Honesty is the best policy: why the civil service policy profession needs to keep talking about the progress it’s making. [1]

Policy makers from across government gathered at the Institute for Government recently to reflect on the progress made since their plan Twelve Actions to Professionalise Policy Making [2] was published in October 2013. And the mood was upbeat – there has been progress on a number of fronts in the last year.

The profession itself now has greater central capacity in the Policy Profession Support Unit, and better departmental visibility for heads of policy profession. With this has come ambitious projects to define the skills and knowledge expected of policy makers, and to embed these in a pilot Master in Public Policy degree and capability assessments for policy civil servants (both of which have recently been out to tender).

The profession is also pushing the envelope in other areas, with a ‘policy lab’ set up in the Cabinet Office to work on a series of service design challenges; a welter of new Policy Schools run by departments for high potential policy makers; and the small but dynamic Open Policy Making [3] team are using their blog and Twitter to spread the gospel online.

A fragile progress?

But as the Head of the Policy Profession, Chris Wormald, acknowledged at the event: the Civil Service has been here before. In our 2011 report Policy Making in the Real World [4], we charted the potted recent history of professionalising policy making. There is a clear precedent in the ‘Professional Skills for Government’ agenda in the mid-2000s, when a flurry of initiatives was begun, competency frameworks rewritten and the policy profession given formal recognition – but early momentum was lost and lasting change proved elusive.

So are there any grounds for optimism about sustaining the progress made so far under the Twelve Actions agenda?

The most encouraging sign is that more policy makers are taking it upon themselves to highlight the gap between where the profession is and where they want it to be. On training and development, on working methods, on knowledge management, there is wider constituency for change, seizing opportunities to discuss what better policy making would look like. This is a long way off reaching the whole of the 17,000-strong profession, but it begins to change the default settings.

With more departments using policy standards or policy tests (as we proposed in Making Policy Better [5]) there is now a shared language for policy makers to challenge each other on how good their policies are – and to stand up to some of the pressure to cut corners.

Treasury-led plans for ‘policy audits’ being trialled in five departments this year will encourage teams to look back at a couple of major policies each year in the cold light of implementation and consider whether the policy advice at the time was as good as it could have been in the evidence it used and the risks it identified.

And there has been a profusion of opportunities for policy professionals to share their experiences with each other – including the popular Leaders Teaching Leaders events where senior policy officials offer personal reflections on effective policy making.

Permanent professionalisation

All this talk could be dismissed as navel-gazing from a group of people accused of being more inclined towards thinking rather than doing. But the history of past reforms shows that lasting change doesn’t come from rewriting guidance at the centre, but from shifting mindsets across departments.

There is no end-point to the process of ‘professionalising’ – willingness to discuss skills, standards, and success are part of what being a profession means, as you can see in the law or medicine. The true sign of a self-confident policy profession over the coming years will be its willingness to extend these conversations to the other professional groups on which they depend, to sceptical ministers and even to the public.
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Links:
[3] https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/