good on paper, but simply don't go, or don't work, with the grain of real life.

A fourth issue is the question about the role of organisations and institutions. In most public policy, the key intermediaries between the well-designed policy and reality are going to be organisations, like prisons, or schools, or hospitals, or police forces. And it is absolutely essential to have a view about how organisations work, about their logic, about their culture, about their capacity. Again and again in government we would get—produced by civil servants as well as outsiders—quite nice paper notions, ideas which have taken no account whatsoever of the organisational transmission belt, if you like, and therefore were bound to fail. And this is, again, a sort of key issue for the sort of competencies of public policy as an academic discipline.

And then, just a few comments, perhaps, to conclude, on the limits of, the inherent limits of, any sort of academic study of public policy, which I think are important to be honest about, because otherwise one runs the risk of disappointment and conflict. One is democracy. Again and again, I found, working within government, there were things which the evidence showed, which academics

could show pretty clearly, which the public did not want to believe. And, in those situations, in my view, it's correct for the politicians to go with the public and not with the academics. Now, the whole point of having a democracy is that you're free to make your own mistakes. And this is quite an upsetting notion for some academics. Where there's a good issue from this week is police numbers, which Ian Blair, the Met Commissioner, was talking about in his lecture, Dimpleby Lecture I think it was, on Tuesday. And, again and again, academic research has shown 'bobbies on the beat', putting more bobbies on the beat, is about the worst way to cut crime. And, again and again, the public say that's what they want in order to feel safe. Now, there are many examples of this kind. All I would say is, if you're involved in public policy, don't simply denounce the public as stupid and irrational. They may be. But also remember that for fifty or a hundred years they've got experience of the experts being wrong, on so many things. And this may be (I'm not saying this is an example), but there will be many things of that kind, where the public is not so far off the point.

The second sort of difficulty is ambiguity. And this is quite a tricky point, but a particularly important one if you're going to try and get engaged in trying to influence governments and politicians. There are some things where there are very good reasons why a governing system, a political system, clings to ambiguity, and avoids transparency and clarity. You're working on Britishness. And anyone working on national identity will be aware of Renan's definition of a nation as forged by the things which are forgotten in order for the society to hold together. Every national identity is a combination of memories and forgetting, and chosen - deliberately chosen - ambiguities. And there are actually other fields in which that is true as well. Human societies only function by being able sometimes to suppress awareness of things and, if you again bring too much rationality to bear, sometimes you bump into that.

And then the third point is time. As I said at the beginning, research time is usually very different from decision-making time, and usually much slower. This is frustrating for people who are involved in designing pilots. Pilots take a year or so to design, three, five years to run, a couple of years to work out the results - total, eight to ten years. By which time, of course, the politicians who commissioned the research are long retired, their party probably in opposition. Do not be surprised if governments and politicians want speed and, indeed, part of them being good at their job is that they do act quicker and make judgements in conditions of uncertainty. And these are just, I think, inherent and unavoidable tensions which reflect where the two sides, if you like, are coming from.

My final point is really sort of to throw out a question to all of you. The areas where public policy research is likely to be most important are twofold. They're either, I think, going to be areas where existing knowledge is underused and under-recognised, where part of the job is to reshape it, recast it and, in part, to actually sell it to otherwise resistant, recalcitrant politicians and officials. And I think there's a lot of areas where it's absolutely clear a lot is known and a lot is ignored. And there's a very important role to be played by sort of you as intermediaries in being clear about where those areas are and focusing on them.

Then there's a second, much more difficult, category, where we simply don't know very much. And yet it's very important to know more. And obvious examples of that would include urban riots. It's possible that what's happened in France over the last few weeks is absolutely transparent to some styles of academic research. But my guess is, and certainly the case four years ago, having been pretty closely involved in the analysis and responses to the riots in the UK, is that we didn't have very good methods for understanding these complex phenomena of urban violence and breakdown of order. And these are, therefore, precisely the areas where new knowledge is most useful. Another example of that kind is the science of happiness and well-being, which many economists, including at this university, have recently got involved in. We're still at the very, very early stages of properly understanding the impact of public policy interventions on human well-being and happiness. And

this is, therefore, a very fertile area, precisely because not that much is yet known. And I would also add into that list how chronic diseases happen and are managed. We face an almost certainly worsening epidemic of many chronic diseases; not just diabetes, depression, but also diseases, like cancer, essentially becoming chronic diseases rather than acute diseases. And much that used to be known no longer works very well in explaining how people handle their diseases and how they could be supported by the state or others.

