Intersections and Innovations

Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector

The Muttart Foundation

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Acknowledgements

For far too long, Canada has lacked a comprehensive resource examining Canada's charitable sector. That has now ended.

The Muttart Foundation has spent many years focusing on building the capacity of charities in this country. The publication of this collection is another contribution to that effort. By understanding more about itself, the sector can continue to develop and find new ways to serve Canadians and those in need outside our nation.

The authors of these essays bring different perspectives on the role and inner workings of Canada's charities. Collectively, they bring an unprecedented insight into the work of organizations whose diversity is exceeded only by their desire to serve.

It is difficult to express adequate appreciation to Dr. Susan Phillips of Carleton University for her leadership of this project. She has been a source of encouragement, persuasion, cajoling and improving authors from across the country. Her efforts now bear fruit as we make this material available to students, academics, practitioners and others interested in the history and future of Canada's charities.

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The work of all of these individuals has come together in this resource which we dedicate to all of those in, or interested in, Canada's charitable sector.

Malcolm Burrows, President

Bob Wyatt, Executive Director

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Part III Innovation and Intersections

Intersections with Governments: Services and Policy Engagement

Chapter 31

Reflections on Teaching Public Policy Advocacy Skills

Allan Northcott
Max Bell Foundation

Canadians benefit from a strong civil society that functions in multiple ways, including serving the interests of the vulnerable, building social cohesion, enriching the public discourse, and informing the development of public policy. It is this last function – public policy development – that is the focus of this chapter.

Civil society organizations have long played a range of roles in public policy development. One of the assumptions of this chapter is that they should, and they should do so to the best of their abilities. That is also the key assumption behind the mission of Max Bell Foundation (where I have worked since 1998), which in essence aims to support Canadian charities that seek to inform public policy decisions.

By the early 2000s, we had come to understand that it is not only financial support that charities need to advance their policy proposals. In many cases, they need professional development too. Many charities have unique hard data, research expertise, deep frontline experience, convening power, and "campaign" skills (more on that below), but relatively few have the skill and understanding required to effectively advocate to influence public policy.

Effective public policy advocacy amounts to providing good policy advice to governments. One can hardly do better in defining what that means than Liz Mulholland in her (2011) summary: good policy advice is "*sound* fiscal, tax, regulatory, programmatic, and other policy advice that governments can *feasibly* implement *without unwarranted political risk* and with reasonable *confidence* that it may yield the desired end goal" (Mulholland, 2011; emphases added).

Max Bell Foundation was inspired to learn, in late 2005, about an initiative of the Maytree Foundation in Toronto. Maytree had launched a training program for Toronto-area charities to help them understand and participate in the public policy process. Their program was called the Public Policy Training Institute (PPTI). After attending the sessions, seeking Maytree's advice, and with Maytree's blessing, Max Bell Foundation launched an Alberta-based PPTI in 2008. (The model has since also been reproduced by the United Way of the Lower Mainland in British Columbia).

Max Bell Foundation has delivered the PPTI annually since 2008. With each passing year, we're more confident that providing professional development for charities that want to do public policy advocacy helps fill an important and largely underserved need.

Defining Public Policy Advocacy

Many of the public policy innovations we enjoy as Canadians may not have been developed at all without the guiding influence of our charities. Regulation of tobacco products, removal of bisphenol A from baby bottles, high-quality mental health services, the registered disability savings plan, the elimination of acid rain, et cetera, et cetera – the list is long and growing by the month. All of these have emerged as part of our social fabric in large part because of the expert interventions of Canadian charities. Canadian society is much the better because of this dynamic.

That said, the reality is that few charities undertake public policy advocacy in either a systematic or sophisticated way. Based on survey data from 2015, Imagine Canada estimates that about two-thirds of charities report doing some public policy advocacy at least once a year. At first blush that sounds like a lot, but two-thirds of those do it "a few times a year or less." About half of those charities that claim to be doing public policy advocacy do little (or nothing) beyond sending information to elected or public officials (Lasby & Cordeaux, 2016).

