



PUBLIC LEARNING: TRANSFORMING BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

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By Robert Rich

Public policy-making can be thought of as a process of public problem-solving. Citizens assign the formal, legal responsibility for formulating and implementing “solutions” for problems in the hands of their legitimate government at the international, national, state, or local level. In a democracy, institutions of government, not-for-profit organizations, lobbyists or interest groups (associations), and individuals are engaged in defining problems, identifying choices to address these problems, selecting a preferred option or set of options, and implementing this choice. This process of engagement or deliberations leads to formal and informal decisions. Within the context of the civic society, it is worth asking how well we, as a society, are doing at addressing the problems which face us.

Why have we had such difficulty – steadily mounting difficulty – in getting at our problems? We might blame our apathy, or our unwillingness to spend, or our failure to understand the problems, or our resistance to change. But something else is wrong, something central, and something crucial. As we examine the intensive and multitudinous efforts to cope with the problems, we are driven to a significant conclusion: there are some things that are gravely wrong with our society as a problem-solving mechanism.¹

The context or environment for policy-making at the international, national, state, and local levels has undergone dramatic demographic, economic, political, social, and technological changes over the past few decades. These changes have been accompanied by the emergence of a set of critical problematic issues, including air and water quality, economic development, access to education, food security, gender inequality, global warming, governance (including a growing concern about ethics and

¹JOHN W. GARDNER, RECOVERY OF CONFIDENCE 58-59 (1970).

integrity as well as corruption) , growing inequities, health care and nutrition, human rights and conflict resolution, inter-ethnic conflict (including race relations) , migration, public health, security, social-welfare, and globalization. Some of these problems fall within the jurisdiction of individual states or regions, but the problems are often similar to or inseparable from those in other jurisdictions. These problems are part of a broader context which can be characterized as reform of government and reform of the overall policy-making process.

2. The role of public learning

*Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.*²

What role does the public play, within a so-called “civil society,” in promoting and facilitating effective problem-solving processes? Can “cultures be changed? Can fundamental beliefs and attitudes be transformed? How does the public “learn” about problems and translate this learning into action designed to address a particular issue? To what extent does public learning represent a paradigm shift in societal thinking or in the approach to a given problem or issue? To what extent does public learning hold promise for changing what may be perceived as a “culture of corruption” in Illinois and other states? To what extent should public learning be considered as part of the process of reforming government or the overall policy-making process?

In approaching these questions, the pioneering work of Donald Schon seems particularly relevant. He initiated inquiry into the nature of public problem solving

² Abraham Lincoln Quotations, *available at* <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/abrahamlin173228.html>

several decades ago,³ and his writings on “reflection-in-action⁴” offer powerful insights relating to the professional approaches that are applicable in addressing problems related to changing cultures which are central to questions of reform. In this paper, it is postulated that public learning is a process in which citizens become engaged in a continuing search for “appropriate” responses to problematic issues or situations (e.g., corruption). Such learning is a social phenomenon – involving interaction with government agencies and with other stakeholders both to formulate or - using Schon’s terms – to frame the problem and also to participate in the design of learning systems which ultimately lead to change. Public learning is a process, in which the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of the civil society are changed, over some period of time, in the search for new “solutions” – new ways of coping with currently perceived problems that affect the public interest. From the perspective of the public, it is very important...to be able to say that we are learning, to be able to admit that we are acting to learn, because it is very difficult to learn if one is required at the same time to pretend to be certain. (Schon, 1974, p. 12.)

Being engaged in learning implies that an individual or organization is open to change. And that it is possible to identify changes in beliefs and/or attitudes which are related to some action or set of actions.

3. Differentiating Between Various Forms of Learning

The literature on public learning has been rather limited. We feel that it is important to distinguish between individual, organizational, governmental and public learning. Individual learning is based on the exchange of ideas and information, which

³ DONALD SCHON, BEYOND THE STABLE STATE (1973).

⁴ DONALD SCHON, THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER #? (1983).

is, in turn, incorporated into beliefs, behaviors, and/or actions. Ideas can be seen as “road maps” or “focal points” around which individuals structure their actions.⁵ Individuals “learn” through increased understanding (based on information exchange), practice, the application of incentives or disincentives, and through stimulus-response interactions. People also learn through interactions with other individuals and events; the information which is derived from these interactions may influence behavior and actions. Individuals learn different things and at different rates over time. Individuals acquire information, know-how, and skills through learning processes. This learning is affected by natural intelligence and by the personal environment at any given point in time. Learning can also be positive or negative, and individuals may be gifted with great learning ability or they may also be learning disabled or impaired. Individual learning may occur at different rates depending on the issue at hand or the context in which an issue/problem arises.