My final point is really just looking ahead. I think the climate for the Unit here is going to be pretty healthy. I see absolutely no sign of any of the main parties sort of lurching back into ferocious, dogmatic ideology. I think there will be demand for well-informed, thoughtful, reflective, serious public policy research, whichever of the main parties is in power. And, to return to George Steiner's comment on dinner party lists, my guess would be, actually, under the next prime minister, whether he is Brown or Cameron, there may actually be even more, rather more, invitations to dinner, whether metaphorical or literal. And, on that note, I will finish.

[End]

Iain McLean: Thank you very much. [Audience clapping] We have a fair amount of time for questions or discussion. Would people like to identify themselves when they ask their questions or make their comments.

David Pritchard: Geoff, I'm David Pritchard. I work for a research consultant company. We have one foot in the academic side and one foot in the government side, and it's quite painful to do that. I think you are on point on so many issues there that we [have encountered] in my company. I'm curious about your description of the three different types, the three different fields. And I think, you know, I recognise those fields, very much so. The question I have is, there are some areas in the field two - and I'm going to take criminal justice, in particular, because that's one we work a lot in - there are uncertain disagreements, you know, not sort of stable compared to, say, health, for example. But there are parts of the criminal justice area that could actually draw a lot, very heavily, from existing knowledge in some areas that's not well utilised. And I'm going to give a very specific example. The policy around drugs, and drug trafficking and drug using, could improve I think significantly from an understanding of fairly basic economic principles about the operation of markets. But it seems to be very slow to sort of permeate through to the policy makers in that area. So, is that, sort of, how do you get things from field two, where they're uncertain, into field one, where in fact there's actually a strong body of knowledge that could be applied fairly easily?

Geoff Mulgan: Well, I think criminology, in its widest sense, is probably the most interesting field at the moment, because it does straddle those first and second fields. And, in relation to my final comment, there is a lot of knowledge there which is not being acted on. And, just to give a flavour of some the things which I did in government, I set up one review of drugs policy. We tried to do the first real end-to-end look at the whole drugs system, from supply in Afghanistan and Colombia, through to demand. A bit of it was eventually published under FOI earlier this year. And this did show some very, very striking features, which came from looking very analytically at the field. The most striking of all was the almost perfect inverse correlation of spending on policing of drugs globally, going up like that, and the price of drugs, going down like that - precisely the opposite of what, of course, the police, intelligence agencies, customs, and so on, wanted to believe. Understanding why that was the case (the nature of the industry's capacity to reorganise in response to threats, and so on) was very, very important. But these weren't necessarily very welcome findings. There was other kind of knowledge, on treatment efficacy, which I think the government should be given some credit for having followed pretty closely. The repeated surveys on paybacks from drug treatment provision and in increasing that provision probably about as fast as capacity can cope.

However, in other work we did on prisons and correctional services, we came to a slightly more, perhaps, a subtler conclusion. There is pretty strong evidence, some of which is very much in the public domain, on the relative effectiveness of different kinds of intervention – prison, fines, community service, drug treatment again, and so on. Now, prison comes pretty way down the list in terms of effectiveness, cost-benefit analyses, and so on. It's not that hard to do paper designs for a completely different criminal justice system, which would end the extraordinary failure rate of two thirds of people re-offending within two years of leaving prison, and all the other ways in which our system is a chronic failure, in my eyes anyway. But, we tried to stand back and understand the dynamics of that system: why was it failing? And to understand the correctional system in the UK, you can't just look at it in a sort of narrow public policy terms (in terms of economics, outputs, inputs, and so on). You had to see how it was part of a system, where the media, politics, and judges were actually part of a loop; where a series of reinforcing dynamics were in effect, sometimes prompted by the media giving the public often deeply distorted views about current sentencing levels, and that in turn influencing politicians feeling the need for certain kinds of rhetoric to appease the media and trying to do what they thought the public believed, judges in turn responding to what the messages they were getting from politicians and the media, and so on. And so you got these malign loops, and, unless you address those and have strategy for changing those, all the rational public policy analysis in the world would have no impact. So we ended up directing quite a lot of effort to how could you break out of that; what would that require in terms of politicians' language, in terms of the sentencing board behaviour, and so on. And I hope (I think we're not quite there yet, but) that over five or ten you could start to turn that tanker around.

