

Wicked problems, policy and politics

Towards more consensual policy-making

Sir Peter Gluckman

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Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures is an independent, non-partisan, future-focused boundary organisation dedicated to tackling the complex, long-term challenges shaping Aotearoa New Zealand's future.

We provide high-quality, evidence-based insights to address critical national and global issues arising from rapid social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. Koi means “the sharp end of an arrow” and “to be bright and clever,” while Tū means “to stand” and conveys resilience. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of the most pressing long-term issues.

Koi Tū Trust is a registered charity – CC63033.

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The public expect politicians to solve the problems that they see as important. Conversely, politicians appeal to the voting public by claiming they can solve such problems. The reality is though that many of the problems that concern the public most are complex and complicated. It is rare, despite bold political claims, that any single policy action will make much difference to such complex issues which are often therefore called 'wicked problems.'

As easier issues are addressed, the harder problems accumulate and compelling solutions remain distant. Examples include climate change, intergenerational disadvantage, rising mental health concerns, addressing inequalities or shifting productivity. The result is that the public becomes increasingly cynical of politicians claiming that their solution will solve such issues. We may need new policy and political process to make real progress on such issues.

Beyond partisanship

The most complex and complicated issues generally require a more consensual approach, if for no other reason than they cannot be solved within one or two electoral cycles, and also because they require multiple actions across multiple portfolios. MMP was designed in Europe to encourage consensual coalitions that could cross and blend political ideologies, and avoid extremist dominance. But in New Zealand the concept of a centrist 'grand coalition' never emerged: rather, the coalitions have tended to form around traditional ideological poles. MMP appears not to meet its original promise of more consensual politics.

In my experience politicians find it hard to move beyond partisanship. Inevitably bipartisan approaches to most policy issues disappear in the face of three-year electoral cycles and political point scoring, only to surface in true emergencies as in World War II and during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The exceptions are the more mundane legislative matters are dealt with little contention. When a policy issue is based on deep personal or ethical values – like euthanasia or abortion – parties step aside and let MPs vote according to their own conscience, rather than the party line.

Around the world, irrespective of the electoral process, centrist parties have been losing out to more extreme parties when competing within the 'attention economy'. The defining characteristic of the new information environment created by social media and the internet is that extreme views will gain greater attention and centrist politics will thus look relatively bland. As a result, there has been a hollowing out of support for centrist parties in favour of more polarising ideologies and personalities. Of course, these views are an important and essential part of the diversity that makes a pluralistic democracy and must

be heard. They enrich the debate and do shift the consensus, which is healthy. It is how modern liberal democracy is designed to work. But paradoxically this can also create a risk of stasis in the policy process.

Making progress in solving complex and complicated problems generally requires a consensual approach to policy making. These wicked problems cannot be solved by a singular action, or in a single election cycle. Trying to address them through the usual process, yet confronting partisan swings across electoral cycles, can inhibit progress rather than moving more expeditiously towards solutions. Problems left unaddressed are likely to get worse and thus harder to address.

Understandings come before solutions

We need to give consideration of how fresh approaches could be taken. Consensual approaches to finding effective solutions are not simply a mélange of compromises between ideological or partisan views. Rather, seeking solutions starts with developing a formal understanding the multiple direct and indirect causes that underly complex and complicated issues. But the fact that there are multiple factors involved almost certainly means multiple actions are needed. And because one thing leads to another, solutions to complicated issues generally take time and inevitably involve trade-offs, a fact that is too often ignored in political rhetoric. Yet acknowledging trade-offs is important in building trust in politics.

Problems emerge over time and the dimension of time must be considered in understanding a wicked problem's cause, and finding solutions. Take, for example, the disproportionately high rates of young Māori and Pasifika men in prison. The causes are many¹. While society understandably wants to punish those who offend, reducing the number of offenders – which is the ultimate goal – requires acknowledging the historical, social, economic, and educational factors that lead young people down that path. Is the long-term solution aggressive incarceration and building more prisons, or is it addressing the pathways that lead young men into trouble? Inevitably, there are intense and valid values-based debates between those who want to focus on greater punishment and those who want to focus on rehabilitation. Irrespective of that debate, it makes moral and economic good sense to have policies that reduce the number on a pathway to crime. This does not need to be based on blind faith: the evidence is robust and argues for a focus on the earlier stages in life. Measures are possible in childhood to demonstrate that interventions that are introduced are having the desired effects on behaviour long before crime becomes the focus.