Organizational learning has many of the same properties as those that have been used to characterize individual learning. There is a growing literature on this subject, which argues that organizations are naturally resistant to change and that by promoting organizational memory, the capacity of organization’s to solve problems and increase performance is enhanced. From this perspective, organizations should promote the development of information systems—formal and informal—which will increase the capacity to know about past experiences and to build upon a foundation of past successes and failures. These information systems will also help to scan the current environment and to anticipate future issues or problems.

⁵ IDEAS AND FOREIGN POLICY: BELIEFS, INSTITUTIONS, AND POLITICAL CHANGE (Judith Goldstein & Robert O. Keohane eds., 1993).

Organizational learning is “impaired” when the history of an organization is not available or considered to be valuable. Organizational learning may also be impaired if the context in which an organization operates or functions has changed but the internal strategies and operational tactics of an earlier situation have been retained because they once worked and it is assumed that that they will work in the future. Heclo⁶ and Weatherford and Mayhew⁷ have argued that public policy making can and should be viewed “as a process of learning (e.g., about how to reduce the rate of corruption in a state or locality or how to improve a population’s health status or whether to have such a goal in the first place), typically on the part of state officials and other social actors intimately connected to the state.”⁸ But, the notion of public learning in the context of civic society is not captured by simply noting that individuals or groups learned something by trying to influence policy and/or actually changing policy or that organizational learning is increasing in society.

Public learning occurs only when it is possible to demonstrate that a fundamental change in beliefs and/or attitudes has led to a specific action or set of actions and is part of a broader cultural change. Within the context of the policy-making process, it is possible to characterize the roles that ideas play in influencing the formulation and implementation of a policy or program. As John Lavis points out: If some learning does take place, determining the role that ideas play can be further elaborated by determining who learned, what was learned, and what type

⁶ H. HELCO, MODERN SOCIAL POLITICS IN BRITIAN AND SWEDEN (1974).

⁷ M.S. Wetherford & T.B. Mayhew. *Tax Policy and Presidential Leadership: Ideas, Interests, and the Quality of Advice*. 9 STUDIES IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT 287-330 (1995).

⁸ John Lavis, *A Political Science Perspective on Evidence-Based Decision-Making in MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING IN HEALTH CARE* 81, 83 (Louis Lemieux-Charles & François Champagne eds., 2003).

of policy change resulted (Bennett and Howlett, 1992).⁹ The people who learn can include experts (e.g., economists on a presidential advisory council or royal commission), state officials (like politicians or civil servants) and social actors (e.g., interest groups or the public more generally). These people can learn about the different options for structuring decision-making organizations and processes, the different means to accepted ends, and even the different ends that policy can achieve. This learning can translate into organizational change or into policy changes that involve a change in means or even ends.¹⁰

This type of learning might be characterized as “government learning”^{11,12} or learning by public organizations.¹³

Government learning or policy learning can be thought of as what Wildavsky characterized as “speaking truth to power.”¹⁴ It has to do with basing decisions on evidence or information in the tradition of “rational actors.” The policy choices which are made by decision-makers reflect core policy beliefs which have been influenced by broadly held and shared societal beliefs; these can, in turn, shape perceptions of how things ought to be.¹⁵ These core policy beliefs have been learned through “rational processes,” including socialization of citizens which begins at a very young age.

⁹ C. Bennett & M. Howlett, *The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change*, 25 *POLICY SCIENCES*, 275, 275-294 (1992).

¹⁰ John Lavis, *A Political Science Perspective on Evidence-Based Decision-Making in* *MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING IN HEALTH CARE* 81, 84 (Louis Lemieux-Charles & François Champagne eds., 2003).

¹¹ Lloyd S. Etheredge, *Government Learning: An Overview*, in *THE HANDBOOK OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOR*, 73, 73-161 (Samuel L. Long, ed., 1981)

¹² L.M Etheredge & J. Short, *Thinking about Government Learning*, 20 JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES, 41, 41-58 (1983).

¹³ C.E. LINDBLOM & D.K. COHEN, USABLE KNOWLEDGE: SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL PROBLEM SOLVING (1979).

¹⁴ AARON WILDAVSKY, SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER (1979).

¹⁵ Paul Sabatier, *Policy Over a Decade or More in* POLICY CHANGE AND LEARNING: AN ADVOCACY COALITION APPROACH. (Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith, eds., 1993) See also DONALD A. SCHON & MARTIN REIN, FRAME REFLECTION: TOWARDS THE RESOLUTION OF INTRACTABLE POLICY CONTROVERSIES (1994), **Berman 1998**, V. Bhatia & W.D. Coleman, *Ideas and Discourse: Reform and Resistance in the German and Canadian Health Care Systems*, 36 CANADIAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, 715, 715-740 (2003).