But, again, this gets back to the sort of methodology question of what disciplines do you need and what methods do you need to actually seriously engage with complex public policy, like prisons, where, if you're too narrow in your focus, your results may simply be irrelevant. And there are many other examples of that kind. I think climate change would be another very good one, where there's not that much point in doing perfect policy design on climate change unless you've can also get into the question of how you change public behaviour, beliefs, etc.

Iain McLean: Thank you very much. I think I'd like to take two or three questions together in a group for Geoff to answer next. At the back.

Rob Wood: My name's Rob Wood, I'm a graduate student here. The question is, you talked about the sort of in-house group of academics within the government – economists, statisticians, and so on. I wondered if you could describe how you think their work collaborates (or doesn't) with academics externally...?

Stuart White: Stuart White, Public Policy Unit. I have a question about academics and values. The focus of your talk was very much on academics bringing empirical knowledge into government, but many policy issues – in fact, any policy prescription – relies on some value premises as well as some empirical premises about how the world works. And I wondered whether you thought there's a role for academics in helping government to think through the ethical dimensions of their policies, as well as providing empirical knowledge?

Brian Galligan: Brian Galligan, visiting Nuffield, but from Melbourne University, Australia. I wonder if you'd talk a little bit more about – which I think is a very interesting insight – this: you said that more theory is needed and often it's in practice, in parts of practice, that there are things being done, interesting and new things being done, but they're not properly theorised. And when I reflect on a lot of things in Australia, particularly in the federal system of diverse governments, in a sense, involved in the same policy area; it's all very complex, but there are lots of probably interesting things being

done, but the academics, there aren't many academics that know the system well enough to be able to, in a sense, appreciate and articulate that. And often the practitioners, the senior politicians, and people running it, who are doing these things, perhaps don't have the theory or the intellectual, you know, the concepts, to articulate it. So there's a sort of a real gap, you know, between the two. I don't know whether that's a bit what you had in mind there? And then how does one really address that?

Iain McLean: Thank you very much. A brief point on these three very diverse questions and then we'll have another round, if you're up for it.

Geoff Mulgan: Very good and difficult questions. First of all: academics within, inside and outside government. Generally, my perception (and it may not be shared by others in this room) is that the links between academics inside government and outside are pretty strong; that often they are the same people, who move in and out, share the same worldview, share the same methods, share the same definitions of what is a good piece of work. I actually think the bigger problem is the relationship between researchers within government and the rest of government. I thought it was a major mistake that most research departments were organised as separate departments - within DFES, DH, and so on - and often became very, very detached from policy, very detached from delivery, very detached from politics. And, therefore, even when they were doing good work and had lots of insights, they weren't having much traction on decisions. And I tried to shift the working model to being that researchers would work on interdisciplinary teams, doing policy design, teams where there would be practitioners as well as policy makers, as well as people who had a sense of the politics of issues. And, generally, I found researchers enjoyed that much more, because they were closer to seeing the impact of their work. But also it's a more efficient way of translating from the research into practice; having people actually working alongside each other, rather than, in a sense, writing a report and then handing it over. And there's been some... I'd say government's moved about a quarter of the way in that direction. But this is the main organisational barrier to a government which is really infused with all the available knowledge which it should be using. And, unfortunately, research departments - like most departments - operate according to sociological logic and try and increase the boundaries around themselves and turf and separateness, which makes sense in bureaucratic terms, but not in terms of outcomes and outputs.

