

THE ART AND CRAFT OF POLICY ADVISING: A practical guide



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*In the second article in our new Books section, editor JOHN O'LEARY talks to David Bromell about his recently published book **The Art and Craft of Policy Advising: A Practical Guide** (Springer, 2017).*

John: What is your professional background?

David: I'm a policy wonk. I worked at the Ministry of Social Development in Wellington for 10 years in various policy roles, including secondments as a private secretary in the Beehive, and a year working on tertiary education policy in the Ministry of Education. I was acting Chief Policy Advisor during my final year at MSD. Before I joined the public service, I worked in tertiary education, parish ministry and the community and voluntary sector.

Since 2013 I've worked in local government as a principal advisor at Environment Canterbury, mostly working with the Canterbury Mayoral Forum on regional economic development. For the last 10 years, I've enjoyed an association with the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies at Victoria University, and I teach political philosophy and public policy in the School of Government.

John: What prompted you to write your book?

David: When I was working in the Beehive I got motivated to improve the quality of policy advice. There was the dreaded 'weekend bag' of papers that Ministers take home with them on Fridays. I thought too many of our papers were overly long and poorly written. A busy Minister needs concise, clearly expressed advice that is presented consistently,

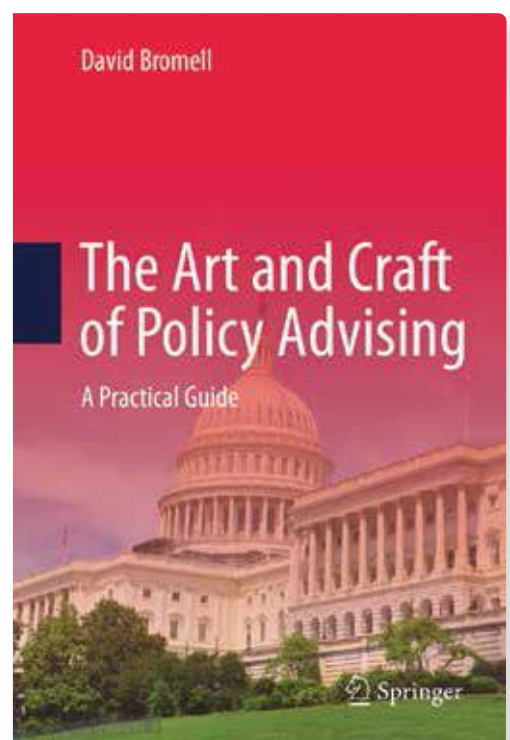
using well-designed document templates. I talked to policy managers at MSD and worked with colleagues on how we could support one another to improve the service we provide to senior managers and politicians. This book, you could say, is an outcome of these discussions and of my own experience as a policy advisor.

I also wrote the book out of frustration with some academic models of 'the policy cycle', as if policy making proceeds in a tidy, logical series of stages and steps. Those of us who work in policy know it isn't really like that. More often than not, policy making is non-linear and follows a winding or even recursive path. I think about policy advising less in terms of cycles, stages and steps, and more in terms of relationships, integrity and communication.

I had no formal training in public policy when I joined the public service, and that's true of around 50 per cent of policy staff in NZ. We learn on the job. I write about this in the book as an 'apprenticeship model' of applied learning. My apprenticeship took about ten years – perhaps I'm a slow learner; I certainly made plenty of mistakes!

So I set out to write the sort of book I wish I could have read when I began my apprenticeship in the art and craft of policy advising. There are lots of good books on policy analysis, very few on the actual practice of policy advising. I've written as a practitioner for practitioners, passing on some of what I've learned about effective policy advising.

What gave me the opportunity to write it was a research fellowship at the NRW



School of Governance in the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany for three months last year.

John: So what is the book about?

David: It's a practical guide, particularly for new policy advisors and their managers, and something to come back to for more experienced advisors.

The first chapter is introductory. It outlines my basic approach, distinguishes between the functions of analysis, advice and advocacy, and introduces a theme of ethics and public policy that runs through the book.

The second chapter asks: 'Who are my clients, and what do they need from me?' How do we manage multiple clients, and

prioritise who and what to pay attention to, when and why?

Chapter three prompts reflection on how much government is good for us, and thoughtfulness about what is private, what is public, what is 'in the public interest', and how we might best create public value in the policy advice role.

Chapter four is on doing policy analysis in ways that factor in emotions and values as well as 'the facts'. The way I pitch it, policy analysis is essentially the art of crafting the right questions to facilitate incremental social problem solving.

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Chapter five is about effective communication, writing well in plain English, crafting recommendations and preparing verbal presentations.

The final chapter is about different ways of working with others to create long-term public value. The chapter, and the book, conclude with further reflection on interpersonal skills for effective collaboration, 'scheming virtuously' and

ethical competencies for public service.

Because I want the book to be a useful, practical guide, I've kept it short and to the point – 177 pages. Each chapter starts with theory and practice, goes on to processes, tools and techniques, and finishes with questions for reflection, to get the reader thinking about their own approach and practice.

People tell me it's very 'readable'. It was important to me to write in the 'plain English', clear, concise style I'm recommending for effective policy advice.

John: What broad conclusions have you come to about policy advising?

David: I think it's as simple – and as complicated – as this: focus on your audience, anticipate clients' needs, build a relationship of confidence, maintain the integrity of our advice, communicate effectively, and provide good value for money.

John: This sounds a very useful book!

David: I hope so. While I was writing it, I recruited peer reviewers in central and local government, and in the NGO, education and training sectors in Cambodia, Canada, Germany, Wellington and Christchurch. Their

feedback was a great help. I still think peer review is our most powerful tool to improve the quality of policy advice – and the effectiveness of our communication.

John: Now that this book is finished, what's next?

David: Well, I have a mind to write something about pluralism and public policy – how we might best manage 'deep diversity' and work out how to live well together, not by demanding 'rights' but by negotiating 'interests' in a world in which everything is connected.

The Art and Craft of Policy Advising, and its individual chapters, can be purchased in ebook format from springer.com. It is also available for purchase in hardcover from Vic Books, and from springer.com and major online booksellers.



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