Children, starting in kindergarten, are taught what acceptable and unacceptable behavior is; they are also taught what is expected of them by society in addition to mainstream values which they are expected to integrate into their daily lives. In the McCarthy era, for example, children walked into a typical first grade classroom to see what was written on the black board; for example, “Communist = Enemy!” This type of socialization has a clear influence on the thinking and behavior of elementary school children.

The process of formulating public policy through the advocacy of various “interests” is not the same as public learning in the context of the civil society. Policy decisions and policy change occurs in a bargaining and negotiating process “whereby actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts . . . acquire new interests and preferences—in the absence of obvious material incentives. Put differently, great interests are shaped through interaction.”¹⁶ In a democracy, it is assumed that the interests of citizens and groups will be expressed “through pressure groups, reflected in legislative debate, whose differing perspectives on the policy will be worked out in public conflict and integrated finally in a single, self-consistent policy.”¹⁷ In other words, bargaining is not the same as learning.

The conventional approach adopted by elected and appointed officials for “solving” a perceived public problem is first to frame the problem and then to assign the task of dealing with it to an existing government agency [such as a state or federal department of education, public health or welfare, aging, economic development, corrections, etc.].¹⁸ Typically, the designated agency is one that had been created and

¹⁶ **Checkel, 1999 p. 548**

¹⁷ Donald Schon, *The Technology of Public Learning* 15 (1974) (unpublished manuscript on file with author).

¹⁸ DONALD A. SCHON & MARTIN REIN, *FRAME REFLECTION: TOWARDS THE RESOLUTION OF INTRACTABLE POLICY CONTROVERSIES* (1994).

staffed many years earlier – and hence was designed to approach the problem arena as it was formulated at the earlier time the outcome of a public policy program or an initiative designed to respond to a “problem” is not equivalent to learning. The fact that a policy or program has succeeded or failed does not necessarily reveal anything about what, if anything, was learned. That is to say, programs which do not necessarily achieve positive results sometimes continue to be funded over time; similarly, programs which lead to positive outcomes are not necessarily funded or continued. Success in the realm of public policy is an inherently political process, which may or may not reflect active learning.

Within the context of the civil society, policy-making can be seen as a learning activity based on information gathering and analysis. Schon and others have noted that we tend to view social problem-solving processes, including policy-making, as being “rational.” From this perspective, government decision makers represent “rational actors.” “It is not so much the content of ideas that counts, but their role as information

in reducing uncertainty or maximizing utility.”¹⁹ Information helps to reduce uncertainty, increase rationality, and, in turn, maximize utility. All rational actor theories call for canvassing of alternative courses of action, followed by the systematic analysis of the consequences of each alternative in terms of the values and goals one wants to maximize, with the ultimate choice to be guided by this analysis. “[B]y adhering to these processes, groups begin to minimize the potentially negative influences that ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk can have on the decisions they make.”²⁰

¹⁹ V. Bhatia & W.D. Coleman, *Ideas and Discourse: Reform and Resistance in the German and Canadian*

Health Care Systems, 36 CANADIAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, 715, 715-740 (2003).

²⁰ PAUL C. NUTT, MAKING TOUGH DECISIONS (1989).

Indeed, the “rationalist dream” is that knowledge will “emancipate us individually and collectively from scarcity, ignorance, and errors . . . Currently, in the context of the knowledge society, we are being enticed, cajoled, and otherwise encouraged to increase and improve the transfer and utilization of research knowledge” *because this will help to promote rationality*²¹

4. Policy Frames–Competing Problem Definitions

At the center of public learning is the process of problem definition, or “problem framing.” A policy frame represents “coherent systems of normative and cognitive elements which define a given field, [including] world views, mechanisms of identity formation, principles of action, as well as methodological prescriptions and practices for actors subscribing to the same frame.”²² The acceptance of a particular “frame” is at the center of the public problem-solving process.

Public learning entails reflection, challenging of assumptions, dialogue/discourse, and deliberation. These processes may, over time, lead to changes in attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and actions. Schon and Rein connect the notion of policy frames with our approach to public learning:

Whatever the issue may be . . . the public process of considering and coping with that issue is marked by contention, more or less acrimonious, more or less enduring. We believe, however, that it is critically important to distinguish between two kinds of policy disputes: those that may be settled by reasoned discourse and those that are stubbornly resistant to resolution through the exercise of reason.

We use the term policy disagreement to refer to disputes in which the parties in contention are able to resolve the questions at the heart of their disputes by examining the facts of the situation. If the facts are accessible to investigation, the contending parties should be able to reach agreement on the question.