The point about values is absolutely right and, certainly historically, academia has often been an energising force of ideology fed into the political system. Thatcherism: much of that came from academia, for better or worse. And there's more and more demand from governments around the world, in which this one is perhaps behind some others, of using professional ethicists to think through not just issues on the boundaries of bioscience, but also issues around behaviour within government. So I think this is..., I was hopefully..., I didn't intend to have a sort of description of just an empirical, evidential input from academia.

And, on the final point about the relationship between practice and theory, there are some sort of very obvious areas where this is the case, and I've always been probably a bit too immersed in technology for my own good, and therefore I'm very interested at the moment in the application of open source methods in public policy and public institutions. They've transformed the computing market, they're transforming newspapers - I was two weeks ago in South Korea, where *Ohmynews* is the top newspaper for under-30s, an open source - newspaper, they're transforming encyclopaedias, even if *Wikipedia* isn't that perfect. And, my guess is that in the next five or ten years they will have huge application in other fields of public provision of public policy. But they need theorists to make sense of them. People are experimenting their way to these incredible new models of organising knowledge and decision-making, which is the perfect ground for academics then to help the practitioners make sense of what they're doing, as they stumble into these radically new ways of

working. And, if I was, starting off an academic career, that's the sort of field I would dive into, because the rewards would be very great.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are things like the relationship between schools and communities, where there's a lot of very diverse practice (in terms of how schools are organised and extent to which the community is woven into the decision-making of the school, its daily life, and so on), but where, I suspect, that there are many types of practice which are well ahead of the policy-making theory, of the kind reflected in the white paper being argued about this week.

Jamie Cowling: Hi, I'm Jamie Cowling. I'm a researcher working in government. I work for the [policy] division of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and I wanted to ask a question, or perhaps pose a thought, around... You mentioned the impact of new technologies, of globalisation, and painted quite a benign picture, where we're finding more evidence, good quality research is being diffused more widely, there's increasing demand for evidence-based policy from politicians. On the other hand, there's a more negative picture, which is often painted, and that's around the increase in speed and the demands placed on politicians to respond to evidence or research, which comes from what you might call less quality controlled areas, and so politicians have to respond to what could sometimes be spurious research, or based on a very small sample. And I wonder whether - you mentioned the point about up-skilling civil servants - perhaps one area where would be helpful (Professor McLean pointed this out earlier) is up-skilling journalists, and perhaps the role of a Public Policy Unit is as much to address the media, in terms of their quality control and reports of public policy as it is to address central government?

Frances Ruane... Policy Institute, Trinity College, Dublin. I was just interested in a distinction you made when talking through the fact that a lot of public policy research could actually be there in abundance, but is something that actually has to be communicated - or I think you said be sold, be packaged - ...by bureaucrats to politicians. And I'm just wondering to what extent do you think the academics should be targeting their work, their approaches, more at the long-standing bureaucrats in the system, and indeed researchers within the system, as opposed to the politicians per se. [*Inaudible*].

Guy Lodge: Guy Lodge from the Institute of Public Policy Research. I just wanted to get your view and opinion on trends within academia and within research, mainly generated by things like the RAE, which sort of strikes me as having an impact of making research very much more narrowly specialised and atomised. And I just wonder what are the incentives through the funding councils and other aspects of the research world. From your view in government, did that make research more relevant and just what impact did it have on quality? I just sometimes think that the people I speak to in government would often with academics they would prefer them to sort of focus on different issues.

Iain McLean: Thank you. Three questions with a bit more commonality between them this time.

Geoff Mulgan: Well maybe it's an interwoven reply then. My view is certainly that the RAE was predominantly negative in relation to the relationship between public policy and government. It meant, as you were suggesting, that there were not that many incentives to be useful, whether in terms of theory, policy, diagnosis, interpretation. I think the RAE will be seen by future generations to have made academia much more inward-looking than it has been, at its best. There have been previous eras when it has been very inward-looking, but the RAE has built in an inward-looking sort of structure of rewards and incentives and culture. And I was repeatedly surprised in government how rare it was for academics to send me their material. And I came to audiences like this and I said why aren't you bombarding me with, you know, why you've got a brilliant insight why government's getting it all wrong and why you've got a better thing to. And it still baffles me how

little that happened. And part of the answer, I think, is the RAE. Part of the answer are deeper questions of culture - perhaps academics are just shy, is the other thing.