Among charities that see contributing to public policy as important to achieving their missions, most identify a lack of expertise within their organization as a key barrier. Max Bell Foundation's unpublished surveys indicate it's almost as important a barrier as lack of financial support to do the work.

Given this shortage of expertise, it should be no surprise that many of the individuals who enter the Max Bell PPTI bring with them a handful of assumptions that need to be unlearned. Chief among these is that public policy advocacy is roughly equivalent to developing and exercising political leverage. This assumption finds expression in beliefs such as:

- "If only I could have 15 minutes with the Minister of X, I could make my case, she would 'get it,' and then the problem would be resolved after she tells her underlings what to change";
- "If only party X were governing rather than party Y, this wouldn't be an issue"; or
- "If I can get enough people to send emails or letters to an elected official's office, she'll see how important this issue is to the electorate and will do what we want her to."

No doubt there are times when each of these beliefs is accurate, but they would be the rare exceptions. One could fill a volume with explaining why these tactics are unlikely to lead to success in securing public policy change. In the PPTI, we offer an explanation by spending considerable time helping participants understand how governments actually work, how specific decisions get made, and the enablers and constraints on those decisions. We often sum things up by noting, among other things:

- By sheer numbers alone, most of the decisions made by governments are not made by ministers. Taking up the precious time of ministers with issues they do not normally deal with is likely a poor tactic, and one that may limit the odds of securing future meetings. It's a far better tactic to elevate your policy "ask" only as high in the hierarchy of government as it needs to go to be resolved. On the big issues that are the proper purview of ministers, they can (and often do) say "no." Getting ministers to "yes" on issues usually requires significant government process and often requires the minister to dip into her own political capital. That all can and does happen, but rarely.
- Good public policy advocacy will advance an issue regardless of the political party currently governing. You may not get the "win" you want with a particular government, but you can keep making incremental progress. If the issue you're concerned with isn't a priority for the current government, you have an opportunity to improve the quality of your policy proposal and to build positive working relationships with public servants. Moreover, the more difficult issues (poverty, homelessness, climate change, etc.) will almost certainly transcend any particular party's term in government, so you should have a longer-term strategy anyway.
- Elected officials receive petitions, form letters, and boilerplate emails all the time. They are informed and sometimes persuaded by them, but they already operate with quite sophisticated ways of assessing just how important this or that issue is to voters. Besides, governments typically already have very full agendas of issues they're trying to deal with.

It's this last point, I would argue, that is central to distinguishing *public policy advocacy* from other kinds of efforts to secure a particular decision from government.

Public policy advocacy is about helping governments do better at something they're already doing, or do well at something they've already committed to doing. It's not about trying to persuade governments to add or remove things from their agendas.

That advice is often puzzling to charities. Some disagree with it quite strongly. Based on my own experience with the more than 200 people who have completed the PPTI, I'd suggest the following reasons why:

Misapprehension About How Governments Work

While most of us have had a class or course on civics, few remember it particularly well. The inner workings of government are, by and large, a mystery. It's a generalization, but I'd suggest that for most of us, the gap in our knowledge of government is filled largely by media narratives. Even for those who are curious and attentive, much of what we're able to learn about government comes through media, whether it's credible reportage or not. Media versions of government activity tend to be oversimplified, spun to be provocative, and almost always framed in terms of partisan battles.

Even for citizens who think of themselves as relatively engaged, connection to the operations of governments seldom goes beyond attending to media stories, voting, and maybe occasionally signing a petition or writing to an elected representative (Turcotte, 2015). Getting a reasonably accurate picture of how governments actually operate requires a significant commitment of time and energy.

Real vs. Ideal

Charities have missions related to making the world a better place, in all the myriad ways that gets defined. Not only do these organizations want to make the world better, so too do the individuals who make them run. Those in charities work toward visions, inside organizational cultures shaped by a shared commitment to improving the lives of others and usually alongside colleagues who share a personal commitment to social change.