²¹ Harley D. Dickinson, *The Transfer and Utilization of Social Scientific Knowledge for Policy-Making Perspectives in Sociology* in MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING IN HEALTH CARE 42, 42 (Louis Lemieux-

Charles & François Champagne eds., 2003).

²² Jean-Louis Denis et al., *Knowledge Utilization in Health Care: From Fine-Tuning Dissemination to*

Contextualizing Knowledge in MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION- MAKING IN HEALTH CARE 11, 17 (Louis Lemieux-Charles & François Champagne eds., 2003).

In contrast, the policy disputes we call controversies are immune to resolution by appeal to the facts. Disputes of this kind arise around such issues as crime, welfare, abortion, drugs, poverty, mass unemployment, the Third World, conservation of energy, economic uncertainties, environmental destruction, and the threat of nuclear war. Disputes about such issues tend to be intractable, enduring, and seldom finally resolved.²³

Reform of government in Illinois represents such a policy dispute. There is little agreement on what the issue or problem is that needs to be addressed and little agreement on steps which should be undertaken to bring about reform.

Competing definitions of a problem or alternative policy frames can provide the basis for agreement or disagreement and for reaching closure in the problem solving process. There are several cases which illustrate the power of competing policy frames or definitions as a basis for action or inaction:

- In the societal debate over public financing of abortion, the two competing “sides” of the issue have been defined as “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” This framing has exacerbated the conflict between the opposing groups and made any meaningful compromise almost impossible. Moreover, the competing stakeholders will not be persuaded that the alternative perspective is legitimate or reasonable. Consequently, there has been little social or governmental learning on this issue.
- Historically, the controversy over adopting measures for purposes of environmental protection were cast in terms of enhancing environmental quality (one policy frame) or promoting economic development (the alternative policy

²³ DONALD A. SCHON & MARTIN REIN, FRAME REFLECTION: TOWARDS THE RESOLUTION OF INTRACTABLE POLICY CONTROVERSIES 4 (1994).

frame). Those who opposed initiatives to protect the environment framed their arguments in terms of loss of jobs and decreased economic productivity in the community. The advocates argued that environmental protection increases the overall quality of life for citizens and it promotes environmental “justice” and/or “sustainability.” In this case, the advocates of environmental protection were able to promote public learning through articulating the dangers of degradation and the benefits of environmental protection. They were able, through dialogue and persuasion, to encourage government to adopt appropriate measures.

- Reform of the criminal justice system has been framed in terms of “just punishment for offenders” as compared with “rehabilitation” and “reintegration into the mainstream of society”. Once again, these competing definitions of the issue do not easily allow for compromise or reaching some common ground. One definition leads to the construction of more prisons and mandatory sentencing policies. The other calls for education and training programs during the period of incarceration. Both stake-holder groups do not seem to be open to “learning” about the impact or outcomes of the actions associated with the alternative policy frame.
- The sale or purchase of handguns has alternatively been defined as an issue of individual liberty and constitutional rights or crime control and reduction of violence. Both groups are resistant to the views of the other and both have little interest in engaging in deliberation or dialogue to resolve the issue.
- The issue of social welfare and reduction in poverty has been framed in terms of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. The deserving poor are those who are employed or who are actively seeking employment. Once again, the definition of the issue leads to an intractable policy position which is not conducive to deliberation or dialogue. There seems to be little recognition that poverty may be a problem of housing, jobs, welfare, income, finance, social welfare, family life, or even genetics.

In each case, the policy frames illustrated above show that we separate problems into clear categories not because they deserve to be separated but in order to accommodate our limited understanding, or to validate actions which are consistent with the “preferred definition” of the issue under consideration. Policy frames also affect the extent to which decision-makers will engage in behavior which appears to enhance risks for them and their organizations. When organizational decisions are framed positively as opportunities– as opposed to negatively as threats – this increases the performance of an organization.²⁴

It is fair to conclude that he/she who controls the definition of the problem (the person whose framing is accepted) controls the rest of the policy-making process and controls the terms of debate in the overall problem-solving process.

5. Conditions for Public Learning

Public learning calls for a widely shared commitment to problem solving which embraces the learning process. This type of commitment may be initiated or maintained despite differing attitudes among citizens. In such cases, the process can proceed by accommodating the differing perspectives of individuals so that they can build upon one another rather than competing to establish who has “won.” An emphasis on “who has won” generally limits discourse, deliberations, and public learning.

