

Think piece

The emerging Scottish model: avoiding everything becoming nothing

James Mitchell, Professor of Public Policy at The University of Edinburgh and Co-Director of What Works Scotland, considers how definitions of a 'Scottish model' are shaping thinking about policy delivery.

What Works Scotland aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

We are working with Community Planning Partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) to:

- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
- encourage collaborative learning with a range of local authority, business, public sector and community partners
- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations get the skills and knowledge they need to use and interpret evidence
- create case studies for wider sharing and sustainability

A further nine areas are working with us to enhance learning, comparison and sharing. We will also link with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere. During the programme, we will scale up and share more widely with all local authority areas across Scotland.

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- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- Joint Improvement Team
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Education for Scotland
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

This Think Piece is one of a series of papers that What Works Scotland is publishing to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform.

James Mitchell is Professor of Public Policy, Edinburgh University and Co-Director of What Works Scotland. He was a member of the Christie Commission. This article is based on a series of discussions, seminars and events taking place over the last six months.

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Introduction

There is increasing talk of the emergence of a distinctive 'Scottish model' of policy-making, but what is meant by the 'emerging Scottish model' of policy-making is not clear. Like many similar ideas, its value may lie more in its potential to **mobilise support** for a variety of reforms than a strict prescription of how policy should be made. Its very looseness may, therefore, be part of its strength as well as a weakness. The obvious weakness in any under-defined idea is, to borrow from Brian Hogwood, that if the Scottish model means everything then it comes to mean nothing.¹

We can understand how the emerging Scottish model can be put to good use in two ways:

- by outlining **what it is NOT**, i.e. what the emerging model aims to replace
- by outlining its **components** and developing a coherent sense of the model.

The issue is whether a new 'policy style' is emerging and, if so, what it replaces and what that new style represents. The very notion that a policy style exists is itself open to debate as it implies homogeneity across sectors² when there may be significant diversity in policy styles across and indeed within policy sectors in Scotland.

Backdrop

Ideas do not emerge from nowhere. Context is all important and the idea of an emerging Scottish model has many roots. The Independent Budget Review's sobering report proposed a 'more strategic, longer-term framework' to meet future challenges.³ The Christie Commission outlined the components of a new way of making and delivering policy. Many challenges were identified that required new responses: financial, environmental, demographic. Are institutions and processes fit for purpose in the twenty-first century? Even apart from these challenges, there are the deep-rooted 'wicked problems' that continue to afflict Scotland. As Christie reported,

Despite a series of Scottish Government initiatives and significant growth in public spending since devolution, on most key measures social and economic inequalities have remained unchanged or become more pronounced... A cycle of deprivation and low aspiration has been allowed to persist because preventative measures have not been prioritised. It is estimated that as much as 40 per cent of all spending on public services is accounted for by interventions that could have been avoided by prioritising a preventative approach.⁴

The fiscal backdrop has been an important stimulant. After about a decade of 5 per cent real terms increases in public spending, we have moved into an era of public financial

retrenchment. And the worst has yet to come. An important recent book highlighted the special kind of politics associated with fiscal squeeze in which blame games are encouraged.⁶ The perfect storm demands a new approach but nobody should be in any doubt about the challenges ahead.

Donald Rumsfeld's distinction for future-planning is useful, 'There are **known knowns**; there are things we know that we know. There are **known unknowns**; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also **unknown unknowns** – there are things we do not know we don't know.' But there is also a fourth category that is often neglected: the **unknown knowns**.

Of course, much of this is open to interpretation and, as ever, issue definition is highly contested. There is often no agreement on the **known knowns**: we may agree that there is a substantial problem but not on the causes. The Independent Budget Review (IBR) was not alone in identifying a cluttered institutional landscape as part of the **known knowns** that needed to be addressed. The IBR noted, '**For a small country, Scotland has a plethora of institutions, including 32 local authorities, 23 NHS bodies, 8 police forces, 20 universities, 43 colleges, and over 1000 other public bodies.**' Some of this has been addressed since the IBR reported in summer 2010 and there has been significant institutional change in policing, fire and rescue and the college sector. The diagnosis of having too many local authorities has been challenged by the Commission on Local Democracy which noted that Scotland has the lowest ratio of councils to population in Europe.⁷ So even the **known knowns** create challenges.