This is perhaps the greatest strength of charities. A culture oriented toward an ideal future, strengthened by the mutual commitments of colleagues toward that future, can be a powerful engine for change and a source of organizational resilience. However, as Witt (2018) notes, "unfortunately, in many cases in the nonprofit sector, we've professionalized the community out of the community sector. Often times, professionals in the sector are creating and delivering their own 'expert' solutions, with limited involvement and feedback from the communities most affected." Our idealism, especially when it skews toward insular, can sometimes separate us from hard realities.

Public servants and elected officials generally share this same commitment to the public good. However, public policy gets made in a very non-ideal world, in very non-ideal ways. There's a great old saying that the two things you never want to see are sausages being made and public policy being made.

Public policy is typically made under limited time and information constraints by people trying to balance competing (or contradictory) ideals, all while responding to practical demands. It is almost always the result of a series of negotiated compromises. As Bismarck is quoted as saying, "Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best." Next best, or compromises, can be difficult to accept for those deeply committed to grand ideals.

The Tools at Hand

Many charities have a "campaign mentality" woven into their operating culture, for two reasons. First, many take some kind of social change as their core purpose and have strategies, tactics, lines of work, rewards structures, and cultures designed around that purpose. Second, charities typically have fundraising as a deep organizational priority, and structures and processes oriented to it. The fundraising prerogative is so deeply embedded in the culture of charities that the term "campaign" is common shorthand for the range of activities intended to secure financial support from different categories of donors.

When one has a useful hammer, all problems can begin to look like a nail. The same set of tools and approaches that are successful in raising funds, or making broad social change, are not necessarily the best tools and approaches for doing public policy advocacy.

Given these factors, it is no surprise that charities need to unlearn some assumptions and shift gears in order to find success doing public policy advocacy.

Above I suggested that charities often assume public policy advocacy can be equated to adopting a "campaign" approach and exercising political leverage. By "political leverage," I mean efforts to make change by engaging with and mobilizing groups of people, who in turn exercise influence or pressure on others. This includes the range of activities parties undertake in the exercise of partisan politics, but it can take other forms as well, including "engagement organizing" (Price, 2017) and "spreading social innovation" (e.g., Etmanksi, 2015). I want to emphasize that this kind of work is essential to a healthy democracy, worthy of doing and supporting, and potentially very effective. As I'll suggest below, it can also be an essential complement to more targeted policy advocacy.

That said, political leverage is different in kind from public policy advocacy. Political leverage seeks to change thoughts and behaviours of groups of people, who will then (it's hoped) carry forward and change larger systems (through consumption patterns, voting patterns, public discourse, etc.). By contrast, public policy advocacy seeks to inform particular policy choices made by a relatively small number of elected officials or public servants. Generally speaking, the way political leverage can shape decisions of governments is by influencing *what* gets on their agendas. Public policy advocacy does so by influencing *when* and *how* issues on a government's agenda get addressed. The former is sometimes referred to as an "outside" campaign; the latter, an "inside" campaign.

For example, the policy decisions related to reducing greenhouse gas emissions currently in place in Canada are rooted in a long history that involves both political leverage and public policy advocacy. Canadian climate policy can be traced back to at least 1987 and the publication of the Brundtland Commission report. Between then and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, much of the work in developing climate policy in Canada could be characterized as "political leverage." Many civil society organizations used a range of tools (demonstrations, public education campaigns, newspaper op-eds, letter-writing campaigns, etc.) to exercise the political leverage that played roles in the federal government's decision to sign on to the Kyoto protocol in 1997 and ratify it in Parliament in 2002.

