

Terry Stokes

‘What Is To Be Done?’

My distinguished predecessor, the foundation head of the School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington, Professor Gary Hawke, recently wrote about the establishment and development of the school during its first quinquennium (Hawke, 2008). For the future, he urged that there be an increasingly international focus. After six months or so in the job, I thought it might be timely to comment on the school as I have found it to be and, especially, on the directions in which I would like to see it go.



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My first impressions, formed at the annual prime minister's prize-giving in the Beehive, were very positive. The fact that the PM had honoured the school by presenting the prizes in each of the years it had existed, the presence of a veritable cloud of *éminence grise* from politics past and present, diplomats, and senior government and university officials – all that suggested a school that was connected. (Mind you, as an Australian I was also struck by the way that speakers began with greetings in Māori. There was something I was clearly going to have to work on.)

Without knowing who else was interviewed, I am sure the selection committee a month or so earlier would have had candidates before them whose curricula vitae listed publications at lengths that put my own modest and somewhat aged collection in the shade. I had just spent half a dozen years in the Victorian Department of Education and Training, looking after higher education and regulating training providers. I had been a university administrator, government adviser and official in various capacities – mostly to do with research in one way and another, but without actually doing very much myself for quite a while.

Before that I had spent time as an academic, thinking and writing about the development, implementation and evaluation of government science and technology policy – but that is a pretty specialised field of public policy. The university had elected to appoint as head of the School of Government someone whose disciplinary background actually lies in the history and philosophy of science. Why? Well, I suppose it might have been because my career has

oscillated regularly between universities and government, and so I know both worlds well.¹ Moreover, I have had plenty of recent experience in government policy, legislation and regulation in tertiary education, and so understand the policy process, as well as public administration and management, from a practitioner's point of view.

I said at my interview, and I am still completely convinced, that any school of government in a capital city must, first and foremost, seek to address the needs of the public service and the wider public sector. This is equally true for both teaching and research. Our primary teaching role lies in educating public sector professionals at all levels. In research, we must address the policy, administration and management challenges which confront those professionals in their day-to-day work.

And so we do. Unusually, the school's primary enrolment is not in the undergraduate public policy major available to students of both the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Commerce and Administration degrees. Rather, most students are enrolled in one of four post-experience coursework masters degrees, in public policy, public management, strategic studies and the Executive Masters in Public Administration delivered through the school's participation in the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG).

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Our academic staff includes Dr Sharleen Forbes, adjunct professor in official statistics, and Professor Miriam Lips, professor of e-government (a joint appointment with the School of Information Management). The former position is funded by Statistics New Zealand and the latter by a consortium of private firms and the State Services Commission. The school also delivers non-award courses of various kinds – for example, Professor Claudia Scott runs such a programme for the Society of Local Government Managers.

Similarly, much of the school's research is closely engaged with the public sector. There is, for example, the Emerging Issues Programme (EIP), funded by a tithe on all public service departments and ministries, and managed by a committee representing their chief executives chaired by the state services commissioner. The EIP seeks to address important medium- to long-term issues of interest across a range of agencies. It brings new issues and approaches to them to the policy table, and it promotes discussion of those issues in seminars and workshops. Most, though not all, of this work is done through the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) under the leadership of Professor Jonathan Boston.

Other research is done through the Health Services Research Centre, directed by Dr Jacqueline Cumming, with much of its funding coming from the Health Research Council; and the Roy Mackenzie Centre for Family Studies, whose director, Associate Professor Jan Prior, spends part of each week on secondment as a research adviser to the Families Commission. Under the leadership of Peter Cozens, the Centre for Strategic Studies participates in the Council for Security Co-operation in Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and, through that programme, and in other ways, is closely connected to the defence and foreign affairs communities and the New Zealand Defence Force. Earlier this year Dr Lance Beath delivered a development programme in Papua New Guinea for its diplomats.

Dr Andrew Ladley, until recently director of the IPS, has this year taken an appointment as senior expert mediator in the newly created standby team of mediation experts at the United Nations, assisting with the constitutional and electoral needs of states emerging from turmoil. Within days of taking up this position, Andrew was in Kenya. Other international engagement by the school includes co-operation with the National Academy of Public Administration of Viet Nam, which has seen, in particular, Professor Bob Gregory and Rob Laking teaching in Hanoi.