By way of a different example, consider the ongoing issues of energy supply. Secure supplies of energy are essential for economic robustness and for supporting our quality of life. Yet climate change and environmental concerns

¹ I Lambie & P Gluckman 2018 <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-10/pmcsa-lts-never-too-early-Discussion-paper-on-preventing-youth-offending-in-NZ.pdf>

must be addressed, and we have major challenges in how to do so. We cannot sit and wait in hope for an uncertain technological solution; any solution requires massive infrastructural investment with many interests involved. We have already seen 'seesaw policies' over both Lake Onslow as a water storage hydroelectric backup and over whether to restrict offshore oil and gas exploration. Clearly there are highly technical considerations of anticipating future energy needs, environmental and fiscal considerations. But no solution can be achieved in a single political cycle, and delays in defining a strategy only compound the problem and add cost. There are clearly values-intensive components to what might be the best solutions, but seesaw policymaking leads to inaction. A policy consensus is needed and that requires all political parties to have access to the same evidence on which to base their positions. Currently, that is a long way from reality.

Consensual policy making

These types of political and policy challenges are not easy to solve, but they are not impossible either. What is needed is a consensual understanding of the problem followed by informed dialogue as to what possible solutions should be considered, and a transparent discussion and hopefully agreement on actions that can follow. The public needs to be an informed part of this discourse. Politicians need to be more honest about the issues, the trade-offs and path ahead for the wicked problems. While they are not easy to solve, they are the problems we must confront if we are to have better futures.

There are encouraging examples of this in practice overseas, and green shoots here. Finland's political parties have agreements over managing government spending over the next decade. They also have a broadly based consensus on increasing investment in research for economic and social growth. These agreements could be reached because the country extensively uses publicly facing foresight approaches to reach a consensual understanding of the future that the country is likely to face.

In New Zealand, the reconstructed Social Investment Agency is intended to carry out the kind of analytical work that could inform less partisan decision-making in the broad social sector. In a world where the availability of data now allows for much better analysis based on evidence rather than opinion, we have new opportunities to make progress.

Trust in politicians is low: in part this is due to their behaviours focusing on personality and slogans rather than on policy arguments; in part too much policy is caught up in the swinging pendulum of our short electoral cycle; and in part, it is due to a bias towards the short-term and putting off the longer-term.

The case of superannuation is a good example. The current political situation in France highlights what happens when heart and short-term self-interests rule over head: the country is unable to confront the reality of an unaffordable

superannuation system. In New Zealand we have diverse and reactive views over the future of superannuation. We lack informed discussion over factors such as population policy, demographic change, changing fertility rates and longer productive lives – all factors that play into the future of superannuation.

Yes, there are challenges with people's widely varying economic circumstances and levels of health and wellbeing. But the overall issues need to be understood in a pragmatic way, as was the case with the process underpinned by the Woodhouse Commission that led to the establishment of the Accident Compensation Commission. Only then can the trade-offs between different choices be understood. With that understanding, political parties can take informed positions, and ideally agree on a consensual long-term and adaptive solution. At worse, the electorate is better informed, and they can make their choices at the polling booth. The alternative is that partisan politics make it almost inevitable that there is no change from the status quo, leaving the problem for the next generation when it will be much harder to solve.

Transformative politics is possible

Truth, transparency and trust are all related. Policy debates and political behaviours will improve if there is greater transparency over the issues we must confront, the evidence that informs decisions and the trade-offs that will have to be made. Clearly public opinion matters, and public opinion is ultimately reflected in the ballot box. But democracy is better served when public opinion is pragmatically and transparently informed, and that is much harder in this age of disinformation.

Is this a quixotic hope? Governments like Finland, and also Switzerland and Singapore, are very different constitutionally but all put a lot of effort into problem analysis and long-term solution finding. A longer electoral cycle might help. But even then, a more open policy process which allows wicked problems to be explored more transparently will help focus the political debate on finding effective solutions that can withstand the pressures of political cycles and ensure greater progress. The public expects transformative rather than incremental progress on many issues; current approaches are inevitably incremental and transformation is only realistic if there is broad consensus. If we could achieve that at least in how we might address these issues, we would strengthen our democracy, and help future generations inherit a society that benefited from the hardest problems being tackled with courage and foresight.



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