And this relates to, I think, your question. I think there are standing jobs to be done, but there are also perhaps structural issues there as well. Many academics will never be particularly well-placed to interpret or translate their work into the in-tray of a very pressed minister or official. And that's why straddling roles and straddling institutions are so important - the kind of one that Guy works at, think-tanks, people whose careers have moved them across those different boundaries and therefore understand the languages and the values on both sides. It's one of the reasons why a flow of more people into government research, but also into government policy-making, and then back into academia probably is essential for getting that translation to work better. One of the things people learn when they do that is they learn to think what it's like if you are a minister with a big red box every night, with a pile of 101 urgent, pressing, difficult problems and why the premium on the academic who can crisply summarise what their insight is, what could be done about it, why that is so important, and how frustrating it is that the vast majority of often very good academic work simply does not provide that and, in a sense, forces the reader to do the work of working out why it's significant or important. And academic styles of writing disincentivise getting to the point, in that sense. And if you want to have influence you have to get to the point, sometimes slightly ahead of what you're absolutely certain of.

To achieve that influence, you're absolutely right; it's often not at all efficient to send something into the minister who has 101 things to worry about. The art of influencing government is often recognising the multiple levels at which power is held. And often quite a junior official may be the key person may be the key person to influence, the key person who will be eternally grateful if you make his or her job easier by giving them insights and ideas. And the standard flaw - and it's shared by businesses, which spend huge amounts of money lobbying government, but academics do the same - is always to put stuff up too high up the hierarchy. And, actually, power is not all concentrated at the top of many hierarchies, as anyone who knows organisations knows. So direct things at many different levels, and then in some ways you have to respond to where there turns out to be enthusiasm and energy and go with that, even if it's at quite surprising places.

But, above all, I think, people outside of government just do not have a feel for the sheer pressure of business and time. And this is why summary, pithiness, clarity is so important. It's notorious that writing a tabloid newspaper leader is much harder than writing a broadsheet leader; writing a really good article in 500 words is much harder than 5000 words, much more intellectually taxing, actually, to really summarise what's important. And much of academic training and, to some extent, bits of civil service training, do not encourage that enough. And that is why very good ideas, very good knowledge, very good evidence doesn't have the impact it should have. So, if there's anything you can do to cultivate pith, pithiness, that would be very valuable.

Iain McLean. Pithiness! I think we have time for a pithy final round of questions.

?: I think you answered my last question. Let me ask you a rather different one. It's hard to, I thought about it ... I've worked in politics and policy-making and academic life, and even the hated media. It's hard to imagine life without policy units and policy advisers. But I was quite fascinated to discover that in many countries in Europe, policy units seemed to be still quite rare; for example, in France, surprisingly, in Spain, in Portugal, even in Italy and Greece. And I wondered if you wanted to draw any lessons from that. I mean, are they much worse run without them.

Steve Rayner: I'm Steve Rayner, I direct the James Martin Institute at the Said Business School. I incidentally also spent sixteen years outside of academia as a researcher in various US government

agencies. And one of the things that I think you've highlighted is that it is quite normal for academics to make a move into government. It's much more difficult for non-academic researchers to make a transition into academia, because their CVs simply don't have the kind of profile of publication in learned journals, because, of course, as you well know yourself, you tend to be producing knowledge for particular purposes, rather than have the luxury to go back and do that. So it's very difficult to bring that kind of expertise into the university. And I've tried to recruit, several times in the UK, people who have, perhaps, a non-traditional academic profile. In various US universities they have what are called professors in the practice, which actually enable you to bring that kind of expertise into play. Do you think there is some model by which it would be possible to facilitate a greater, perhaps, exposure of the academic research community to people who have had careers in government research?

?: Hi, I'm a graduate student in International Relations, and I just wanted to ask you about something which ties in both with this kind of question of ethics and globalisation. I wanted to ask you specifically about whether you feel that it is the case that sometimes you now see these new coalitions of business interests and epistemic communities that function at a higher level and have a kind of monopoly on knowledge, who then actually circumvent some of the political decision-making by governments, and tend just to normalise a certain kind of set of ideas, obscuring a more political, ethical dimension?