I could keep multiplying the examples, but these will do to make the point: little that we teach is of purely theoretical interest, and little of our research does not have clear relevance to the administration of government and the development of government policy.

But there are challenges. An early task that fell to me was to review the EIP at its mid-point of funding to see how well it was succeeding. The most revealing aspect of this review was the one-on-one discussion I had with 27 chief executives of departments and ministries. At one level, I found out where the government of New Zealand is actually located! At another I experienced the various approaches agencies took to security – varying from the not quite cavalier to the nearly paranoid.

In relation to the EIP itself, the findings were somewhat mixed. On the one hand, there was general (but not quite universal) support from chief executives for the EIP, and for continuation of funding into a second triennium at an enhanced level. And this has subsequently been agreed, with an expansion of participants to include Crown entities with strong policy roles. Where chief executives knew about projects, none thought they were unimportant or entirely unsuccessful. While each of the eight projects completed or under way had its supporters, the climate change and sustainable energy projects were the most widely known and most widely thought to be influential.

On the other hand, however, a number of chief executives reported little or no engagement with the EIP. Of most concern were a number of chief executives who felt that there had been EIP projects with which they should have engaged,

but had not – or had only done so to a limited extent. It was generally felt that the EIP had suffered significant communication failures which needed to be addressed.

Within the school there was general support for the EIP, and an appreciation of its particular importance to the IPS. But I found there was also some rather disappointing lack of interest in the usefulness of the programme and its outcomes. In a couple of cases, as well, publication outcomes were not timely. Academics can over-emphasise getting research exactly right, instead of getting it out in time to have an impact.

These findings are consonant with other feedback I have received, and suggest there is an ongoing need to maintain and strengthen the school's focus on the needs of its public sector stakeholders. There is also a need for some of those stakeholders to have a better understanding of what we in the School of Government actually do.

Current policy settings in New Zealand higher education do not always help. In relation to load, for example, there is a perverse lack of incentives to find new students (domestic ones, anyway). They will not generate any more revenue. I imagine this will change, but not, I fear, until after the impending general election and so perhaps not with effect until some time after that.

Until then, the rules appear to reward maintaining student interest close to 2006 levels. Nevertheless, the school needs to continually re-assess each of its post-experience programmes to ensure they optimally meet the needs of public sector policy analysts and managers.

We also need to work out whether a different mix of award and non-award (assessed or otherwise) programmes is right. The distribution of our enrolments across departments, ministries and other public sector agencies shows good take-up in some agencies and poor, even no, take-up in others. Some of the latter are large ones, and include some central agencies. Recent interest in the ANZSOG Executive Masters has been disappointing, and enrolment in that programme shows a worryingly consistent preponderance of male candidates. Both of these latter ANZSOG issues almost certainly have root causes, including some which need to be addressed within the public service. We look forward to working with the new state services commissioner, Iain Rennie, and the chief executive of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Shenagh Gleisner, on them.

On the research side, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) provides another challenge. This is not because of the kinds of research outcomes that count (which are reasonable), but because of the way in which it assesses the quality of those outcomes. In common with the British and now the Australian approaches to assessment of research performance, the PBRF relies on peer review to determine quality. That does not sound so bad; indeed, for many academics it is very good news, since it puts them in the driver's seat: 'Trust us; we know which of us should

get your money.' But, as I have argued (Stokes, 2008), it is inimical to applied research, where it is the views of those who commission and those who might use research that are important. Inappropriate reliance upon peer review produces another potentially perverse result – research whose outcomes receive strong peer endorsement, but which fails to be adopted.

I do not want to over-emphasise this issue. Victoria University's senior management does value applied research outcomes, and the views of users of those outcomes as to their utility. But they have to try to optimise the university's performance within the rules as they currently are. And those rules, by their reliance upon peer review, favour basic research over applied research. So they tend to undermine the School of Government's unique mission within the wider university.

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The research of the School of Government will be subjected to review towards the end of 2008. I anticipate that the review panel, membership of which has yet to be finalised, will include public sector stakeholder representation. One of the questions which I hope it will address and recommend upon is the current structure of the school, which has a core of academic teaching and research staff, and six research centres/institutes. The staff outside these centres/institutes, sometimes (inaccurately and unhelpfully, in my view) called the 'teaching centre', include some of our strongest researchers (as assessed by the PBRF in the past). Their work is driven by their individual research interests. Those in the centres and institutes (the IPS apart) have a more focused research agenda. The research centres/institutes vary in size, and their interests also overlap quite considerably.