Much to contend with lies somewhere between known knowns and known unknowns. Our changing demography is an example – we know it is changing, but imprecisely – few predicted the extent of demographic change that has occurred in the last two decades and while we may have a broad sense of further change leading to an ageing population, demography is an inexact science.⁸ There are energy and environmental challenges that have implications across public services but again the nature, scale and causes are contested. There will, of course, be challenges that are as yet unforeseen and unforeseeable – the **unknown unknowns**.

But here we suggest that the existence of a fourth category, what Slavoj Žižek has referred to as **unknown knowns**, may prove the most challenging. By this, he means matters that we don't know or fail to acknowledge that we know. This was expressed well by Jean-Claude Juncker in his famous comment on the crisis in the Eurozone, 'we all know what to do; we just don't know how to get re-elected after we have done it'. And, of course, that statement is contested. In challenging times, we may be disinclined to face up to problems whether consciously or otherwise. That may be evident especially when risk-averse norms are dominant.

What the Scottish Model is not

Many policies are defined in contrast to an existing policy, or an understanding (sometimes a caricature) of an existing policy. *New Politics*, for example, became a myth around which a set of alternatives were articulated a generation ago

in Scottish politics. What was deemed 'old' was a mixture of existing practice and caricature. The power of the myth lay in its value in mobilizing support for change rather than its accurate portrayal of existing practices.

Similarly, an implicit understanding of where public policy has gone 'wrong' underlies the case for a new Scottish model. What is opposed in the old Scottish policy-making model include an approach characterized by:

- top-down
- paternalism
- working in silos
- acute focus on curing problems after they arise.

A key element in this understanding is a crude negative caricature of past and existing policy-making. The notion that all policy-making has been top-down, paternalistic, silo-based ignoring prevention is absurd. And each of these weaknesses might be expressed positively and will have their place. Indeed, a key element of the emerging Scottish model is the need to understand why existing practices – whether desired or otherwise – exist. Throwing the baby out with the bathwater is a danger in any reform process.

Weaknesses – perceived and real – are important mobilisers and means of identifying the shape of reform.

The components of an emerging Scottish model

If the emerging Scottish model arises out of a critique of an existing policy-making style, then what is being offered in its place? The elements of a new style of policy-making owe much to the four pillars outlined in the Christie Commission Report:

- *Reforms must aim to **empower individuals and communities** receiving public services by involving them in the design and delivery of the services they use.*
- *Public service providers must be required to work much more closely in **partnership, to integrate service provision** and thus improve the outcomes they achieve.*
- *We must prioritise expenditure on public services which **prevent negative outcomes** from arising.*
- *And our whole system of public services – public, third and private sectors – must become **more efficient** by reducing duplication and sharing services wherever possible.*

A variety of key terms crop up in reports and discussions of the new Scottish model. Included amongst these, all drawn from Christie, are:

<i>Personalisation</i>	<i>Early intervention</i>
<i>Empowerment</i>	<i>Effectiveness</i>
<i>Partnership</i>	<i>Consistent data gathering</i>
<i>Accountability</i>	<i>Greater transparency</i>
<i>Failure demand</i>	<i>Bottom-up reforms</i>
<i>Preventative spending</i>	

Many other terms and ideas emerge from even a cursory glance at debate on public service reform: **assets based approaches; co-production; evidence-based policy-making; resilience; wellbeing** and the list goes on. Indeed, reform processes are marked by a tendency to invent or reinvent terms in efforts to sound reform-minded and appear ahead of the game. This raises the danger that sound bites displace reform, efforts are channeled into looking and sounding good rather than achieving good.