²⁴ **Whyte, 2000** See also **Nutt 1998**

The essence of public learning lies in effecting changes in attitudes and/or beliefs of the civic society regarding problematic or critical issues. These changes may be influenced or associated with concomitant interactions among societal institutions (e.g., government, professional associations, interest groups, public interest organizations, not- for-profit organizations). Within civic society it is possible to realize or accept change for society as a whole or, alternatively, we might encounter competing core beliefs and attitudes, which can lead to resistance to change and inaction. Public learning does not require that formal consensus is reached at every stage in the process. But, for public learning to occur, a policy frame has to be widely accepted. If two frames continue to be hotly contested in society, it is highly unlikely that general public learning will occur.

Public learning may be stimulated or supported by a variety of changed conditions or broad contexts for life in the civic society: These include:

- A **crisis** – any happening perceived to be incompatible with the prevailing expectations – may lead to changes in beliefs and behavior and may lead to a paradigm shift; (e.g., the first NASA “disaster”, the spread of AIDS, or the terrorist attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon on 9-11-2001.) Other major crises include the Great Depression in the 1930’s, the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of U.S. as a formal participant in WW II, and the growing protests against the war in Vietnam.
- Advances in technology or technological innovation** which may lead to new opportunities for society which, in turn, may lead to fundamental changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. We have experienced the impact of new technologies on medical treatment such as penicillin or streptomycin, and medical diagnostics such as X-rays, electrocardiograms. The introduction of generic drugs, the hybrid auto vehicle, MRI (magnetic resonance imaging).

- Impact of new communications facilities and technologies.** During the 20th century, we have experienced tremendous changes in communication, such as telegraphy, telephones, radio, TV, and the impact of computers on technology- enhanced teaching and learning or the radical changes in productivity made possible by computers, and the Internet and the world wide web, cellular phones, the expansion of fax machines, and Fed-Ex.
- The role of experts** in influencing political leaders and the general public. For some issues such as medical practice, climate change and food and drug regulations public policy-makers have relied on experts in various scientific and technical fields to relate their knowledge and know-how to increase governmental and public understanding. The role of experts in drawing attention to significant scientific findings can be underscored in some notable examples: global climate change, discovery of West Nile disease, genetic makeup the human body, DNA as a tracer of individual activity or predisposition. In recent years, medical diagnosis, treatment of illness and the consequent life expectancy have been greatly modified by such expertise.
- Increased understanding concerning the means or ends related to a particular issue.** An example is the widespread appreciation of moderate exercise for the promotion of health at all ages. Other examples include the reduction of fatal or serious automobile injury through improved vehicle design, the use of seat-belts or air-bags, improved roadway design, as well as improved weather forecasting for air traffic control and storm damage control.

6. Some Historical Examples of Public Learning in U.S. Civil Society

By considering some historical examples, we may gain insights into the processes by which public learning has led to significant changes in public policies and practices as well as broader changes in culture. Indeed, in many such cases, public learning led to a fundamental shift in the mainstream thinking of society as a whole as indicated by changes in federal law and/or major Supreme Court decisions. In this context, we note that public policy represents the codification of mainstream values. As mainstream values change, public policy and the interpretation of laws may also change. Over time, it is possible to observe changes in core beliefs, assessments of what constitutes “acceptable” or “appropriate” behavior, and in accompanying official governmental actions or imposition of sanctions.

6a. Prohibition, Anti-Prohibition, Alcohol, and Drugs

One example of a public learning process initiated in the latter 19th century was embedded in the temperance movement – centered on the premise that alcohol and alcoholism were responsible for moral degradation, ill health, poverty and criminal abuse. This public learning movement led in 1919 to the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution – instituting prohibition of the manufacture and sale of liquor. But prohibition was short-lived – due in part to the refusal of large numbers of citizens to abide by the laws, and the manifestation of unanticipated problems associated with gang warfare, illegal manufacture and sale of liquor. In addition, society, as a whole, did not accept as “legitimate” the basic premise behind the temperance movement and the 18th Amendment.

Only 14 years after it had been adopted, Prohibition at the federal level was formally abolished in 1933, with the adoption of the 21st Amendment. In this case, Prohibition had been translated into law before the core beliefs and values of civic society had actually changed. In effect, the “solution” of a problem was seen as more problematic than the evils it was proposed to alleviate. This change illustrates how public learning is an evolving process over time. Actions can be taken, reconsidered, and followed by reversing the original action.

However, in terms of civil society, issues related to alcohol and drug use continue to be a matter of serious public concern. Over the last thirty years, there has been a multi-faceted public response: (a) a significant increase in exposing elementary and secondary school children to public health related curriculum on the health-related consequences of drinking; (b) the very visible D.A.R.E. campaign championed by Nancy Reagan; (c) formation of public interest groups (e.g., Mothers Against Drunk Driving); (d) “crackdowns” on drunken driving at the state and local levels marked by increased enforcement and initiatives in the courts for mandatory sentencing; and (e) changes in state laws lowering the legal blood alcohol level for “DUI” – driving while under the influence of alcohol.