Such historically derived, *ad hoc* organisational structures are not – for that reason alone – necessarily a bad thing. I have, for example, formed the view that the 'brand' which the IPS has developed is a major asset to the school, not to be lightly abandoned. *Prima facie* 'peculiar' research organisational structures can generate a great deal of productive and effective research. In Australia, the so-called co-operative research centres (I say 'so-called' because they are not in any sense of that word which might be found in a dictionary) have been a success despite certain features of the model.

Our engagement with ANZSOG is another area where I think there is room for improvement. The educational activities of ANZSOG, chiefly the Executive Masters of Public Administration and the Senior Fellows programmes,

have been quite widely seen as being successful, on both sides of the Tasman. Yet we have still to host one of the annual Senior Fellows programmes here in New Zealand. The slide in New Zealand demand, alluded to already, has to be turned around. Perhaps even more, there needs to be a genuinely ANZSOG research agenda, rather than the collection of individual ANZSOG professors' personal agendas – active though some of those have been – which we have seen to date. The danger for New Zealand is that such an agenda will tend to be dominated by the problems of Australian federalism, which are of little interest in New Zealand.

The Backbencher provides a kind of 'fortune-teller' note with its meals, often a political quotation. My first, from Goethe, seemed particularly appropriate to my new role: 'To rule is easy, to govern difficult.' As it is for all of us.

Both ANZSOG and the VUW School of Government have benefited from generous endowment by the New Zealand government. I hope that we will be able to use the school's Trust to influence investments by the ANZSOG Trust in areas of mutual interest. These might include a coursework doctorate, and research projects in areas such as Pacific and trans-Tasman governance. One area that Dr Chris Eichbaum from this school has been talking about recently is the Australian ministerial councils, on which New Zealand ministers are mostly represented, substantively or as observers. The successes and failures of these councils, from either a New Zealand or an Australian federal perspective, have been little studied – though some work has begun to appear (Jones, 2008).

I agree with Gary Hawke that an international agenda has to find a central place in the School of Government as we move forward. The trans-Tasman relationship, principally through ANZSOG, will, of course, figure large in that. In the relatively short time I have been head of school, this has resulted in my engagement with the annual Australia New Zealand Leadership Forum, as well as with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which has recently found a second wind. After a rocky time, the defence/strategic relationship between the two countries is on more common ground – for example, in relation to the Pacific, East Timor and Afghanistan. This year saw Geoffrey Till, professor of maritime studies at King's College, London, take up the inaugural visiting appointment to the Sir Howard Kippenberger Chair in Strategic Studies. The School of

Government is also exploring international partnerships, such as that already mentioned with NAPA in Viet Nam, but also in Europe and North America. In November 2008 I expect to attend the conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management in Los Angeles. The school is an institutional member of the association.

We will also continue our involvement with the Commonwealth Advanced Seminar, a two-week event presented annually in Wellington for ministers and senior officials from Commonwealth and some Asia-Pacific and Latin American countries, who have the opportunity to study and discuss programmes of reform in the public sector. This is run in conjunction with Dr Richard Norman, of the Victoria Management School, who directs the seminar. The school is regularly visited by officials and politicians from other countries. For example, we were recently visited by a delegation of parliamentarians from the European Union.

It has been gratifying, too, to begin the process of succession planning within the school by securing agreement to replace Rob Laking (who, in moving towards retirement, has taken up a part-time appointment) with a lectureship, which will enable us to continue his invaluable teaching in the area of comparative international public management. Succession planning will have to remain a focus for us for some time to come as more retirements are in prospect. As these senior colleagues are replaced by younger scholars we will face a strong challenge in maintaining a good performance in the next PBRF round.

Finally, the well-known Wellington watering hole, The Backbencher, provides a kind of 'fortune-teller' note with its meals, often a political quotation. My first, from Goethe, seemed particularly appropriate to my new role: 'To rule is easy, to govern difficult.' As it is for all of us.

1 Recently I heard someone with a similar kind of career observe that his answer when asked why he kept coming back into government from academe was, 'It feels so good when you leave'.

References

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