Once climate change was clearly on the agendas of Canadian governments, attention began to shift to policy options. During the decade following Canada's ratification of Kyoto, three broad policy options took shape: regulate emissions, subsidize technologies and behaviours that reduce emissions, or put a price on emissions. Many civil society organizations have undertaken public policy advocacy to improve understanding of and advocate for the implementation of some combination of these policy options. The tools they use to do so, however, are not the same tools used to get the issue on the government agenda in the first place. They are more likely to include things like policy-oriented research, knowledge mobilization, stakeholder consultations, targeted meetings with public servants and elected officials, et cetera.

Dividing the history of policy development as in the example above is, of course, an over-simplification. It does, however, illustrate the distinction between "political leverage" and "public policy advocacy." Getting to a desired public policy change often requires both, and may even require both at the same time (e.g., "keeping up the pressure" while "developing a solution"). But they are two *distinct* strategies, requiring *different* activity sets, skills, and resources.

Before offering an account of how the Max Bell PPTI aims to improve the skills and knowledge related specifically to public policy advocacy, let me turn first to the question of why a charity would invest any of its scarce resources in doing it.

Why Undertake Public Policy Advocacy?

For virtually all charities, resources are scarce. Most charity CEOs I've had the good fortune to know spend considerable energy trying to maximize the positive impacts of the resources they have available. That often translates to seeking to deliver only the most effective programs, targeting efforts where there is the least overlap with other organizations, collaborating when it makes practical sense, strategizing over "root causes" of problems, and trimming expenses wherever possible.

Public policy advocacy seems, at first blush, a poor fit with these imperatives. Public policy advocacy takes place in a complex and uncertain context. Its outcomes are inevitably uncertain, and – at best – it may yield a negotiated compromise. So why do it? Well, above I offered the beginnings of a list of public policy "wins" that have dramatically improved Canadians' quality of life, and that wouldn't have happened were it not for the efforts of charity leaders. When it's successful, policy advocacy can produce very powerful mission-specific outcomes. Aggregating up from more specific policy issues, I'd add two more general arguments for doing policy advocacy.

To Strengthen Democracy

The contemporary geopolitical space drives home the point that we cannot take democracy for granted. The quality of a democracy depends on considerably more than citizens turning out to vote in elections. The overall health of our democracy can be measured, in part, by the extent to which those votes are informed and motivated by citizens engaging with each other around public issues. Many Canadian charities, in their missions, actions, and volunteer bases, are elemental expressions of citizen aspirations to participate in collectively caring for each other and governing ourselves. As such, they are an important platform for engagement between citizens and the elected officials and public servants who act on their behalf.

To Leverage Expertise in the Pursuit of Public Good

Through their delivery of essential publicly supported programs, many charities acquire a wealth of knowledge about how government policies affect people's lives. Charities are well placed to study, assess, and comment on those policies. Beyond service delivery, their expertise is a vital source of information for governments to help guide policy decisions. It is therefore essential that charities continue to offer their direct knowledge of social issues to public policy debates.

Furthermore, governments need good advice. Much has been written about the diminishing capacity of governments in Canada – at all levels – to do the kind of policy development necessary to respond to the challenges we collectively face. At the same time as their resources are shrinking, governments are facing heightened scrutiny and expectations from an electorate that itself is increasingly diverse. Canadian charities can help in a range of ways, including bringing frontline knowledge to bear, convening stakeholders, facilitating and informing dialogue, delivering and assessing demonstrations and pilots, and providing neutral spaces for engagement.

Adding to the practical rationale for charities to engage in policy development, Roger Gibbins (2016: 1) makes a compelling case that they have a moral obligation as well. He argues that the obligation

> … extends well beyond charities that are contractually involved in the delivery of public services. Charitable status and the financial benefits it conveys create a moral imperative to pursue the public good and to be engaged as policy advocates in political and ethical debates about policy and social change. The very concept of a charity carries with it an obligation for policy advocacy that sets charities apart from the private and more broadly defined non-profit sectors. In short, charitable status confers a privileged position that comes at a price: that charities necessarily assume a moral obligation to pursue the public good.

