

## **Book review**

# **Policy Problems and Policy Design**

B. Guy Peters

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In his most recent book *Policy Problems and Policy Design*, public policy pioneer Guy Peters draws on more than five decades of experience to give a considered analytical outline and critique of policy problems and policy design. Drawing on empirical evidence he leads us to consider 'new', broader and more open approaches to policy design where "the challenges of design are little changed, but approaches to meeting them are." (p.142). Peters argues for this new approach to policy design based on critiques of the old, more technocratic approach, for its narrow focus, reactive style, short-term-ness, its lack of consideration for context and its instrumentalism. In line with this is the current resistance amongst policy makers to evidence, matched only by the unprecedented amount of information available to them, making it "the best of times and the worst of times" for policy design (p.3) and highlighting the relevance of this book to a contemporary policy context.

Chapter One sets the scene with the fundamentals of policy design, including the role of humans, values and conflict, in types and models of policy design and focusing on the processes of a working policy, rather than its creation. Peters then unpicks the complex issue of policy problems in Chapter Two and, perhaps more importantly, how such problems are perceived and structured, addressing the key question: *are policy makers treating the cause or the symptoms of a policy problem?* He goes on to draw on empirical evidence as a means of critically considering the way that policy problems are phrased and framed – the definition of a problem influences the selection of instruments to tackle it – listing functional definitions with functional categories such as 'health' and 'defence'.

Policy problems are considered from a number of different angles drawing extensively on the literature, for example Dunn's characterisation of policy problems in terms of interdependency, subjectivity, artificiality and instability, to problematise the concept. Well-structured problems, Peters argues, are easier to solve with their clear goals and well-defined alternative solutions, but this approach is not always desirable because of its simplicity; therefore, he cautions, we must "seek simplicity but distrust it" (p.137).

In Chapter Three, he turns his attention to wicked, complex or just difficult problems, attempting to define their characteristics by drawing on previous empirical work (for example, Peters and Tarpley, 2016). This detailed analysis highlights the ambiguity in our understanding of 'wicked' in the field of social policy, not to mention its intricacy.

Peters' subsequent observations on wicked problems illuminate issues often couched in the underlying assumptions.

Matching policy problems with policy instruments is a recurring theme throughout the book but becomes the central focus of Chapter Four. Side effects and unintended consequences, both positive and negative, are considered in this chapter, as well as the importance of linking policy design with institutions and more specifically institutional design when considering policy delivery.

Finally, in Chapter Five and continued into Chapter Six, Peters comes to his proposal for New Policy Design based on critiques of 'old' approaches. Importantly he reiterates that "policy design ... involves careful consideration of the nature of policy problems...and how those policies.... fit into the broader social and political environment for public governance" (p.130). He emphasises the value of considering this broad 'whole system' approach without losing the valuable elements of a technocratic approach, with its focus on careful design to a very high standard regardless of context.

Peters lays out key policy design issues clearly and with an accessible narrative throughout, balancing the academic with the legislator viewpoint. The book subtly combines an argument for change and adaptation to contemporary society, alongside the value of learning from traditional technocratic approaches to policy design of the past. This blended old and new approach, encapsulated in his focus on designing policies carefully with systems in mind, acknowledges a complex socio-economic context within which policies, and the (complex) policy problems they address, are forged.

The book is not only informative and thought provoking but highly reassuring. As a social policy scholar, I find Peters' long-standing, deeply rooted knowledge in academia and in practice coupled with his acknowledgment and acceptance of inevitable messiness, difficulties and mistakes, heartening. He presents positive messages in issues such as policy ambiguity, highlighting the value of policy failure for learning.

In parts Peters' brevity on certain perspectives can come across as dismissive. For example, government 'absolution' as an approach to wicked and complex problems could be elaborated upon. As Peters points out later in the book, government administrations are short-term and policy design can suffer as a result. Absolution or the denial of responsibility for a policy problem therefore seems a highly viable approach often taken by government rather than a 'strategy that is rarely visible' (para phrased from p.79). However, Peters does give 'the political' a space in his final set of axioms, and discusses the incorporation of politics into policy design, for example the inclusion of political values in policy evaluation (p.139). While he acknowledges the difficulty of this, referring to the age-old problem of legislative bodies wanting to make their own decisions (p.139), he does argue for a closer link between governing and policy.

The breadth and depth of material and ideas covered in 142 pages are impressive, especially as regards the range of empirical evidence drawn upon, as seen in research quoted from 1989 on decision maker choices and what they are based on. However, I would have liked more examples to illustrate certain technical points, for example to clarify the concept of 'automatic instruments'.

His concluding ten key messages re-emphasise the value of the book as both a reference to a wide and deep body of knowledge and a valuable contribution to academic thinking on the future direction of policy problems and design. Amongst other things this must "begin with policy problems; be future orientated; be not only top-down and include context, institutional design, flexibility and participatory design" (distilled from pp.130-140). These guidelines help to fulfil the author's aim of "developing academic thinking and improving government performance" (p.131) in a contemporary setting.

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## References

Peters, B.G. and Tarpley, M.M. (2016) *Are Wicked Problems Really So Wicked? Perceptions of Policy Problems*. Paper presented at a conference on Wicked Problems, Wageningen University, the Netherlands, October 18<sup>th</sup>.