

Book Review: Saving politics from the shopping mall

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Rescuing Policy: The Case for Public Engagement

By Don Lenihan

The Public Policy Forum

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Don't be fooled. Don Lenihan's new book from the printing press at the Public Policy Forum may be titled Rescuing Policy but it is voters he actually hopes to emancipate. From what, exactly? The muscular success of the 'consumer model of politics' which, Lenihan argues, has left our federal government allergic to big ideas, hostile to open decision-making and addicted to bite-sized policy offerings that leave our nation's true challenges largely unassaulted.

If that sounds like a de facto critique of the Harper Conservatives, your hearing need not be tested. Although rarely direct in tone, it is apparent from word one that Lenihan is gravely concerned by the approach of the current federal government. After all, Harper's team has transformed the consumer model into a science of electoral success. Micro-policies such as tax credits for minor league hockey are carefully tested in advance and then marketed with the secure knowledge that they will win approval among distinct slices of the public. Such initiatives are peddled as part of a direct transaction: particular policies earn specific votes. Hence, the analogy to consumerism.

Contrary to what some in a frequently breathless Parliamentary Press Gallery might have us believe, however, this is not a particularly new phenomenon. Indeed, what occupies Lenihan are two consequential developments that flow from the Conservatives' mastery of this approach. First, that the same electoral techniques used to design party platforms are now being utilized to similarly shape ongoing public policy. And second, that other political parties (and, therefore, future governments) might opt to emulate such practices, believing them to be the best or even the only way to emerge triumphant at the ballot box.

The clear danger, Lenihan alerts readers, is that we risk entrenching federal leadership that is designed to duck rather than deliver — that is programmed to eschew policies that confront complex emerging challenges in favour of those already comfortably understood and invited by the public.

On this count the book's point of departure is sobering, presenting readers steeped in practical politics and hard-core policy alike with a sound and intriguing premise. Where the author's work shines is in the early and efficient clobbering he takes to the consumer model. His dissection of its flaws is convincing, if a bit familiar.

It is when the author turns to his proposed alternative that matters grow more challenging. The book exists to promote the benefits of Lenihan's "public engagement" model of policy development.

Something more permeable and involved than mere consultation, this approach lends participants a genuine role in constructing policy solutions. It is collaborative rather than closed, networked instead of normative, open and not merely opportunistic. The mechanics and merits of the process are described — both in theory and by way of case study — in careful detail.

Lenihan makes two bold claims for his approach. First, that it generates better policy, and second, that it generates increased electoral appeal. The second of these seems particularly motivating, and the book can accurately be described as driven to persuade partisans and political professionals that adoption of Lenihan's policy approach is in their political self-interest.

In this effort, it does not succeed.

Despite an entire chapter that is preemptively styled Political Objections to Public Engagement, Lenihan fails to make the case that electoral success would be enriched rather than risked by his recommended approach. And, fair or not, drawing case studies from a New Brunswick government that subsequently went on to lose power is unlikely to stir much courage among political practitioners. (Interestingly, Lenihan cites former premier Shawn Graham's defeat as a evidence for his thesis, arguing that it was the government's out-of-character failure to adequately engage voters on its energy deal with Quebec that proved its undoing. Of course, one cannot help but wonder if the policy itself played a role, as opposed to merely the failures of its development and communication.)

The idea that a more deliberative, authentic conversation with the public about policy solutions will elicit increased levels of support seems intuitively right. Lenihan notes that if citizens are allowed to contribute genuinely to policy remedies they will feel a greater share of ownership over the outcome. In effect, political actors will benefit from a more firmly formed consensus and the public will assume a measure of responsibility for the decisions taken.

Maybe. But what works in political theory rarely translates well to the hustings. And while engaging the public in support of important initiatives is always a good idea, there is little evidence that a superior process will necessarily shield the government from harsh criticism if public attitudes shift or if the process of implementing those changes encounters problems.

For example, the 1990s deficit battle enjoyed significant levels of public support. And — in a sort of historical analogue to the model Lenihan urges — great effort was made prior to the 1995 budget to engage the public and fashion a sturdy consensus in favour of action. But was that the real secret to its success? Or did it owe also to other factors such as the fortuitously timed expansion of the U.S. economy? One wonders if the public consensus would have held quite so firmly if those budget cuts had bit during a period of economic contraction. The point is that the direct line that connects cause and effect is, in practice, often more dotted than this work implies.

Other assumptions embedded in Lenihan's book also give pause. Are the policy challenges of today really more complex than ever? Or is that simply the inherent bias of the present-day to see itself as

exceptional? The book also insists that citizens now demand increased transparency from their governments. But is the evidence of this quite so definitive? It would be surprising to find advocates for more isolated decision-making. But does the public have the genuine interest and the necessary resources to evaluate the real degree of openness in federal government policies?

Even more importantly, do they really care — and to what extent? It seems highly unlikely that Canadians will condemn policy outcomes they support because of suspected flaws in the process. “How” a decision is reached rarely becomes salient unless “what” it produces becomes problematic.

Faith in the model also hinges upon an unproven, perhaps even unprovable, premise: that policies arrived at openly and by consensus will necessarily be superior to those that are not. One need not be an advocate of backroom power brokers to have doubts as to whether this is certain.

This teases at an issue fundamental to reading Lenihan. His faith that a better process will inherently produce a better result begs a measure of skepticism. And, although his work fairly radiates with an anticipated sensitivity to this charge, its every page nevertheless secretes an undisguised enthusiasm for process. Chapters begin and end with summaries of what we’ve learned already and careful, clear indications of what is to come next. Case studies are qualified considerably. A postscript is accompanied by not one but three appendices. And the final chapter’s eight recommendations feature suggestions for secretariats, responsible ministers, official policy enshrinements, evaluation frameworks and collaboration between governments.

If process is the cure to what ails our politics, then the Public Policy Forum has surely just produced the Gray’s Anatomy of our times.

And that is the principal achievement Lenihan offers here. To the willing decision maker, he provides a meticulously rendered model for improved policy generation that can be easily lifted for use and application elsewhere. No small feat. But again, what is lacking is a conclusive argument that might effect widespread behavioural change on the part of our nation’s political class. In the end, Lenihan’s inducement is far too insufficient. As incentive he can muster only the ephemeral prospect of potential electoral benefits that might come from a more open policy process. Compared to the pointed risk that attends the abandonment of a proven vote-getter, his model is not likely to win many converts among hardboiled politicians.

In short, if you want to get rid of the consumer model of politics, you’re going to have to beat it. Not in print, but at the polls.

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