We have become adept at inventing the language of reform, with new terms invented or old terms polished up to be used as evidence of reform-mindedness. This is not to criticize those who use or even invent these terms. We need to acknowledge that an abundance of ideas can be a form of displacement activity. A key challenge is to work out how, where and when such terms can usefully be operationalized. Are there primary ideas within this emerging Scottish model? Is change to be ever present – an endless revolution? We run the danger of *initiative-itis*, the 'tendency to launch an endless stream of disconnected innovations that no-one could possibly manage'⁹ resulting in policy overload.

The **unit of analysis** is not always clear in discussions of the emerging Scottish model. Are these ideas and approaches of equal relevance in all policy areas and at all levels? Is this shift in policy style only applicable in the broad field of social policy? How would personalization be applied in energy policy? When we refer to a 'system-wide change' what exactly is the 'system' being referred to? Is there a Scottish policy-making system or a series of systems, each very different depending on the policy under scrutiny?

The looseness of much of the language surrounding debate on the emerging Scottish model is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is challenging in being all-inclusive. Expectations of 'systems-wide change' does not account for the absence of a system and the existence of numerous policy communities and policy arenas. But it is also an opportunity to shape and define the emerging Scottish model through deliberation. The simple fact is that there can be no single solution, no magic bullet nor even an answer, only a series of responses each contributing to the specific while informing other policy communities and arenas.

An emerging Scottish model or models?

It seems more appropriate to consider whether there is an overarching emerging Scottish model within which a series of approaches exist, rather than a single model. The search for a Scottish model is likely to prove illusory if this means a uniformly applied approach across a range of policy making. Each policy-maker or commentator will tend to privilege one element or some elements over others. The range of policy arenas and communities makes it dangerous to expect a single policy style to emerge. Though early work on policy styles sought to identify national styles,¹⁰ this failed to account for the diversity within any national 'system'. The emphasis in this early literature was on prevailing approaches to consultation. Consultation is only a very small element in

any policy style and our understanding of consultation has moved on. That is a lesson we would be well advised to heed.

The plurality of elements, ideas, policy arenas and communities requires us to take care to avoid imposing one model everywhere when in fact diverse needs require diverse models or at least emphasis. Aware also of the danger of initiative-itis is equally important.

In conclusion, the very idea of an emerging Scottish model is useful symbolically as a means of mobilizing support and re-focusing attention on critical areas. But there needs to be more effort in clarifying what it means and how its elements fit together.

¹Brian Hogwood, 'If Consultation is Everything then Maybe It's Nothing', *Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics*, no. 44, 1986.

²See Peter John, *Analysing Public Policy*, 2nd edition, London, Routledge 2012, p.62, 186.

³Independent Budget Review Report, 2012, p.12, para. 57, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/919/0102410.pdf>

⁴Report of the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (Christie), 2011, p.viii.

⁵D. Heald and C. Hood, 'The Politics of Fiscal Squeeze', in C. Hood, D. Heald and R. Himax (eds), *When the Party's Over*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p.10.

⁶C. Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-Preservation in Government*, Princeton University Press, 2011.

⁷*Effective Democracy*, Report of the Commission on Local Democracy, CoSLA, 2014. p.14.

⁸Estimates are important so long as they are treated with care. The population aged 65 and over '... is **estimated** to increase by 21 per cent between 2006 and 2016, and will be 62 per cent bigger by 2031. For those aged 85 and over, the population will rise by 38 per cent by 2016 and 144 per cent by 2031. This is particularly significant, as the need for care is far greater among the over 85 population... around £4.5 billion was spent in total on health and social care for people aged over 65 in 2006-2007... this figure will need to increase by £1.1 billion by 2016, and by £3.5 billion, or 74 per cent, by 2031.' (**my emphasis**) *Reshaping Care for Older People*, Scottish Government, 2010.

⁹Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. 4th ed., Teachers College Press, 2007.

¹⁰J. Richardson (ed.), *Policy Styles in Western Europe*, London Routledge originally 1982 republished 2013.

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