These initiatives have been accompanied by a general shift in societal attitudes toward alcohol for which some of the arguments made during the earlier prohibition movement can be recognized. Social drinking does not have the wide spread acceptance that it once had; as signified by an apparent decline in the popularity of “happy hours.” Bartenders are encouraged, if not expected, to decline to offer a customer another drink if this might result in danger to himself or others. Information on the negative consequences of teenage drinking is being widely disseminated. This shift in societal attitudes about alcohol has also reflected in societal thinking about narcotics and substance abuse.

6b. Smoking in Public Places

The rights of individuals are integral to traditional American values. A high value has been placed on preserving individual autonomy. The Bill of Rights, incorporating the first ten amendments to the United States constitution, codify these individual rights which have been assigned a very high priority in American society. At the core, these legal rights include freedom of speech, religion, the press, and, with certain restrictions, the right to bear arms. Historically, society has been quite reluctant to abridge the freedoms of individuals without a clear warrant (e.g., crime, violence).

From a societal perspective, non-smokers were not considered to have rights of higher priority than those of smokers in public places such as restaurants, movie theaters, airports, train stations, airplanes, and trains. Some public places had designated smoking and non-smoking areas. Prior to the 1960's, airplanes assigned smokers to the left of the plane and non-smokers to the right. Similarly, restaurants and other public places had smoking and non-smoking sections. Growing tobacco was a major crop in some states and corporations making and selling smoking tobacco were major economic contributors to the overall economy.

Over the last four decades, there has clearly been a major change in societal attitudes about smoking, including legal suits against the tobacco industry by victims of smoking. The Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, was the champion of a public education campaign which led to a significant paradigm shift in U.S. society as a whole and, even to some degree, in other countries. Some of the indicators for this major change include:

- The Surgeon General's Committee on Health advocated "warnings" on packages of cigarettes [1964];
- Wide-spread dissemination of information which documented the negative effects of smoking on people's health;
- The inclusion of information about smoking in the curricula of health classes taught in middle and secondary schools;
- Laws which declare that public places (e.g., airports, restaurants) may designate "non-smoking" zones;
- Court decisions which have held tobacco companies liable for documented health problems of smokers;
- Places of work being declared as non-smoking zones so that smokers have to leave the building as opposed to being able to smoke in their own private offices;
- Major increases in taxes on the sale of cigarettes; and
- A real decrease in the rate of smoking among all demographic groups (except for women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five).

Why were the Surgeon General's initiatives so successful? Why was society willing to limit the rights of smokers in public places? What accounts for a general change in the position of society – which had previously been sympathetic to a smoker's assertion that "I have just as many rights as you do!" A key step in the process was the very convincing evidence – as accepted in legal proceedings – of the negative secondary effects of smoke. Consequently, from the societal perspective, it was difficult to maintain the position that if you choose to harm yourself by smoking, this is your own individual choice. The new evidence showed that aside from hurting themselves, the secondary effects of their smoking could hurt some of those who breathe the surrounding air. In this case, the public appears to have learned from the public education campaign and the convincing scientifically verified evidence that was widely disseminated. This campaign was, then, translated into vigorously enforced laws and regulations. These initiatives, in turn, led to significant change in how society treated smoking in public places.

7. The Drivers or Instigators of Public Learning

As one reviews the historical record of the various categories of public learning – it should be noted that it can be initiated or enhanced through the efforts or activities of one or more of the following actors or "drivers"

A ***policy entrepreneur or champion*** who promotes increased public understanding, a change in attitudes and beliefs, and expectations, if not demands, by the civic society for action. This entrepreneur may even be successful in encouraging a paradigm shift for what is acceptable behavior in dealing with a particular issue or social phenomenon. Examples of individuals who have served the role of policy entrepreneur or champion Chief Justice Earl Warren and

Associate justices of the Supreme Court (school desegregation). Surgeon General C. Everett Koop (for the development of the anti-smoking campaign), Mayor David Lawrence and Richard K. Mellon (Pittsburgh Renaissance); FDR (the great depression, prohibition, and WW II).

