

## Sound-Bite Policy\*

It's next-big-idea season in Ottawa. That's the time when the government in power and parties in waiting cast about for election bait. Individual sound bites will be collected into a political songbook. Otta-wonkers are hard at work crafting the notes they hope will strike a chord in voters' hearts.

Policy sound bites typically take the form of individual measures, almost always billed as new even if they are little more than incremental change to an existing program.

But individual measures that comprise a policy short list rarely have anything to do with each other. They are usually discrete entities with one common purpose: election win. The problem with the one-note approach is that societal problems are far more complex than the proposed solutions. Point-form policy is precisely the opposite of what is required in a complex world.

Emerging research and dialogue on how to resolve the challenges of the day have moved far from the simple-simon political norm. A burgeoning literature on complexity science, rooted in the study of natural ecosystems, has

emerged to help tackle tough problems – racial tension, social exclusion, homelessness, drug abuse and domestic violence.

In fact, the simplistic approach to public policy can create more problems than it solves by adding layers of complication to an already messy system of benefits or services. The disparate parts often work against each other to make life more difficult for citizens. Eligibility for one form of assistance, for example, may cancel out qualification for another.

Moreover, the factors that comprise a given problem are usually so intrinsically linked that it is hard to pinpoint a single trigger or sole cause, and then respond with a magic silver bullet. The UK refers to these tough challenges as “wicked problems.”

Take, for example, the growing concentration of inner-city poverty in Canada. So-called distressed neighbourhoods are characterized by many factors – teenage pregnancy and high proportion of lone-parent families, low levels of full-time school attendance, weak literacy skills, higher rates of chronic and mental illness, housing instability, substance abuse and crime,

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large numbers of working-age adults without market income and heavy reliance on income programs.

Within this social stew, it is not possible to identify one single dimension as the root cause of widespread and persistent poverty. For some households, low income may result from poor literacy proficiency, which makes it difficult for the family head to find decent employment. Teenage pregnancy may impede young women from completing high school and getting a job. In other households, illness or disability may have interrupted or even prevented participation in the labour market. Still others face discrimination that pushes them to the margins of society.

Complex problems require more than sound-bite measures. They need leadership that acknowledges the scope of the challenges being addressed. They require the engagement of business, labour and the community in association with governments. They need multiple and linked interventions to address effectively their many dimensions.

Canada currently faces at least five wicked issues that should top our social policy to-do list.

Persistent poverty and growing inequality are ticking time bombs that threaten to explode the social order of nations – at home and throughout the world.

We need to prepare for the needs of our rapidly aging population. The coming demographic tsunami will exacerbate current labour shortages, and strain our pension and health care systems.

The exclusion of racialized youth must be addressed over the long term – not simply as one-

off responses to high-profile incidents. Multiple interventions are required to tackle, at their very core, the racism and poverty that trigger violence.

The marginalization of Aboriginal Canadians is a national disgrace. Clean water, decent housing, early childhood development and other family supports, and education and training, are basic starting points. Even the fundamentals are not yet in place in many Aboriginal communities.

Finally, these complex challenges typically end up on the doorsteps of local governments, which face increased responsibilities and shrinking revenues. A new financing deal is required to enable cities to manage their growing social role related to environmentally sound infrastructure, affordable housing, parks and recreation, and opportunities for cultural expression.

Political leaders should open a national dialogue that calls attention to these wicked problems. Instead of going to the polls with policy timbits, party platforms should propose ways to mobilize for these deep social challenges.

Leadership in a complex world is not about providing small answers. It is about organizing to tackle big questions that both test – and threaten – our well-being as a nation.

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