Since 1998, Max Bell Foundation has fundamentally taken on board these arguments for doing public policy advocacy. The PPTI has become one of the key ways we deliver on our mission to develop innovations "that impact public policies and practices." The structure and content of the PPTI has evolved since it was first launched in 2008. Twelve years in, it includes the following elements.

The Max Bell Foundation Public Policy Training Institute

Many non-governmental funders who seek to engage the public policy process, either directly or by supporting other charities in their efforts, do so with a particular perspective or public policy objective. The Max Bell PPTI takes a different approach. Representatives of charities are admitted on the basis of their interest in policy advocacy and their organization's capacity to apply the lessons of the PPTI in pursuit of their own missions, whatever those may be. Max Bell Foundation is agnostic about the policy objectives of PPTI participants.

Brenda Eaton (2014), who has served on the Max Bell PPTI faculty since inception, summarizes the program concisely:

> The program has three objectives. The first is to enhance participants' understanding of how federal, provincial, and municipal governments make policy decisions, so that they can participate more effectively in the public policy process. The second objective is to provide participants with training in how to develop practical and workable policy alternatives through both formal and informal learning formats, which include lectures, case studies, readings, panel discussions, group work, and one-on-one discussions with the faculty. The third objective is to have each participant make significant progress on a public policy issue that would improve his or her organization's ability to accomplish its mission.

A broad array of nonprofit organizations has participated in the Max Bell PPTI. Their missions are focused on social services, health, agriculture, environment, volunteerism, housing, and many other public issues. As an added element of diversity, the PPTI also tries to involve people from all parts of Alberta – the urban centres of Calgary and Edmonton, the smaller cities, more rural areas, and in some cases from out of the province.

The group meets in six two-day sessions over a six-month period, alternating between Calgary and Edmonton. The faculty are practitioners from diverse corners of the public policy arena. The common thread is that they all have extensive first-hand experience in the mysterious ways of public policy development. Equally important, they are all advocates for a robust public policy process. The faculty includes:

- a former Alberta cabinet minister;
- the head of a regional think tank;
- the head of a research organization and former assistant deputy minister;
- the CEO of a large nonprofit organization active in public policy development; and
- a former deputy minister to a Canadian premier.

The faculty are assisted by guest speakers, including researchers, government-relations experts, municipal politicians, and current civil servants.

Before the course begins, and as part of the selection process, each participant must identify a public policy issue he or she wishes to pursue. This must be a substantive issue, as distinct from a request for more funding or resources for their organization. It may or may not be something that is actually "in play"; what matters is that it be a proposal that can be used as a case study and learning tool for the duration of the course.

The Max Bell PPTI faculty spend half a day following each year of the program to debrief. Over the 11 years the PPTI has been operating, the following "lessons learned" have been reinforced:

Matching a curriculum to the messy and dynamic reality of public policy–making is an ongoing challenge. Depending on their own backgrounds and experience, and on the particulars of the "live" public policy proposal they're working on, participants inevitably have differing views on which elements of the curriculum are more important and what sequence they should come in. As Eaton (2014) notes, "those involved know that the process of public policy development and adoption is never straightforward or linear. Public policy often starts in the middle and works back before going forward, or it travels in increasingly tighter or broader circles. The course seeks to recognize this reality and so the individual modules often overlap."

Access to and interaction with the Max Bell PPTI faculty is consistently identified by participants as one of the most useful elements of the program. It would be difficult to overstate the value of faculty members who have both a) significant direct experience with government and b) a deep commitment to the idea that charities should be engaged in policy development. The Max Bell PPTI assigns each participant to one of the faculty members, who acts as their mentor during the six months of the institute. The faculty mentors engage with participants around a set of six assignments designed to cement the learnings of the PPTI.

Participants tend to be senior in their organizations, have some experience with public policy, and represent a very broad diversity of public issues.[1] Unsurprisingly, they learn as much from each other as from the faculty. We aim to provide as much time for group exercises and offline interaction as possible, and participants consistently identify this as among the most useful elements of the PPTI.