- ***The influence of keen observers and writers.*** In the latter 19th and early 20th century, the rise of the labor movement and the recognition of widespread inequities led to the adoption of legislation for protecting the rights to organize labor unions and to eliminate child labor and sweatshops. During the great depression of the 1930's, public learning was enhanced by such writers as Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*) and John Steinbeck, (*Grapes of Wrath*)
- The ***insights and discoveries of far-sighted scientists*** – who can and have recognized the onset of threats to the public interest, and potential alleviation of dangerous challenges. Rachel Carson (author of “the Silent Spring,” 1962) is generally credited with starting the public learning about environmental hazards.
- ***“Ideas in good currency”²⁵***—this represents a change of “what is in people’s heads” as well as “what ideas are held as powerful for action.” Ideas in good currency can and do change over time [e.g., Aide to Dependent Children which was then transformed into Temporary Aid to Needy Families, the idea that health insurance companies can exclude pre-existing conditions from coverage as compared with the new law which does not allow for this, (No Child Left Behind)].

- The acceptance of new scientific findings or remedial recommendations.*** This may be especially difficult when the scientific findings run counter to long-held traditions or beliefs; for example, rejecting meat, eggs and french-fries for breakfast, or initiating moderate daily exercise for octogenarians. Global climate change.
- The influence of the media*** in framing issues, influencing the public, and promoting public learning. In recent domestic and foreign policy discussions, radio, T.V. broadcasting rose to prominence as the preferred and most effective media for influencing public attitudes and public policy. The media can be a powerful source for information and misinformation. On the positive side the media have contributed to public understanding by drawing attention to the hazards of smoking or the growing incidence and negative consequences of obesity, as well as to the positive maintenance of personal health through physical fitness. But for some complex policy issues, such as foreign policy and disease management, the media have had unpredictable and often questionable roles. The increased availability of information may have unintended consequences.

8. Constraints or Obstacles to Public Learning

While public learning can be enhanced, it can also be blocked or constrained by a variety of other social forces:

- Prejudice and hatred** may represent core beliefs for segments of society; such beliefs (e.g., racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia) can serve as a barrier to positive action in any society;

Traditions which are socially, culturally, or religiously based. The war in Iraq and its aftermath offer many examples of retrogression as well as advances in public learning about human societies operating under differing traditions.

“Dynamic conservatism” – organizational resistance to change – career bureaucrats who argue “it was done this way yesterday, it will be done this way today, and it will also be done this way tomorrow.” But also, other internal constituencies (e.g., union leaders, workers, professors, students, administrators, janitors, etc.) who feel threatened by changes in roles.

The lack of leadership, or the absence of human and financial resources for public interest movements;

Formulaic ways of thinking (e.g., fundamentalism), which discourage or limit critical thinking.

Controversies based on conflicting policy frames.

For public learning to be sustained there needs to be a commitment to engaging in a problem-framing and problem-solving process, whether or not it leads to a particular solution and whether or not there is consensus on a particular option. Public learning can occur when there is a commitment from various stakeholder groups in the civil society to be engaged. When individuals are engaged in public learning networks, there is a movement toward fuller perception of what is happening, and explicit consciousness of the public learning process.

9. Some concluding observations

Public Learning requires a shared commitment to resolving disagreement or controversy and promoting actions in the public interest.

Public learning is not the same as public understandings of a subject or problematic issue. One can develop an understanding of the dimensions or complexities of such an issue, but such understandings do not necessarily lead to changes in beliefs or attitudes, and they do not necessarily lead to an action or set of actions. Nor is public learning the same as governmental learning. Sometimes political leaders can embrace new ideas which reflect individual or organizational learning. However, if the public is not ready to accept or accommodate to these ideas, they may not provide political support or change in life-styles demanded by such adoption. Furthermore, the learning process may be obfuscated by proponents and opponents – each dedicated to opposing beliefs.

Public learning is a phenomenon that has to do with how the society, as a whole, “learns.” We have observed that this type of learning is different from individual, organizational, governmental, and scientific learning. Public learning has to do with changes in societal beliefs and attitudes that lead to action in the public interest. And as noted above, such action often calls for resolving disagreements or controversies, especially when controversy has dominated political, legal and cultural behavior. This type of learning is an active process. It usually involves paradigmatic (as compared with incremental) change that is associated with a variety of actions taken by diverse stakeholders in society. Hence, we talk about public learning in the context of the civil society.

Public learning may be reflected in long term changes in fundamental beliefs or attitudes that promoted or supported new policies or practices in the public interest. For example, American society as a whole accepted the notion that “separate but equal” facilities were appropriate; then, at a different point in time, there was a paradigmatic change that led to the general belief that separate is inherently unequal. This change led to a broad series of actions including changes in laws (e.g., the Fair Housing Law), affirmative action policies, election to local, state, and national positions of responsibility, broader participation in the arts, and appointments to executive positions. Yet, the learning curve is still occurring in this area as many of these actions are controversial and do not always enjoy broad acceptance.