Geoff Mulgan: Well, if you're asking about the business world's influence over the WTO, over national governments, over global decision-making, I would say there's a combination of the things you've described. Epistemic communities might not be the phrase I would use, but essentially shaping how decision makers think about what is natural or normal. But it's also much simpler. It's about lobbying power and the lack of any really strong alternatives with the capacity to lobby issues by issue, directive by directive, in those institutions. Though, both in terms of ideas and decisions, it's much more contested than it was five years ago, thanks to all sorts of movements and organisations getting better tooled up. And that's another, I think that a very interesting territory for research, because, as I said earlier, this is new territory. No one quite knows how it works, we've never had anything like as interconnected a global system before, so many global institutions with unclear accountabilities, ethos, etc.

On the visiting professor's point, I do think universities have a bit of a job to change and create slightly different roles. I mean, I know, I mean the college I think you're attached to, of a particular figure from a global economic institution, absolutely the perfect person to become a visiting professor; enormous knowledge, very academically knowledgeable, but didn't have the publications track record precisely because of what he'd been doing during his career and, therefore, was rejected as a visiting professor, which is a totally counter-productive decision for an academic institution to make. So maybe there do need to be slightly different roles.

And then, finally, to make the case for policy units, since we are talking about a policy unit here. I had the fortune or misfortune to visit very large numbers of presidential and prime ministerial sort of offices around Europe and the world. It's true that many of them do not have things called policy units, in the way that the UK does. Most of them have very large staffs. If you go to Berlin, or Paris, or Rome, there are huge bureaucracies servicing prime ministers; dozens or hundreds of people on each topic area. In my view they're organised quite inefficiently. They're poor at analysis. They're very bad at coordination and at looking at cross-cutting issues. And if you look at the governments which are either judged by the rankings to be the best performers, most effective as governments, or which have actually achieved success in improving their national success (whether socially or economically or environmentally), without exception, these governments have strong, cross-cutting policy and strategy teams in their heart, who are given substantial clout within the system, a fair

degree of freedom and, in turn, have lots of relationships with outside organisations. They are usually in smaller countries I'm talking about - Scandinavians, East Asians, and so on, Canada rather than the US. I think, these old government models, with large, rather stagnant, inward-looking bureaucracies are turning out to be pretty bad at coping with change and thinking. And, therefore, the task for the academic equivalents is to be multi-disciplinary, quick on your feet, and to as little as possible mirror the vices of what are found within governments. And I think some of what we've got in the UK is not bad by international standards, in terms of quality of work that's being done. We'll see how well France responds to the riots – perhaps the next few weeks are a bit of a test of their capacities.

Iain McLean: Thank you... Geoff, you've given us a great deal to think about. The theme which, I felt, kept coming back again and again, as I think many of us are conscious of, is the different pace of production in academia and in the policy world, and how each has to become more aware of the way the other does things. But, in particular, academics have to become more aware of what they have to do to be useful to policy makers.

And, on that note I'll say that I only met Michael Young once, but it certainly taught me a lesson. 1987 General Election: it was obvious to him, as to many other people, that there was a distinct failure of coordination among the electorate, many of whom were very hostile to the incumbent government, but didn't know how best to bring this about in practice. So he came to me – I think he came to a number of people at the time – and said, "I want a manual on tactical voting for 600 odd constituencies, and the election's in six weeks' time. We'll need it next week." And I started thinking about this. Excel barely existed then. Now it would be easy – you'd go to the BBC website and there's your info. Well, several all-night sessions with me and one of my graduate students - with Michael, I have to say, yapping at our tails all the time – and we did it. We produced the manual within a week. And it taught me a lesson I've not forgotten, about how, if you're to be useful in politics, you have to go at policy makers' speed. And so I'm very pleased that we've had Geoff to come here, to give us his experience from all the different places he's worked, including the one where he works now, and once again I'd just ask you to join me once again in thanking our speaker.

[Clapping]