Having participants work on a "live" public policy proposal during their time in the PPTI has proven invaluable. While it is useful to have some degree of theoretical understanding of the policy process, the roles of research, assessing policy options, implementation strategies, and communications strategies, it is the direct practical application of them that participants value most highly.

One indicator of the program's success is the extent to which participants have succeeded in achieving the policy proposal they developed during the PPTI. Of the more than 225 individuals who have completed the program, more than a dozen have succeeded with their policy "ask" (a handful of them during their terms in the PPTI). Many more have kept us updated as they continue to pursue an initiative that had its early development during the PPTI. And more still have moved on to other policy proposals and told us how their PPTI experience has set them up for success.

Another indicator of success – more challenging to measure with certainty – is the number of connections between public policy entrepreneurs within the charitable sector. We're aware of a small number of policy coalitions that either began or were reinforced during the PPTI. Those coalitions continue to engage with governments in the shared pursuit of the public good.

Where To from Here?

In December 2018, the Implementation Act associated with the 2018 federal budget received royal assent. Included in the act was a significant change to the legislation that impacts charities' ability to participate in what is now called "public policy dialogue and development." The legislative changes, and CRA's guidance, mark the end of a major chapter in the ways in which Canadian charities are encouraged by the federal government to engage in the development of public policy. The chapter began in 2012 with a CRA audit project that sought to review charities' adherence to CRA's "political activities" rules.[2] Central to this chapter in the history of Canadian charities is the *Report of the Consultation Panel on the Political Activities of Charities*[3] and the federal government's response to the report.[4] What neither of those documents can reflect is the tremendous collective effort, on the part of many individuals and on behalf of many Canadian charities, to improve the regulatory regime within which public policy advocacy takes place.

I mention this not only to emphasize that charities now have greater clarity and more regulatory latitude for their policy advocacy objectives. I also want to flag that I believe – some may say optimistically – that getting to this new policy environment has helped galvanize the charitable sector's collective commitment to public policy advocacy. For more than five years, dozens of individuals working in a range of organizations (both charities and allied professions) contributed significant time and energy to a broad, coordinated policy advocacy effort aimed at improving the environment surrounding the conduct of policy advocacy. While of course only time will tell, I expect that the relationships and learnings that developed in this effort will endure. My experience with umbrella organizations in the sector, and with the broad range of charities I come into contact with, leads me to think that policy advocacy by charities will grow in the future.

If that's true, the need for the Max Bell PPTI – and similar programs – will grow as well.

For our part at Max Bell Foundation, we're now preparing to make the curriculum of our PPTI available as a free online learning resource. We have had a number of inquiries from other organizations asking for advice and help as they develop shorter, more targeted professional-development opportunities for charities wanting to do public policy advocacy. And we're exploring – notably with Maytree and the United Way of the Lower Mainland – how we might leverage our respective programs in ways that will further serve Canadian charities in their pursuit of public policy advocacy.

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Notes

[1] See https://maxbell.org/our-work/programs/public-policy-training-institute/ppti-participants/

[2] For a fuller account, see https://thephilanthropist.ca/2015/07/a-chilly-time-for-charities-audits-politics-and-preventing-poverty/

[3] https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/about-charities-directorate/political-activities-consultation/consultation-panel-report-2016-2017.html

[4] https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/news/2019/03/the-government-of-canada-delivers-on-its-commitment-to-modernize-the-rules-governing-the-charitable-sector.html

Biography

Allan Northcott, Max Bell Foundation

Allan Northcott is president of Max Bell Foundation, a private grantmaking foundation based in Calgary. Its mission is to support projects across Canada that bring the expertise and experience of civil society organizations to bear on the development of public policy. Its program areas are health, education, and environment, and its policy-oriented mission means the Foundation also attends closely to the regulation of charities in Canada.