The influential leaders or “drivers” of public learning may be associated with differing organizations, affiliations or professions. Amory Lovins has called attention to what he calls the tri-polar setting for public learning: Based on his personal experience in working for energy conservation and ecological sustainability, he argues that the role of government has declined in making or implementing national policy:

Traditional thinking about all these issues has been influenced by the supposition that governments are the axis of power and the locus of action – so that we need to focus on governmental and international institutions and instruments. That’s the wrong mindset, dangerously incomplete and obsolete, in a world that is clearly tri-polar, with power and action not just within governments, but also in the private sector and in Internet empowered civil society . . . Increasingly, government is the least effective, most frustrating and slowest to deal with, so one ought to focus attention on the other two.²⁶

In the above statement, Lovins has offered a valid caveat associated with relying solely on government agencies to encourage public learning. However, as noted in selected examples of public learning in U.S. history, there are many instances of major changes in public policy initiated by government leaders as well as by non-partisan, not-for-profit organizations in the public sector. In the recent past, the private sector is also increasingly involved in public affairs, and the largest industrial firms have resources and access to financial assets that dwarf the GNP of many smaller countries. Thus, public learning may be instigated and supported by any or all of the major drivers in both public and private sectors.

²⁶ Amory B. Lovins, *How to Get Real Security* 109 WHOLE EARTH, 8, 8-16 (2002).

The “learning curve” and the time required for Public Policy Change

Public learning in the past may be characterized by lengthy learning curves – more often measured in decades rather than years or months. As in the cases of civil rights and voting rights for women, the long time-constants may be reflective of differences in deeply held regional beliefs, widespread controversy among stakeholders, and rigidly maintained political loyalties. In addition, the long time-constants may reflect serious controversy in framing of the problem issues and in the cultural norms of the national and international society. For many current issues, the lengthy learning curve may reflect the realization of closely related problems along the way, thus introducing “stages” in the perceived learning curve.

Clearly, it is difficult to anticipate the time required for public learning to respond effectively to unprecedented threats – such as HIV/AIDS – and new and emerging diseases such as anthrax, smallpox, West Nile virus, Ebola virus, and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome).

It also should be noted that governmental action and public learning is not dependent upon reaching a consensus in society. In this paper⁴, it has been observed that fundamental changes in beliefs and attitudes may occur at the same time where there is a vocal minority who has a strong held alternative point of view. This is certainly true, for example, of smokers who have been forced to accept that American society has gone through a dramatic paradigm change.

We can also observe instances where the government took actions which turned out not to ultimately enjoy public approval (e.g., prohibition and anti-prohibition); the initial governmental action was, then, reversed (e.g., initial federal government policy with respect to AIDS). In other instances, policy entrepreneurs succeeded in informing and “educating” the public (e.g., C. Everette Koop and the anti-smoking campaign, Earl Warren and the civil rights movement), and the initial governmental actions enjoyed widespread approval, this was, then, reflected in the civil society more generally. We have also documented instances where scientific experts are ahead of society in their beliefs and recommended actions (e.g., greenhouse gases and climate change). It is an open question as to whether there will be increased public learning in this area.

10. Final Concluding Observations

Our discussion of public learning should not be construed to indicate that government cannot or should not act in the absence of public learning. There are instances in which a problem is so serious or threat so imminent that society cannot wait for the learning curve to advance to the point where a paradigm shift can be documented. Some of the problems which may require governmental and scientific attention before real public learning can be achieved include: global warming and related environmental problems affecting the health of the world's ecosystem, the increasing threat of "terrorism", ground water depletion, soil nutrient losses and desertification, population growth in some parts of the world and the threat to societal sustainability due to lack of population growth in other parts of the world.

For some critical issues facing society, public learning has been delayed or even obfuscated and little progress has thus far been made toward changing public attitudes, beliefs, or actions. Governments have felt the need to act and it is an open question as to how the public will ultimately respond. These observations lead us to the conclusion that if the public learning curve for a major public problem issue is longer (in duration) than the interval required to respond to the issue, it is possible or even likely to result in chaos or social breakdown. A commitment to public learning may well be essential for societal renewal or sustainability. We do not argue that the process is necessarily free from mistakes or errors of judgment, but we believe that a continuing commitment to public learning may provide avenues for changing course. Public learning represents a collective commitment to addressing problems in the public interest. Such a commitment is consistent with John Gardner's observation that:

A society that is capable of continuous renewal will have effective internal communication among its diverse elements. We do not have that today. We are drowning in a torrent of talk, but most of it serves only to raise the noise level . . . Communication in a healthy society must be more than a flow of messages; it must be a means of conflict resolution, a means of cutting through the rigidities that divide and paralyze a community.

²⁷ JOHN W. GARNER, RECOVERY OF CONFIDENCE 58 (1970).