

PROJECTING GEOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN IN CANADA
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Geography, Politics and Government Session

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Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank the Royal Canadian Geographical Society (RCGS) and the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG) for the opportunity to speak to you today. It is a tremendous privilege to be here and to be given time to talk about some which have always been of tremendous interest to me.

What I would like to do today is share with you a few rambling thoughts I have had over the years regarding the relevance of Geography to broad public policy issues.

Geography in all its aspects, and geographers, continue to make a significant contribution to society and to government decision-making at all levels. They do this through the application of important conceptual models, analytical approaches, leading edge methodologies, and state of the art empirical analysis. And they do this in a variety of sub-disciplines, fields and sectors. However, the conclusion I will try to reach today is that there is still enormous undeveloped potential for the discipline and practitioners to contribute more fully to broad cross-cutting policy issues.

Modern Policy and Government

First let me speak about policy and government.

There probably was a time in the distant past when issues of public policy were simple in nature, and lent themselves to simple solutions. A golden era, perhaps, when analysis informed decisions and the options available to decision makers were few in number and crystal clear in their implications. I must admit, alas, that I have never known this age. What I have observed, however, over the last several decades, is that already complex public policy issues have become *ever more complex and intractable*. And there seems to be no let up or respite. There are many aspects to this growing complexity – the impact of technology and communications systems (just think of what e-mail and the now ubiquitous “blackberry” have done); demographic, socio-economic, and political change; shifting regional balances; direct input to decision making by civil society, and so forth.

One outcome of particular importance is that modern public policy issues simply do not fit neatly into organizational boxes or rigid institutional structures- nor do they conform to the niceties of any one particular academic discipline. They cut across the mandates of departments and agencies, across regions, and across different levels of government from the local level to the international level. Analysis of these issues and the development of options for action require input from many different scientific and other disciplines, no one of which is always pre-eminent (despite what the economists may think). To use the current jargon, policy issues have become more “horizontal”.

This reality is of importance to policy making because governments perforce require a modicum of structure in order to be able to function. Typically these structures are vertical in nature with a particular legislated or policy-driven mandate. *Authority* and *accountability* flow from the top to the bottom (and hopefully back again). This is particularly the case in the Canadian version of the Whitehall system of Parliamentary democracy

And so there is a dilemma – how to deal with “horizontal” issues in a “vertical” system? Clearly, in the world I describe, there is a critical need for enhanced cooperation and partnership between the different institutions involved in these issues. These are virtues which are often in scarce supply and represent major challenges for institutional change – the challenges of working together and building consensus! With an increased focus on a certain kind of accountability, which has arisen recently for a variety of reasons, I do

believe that this “verticality” – the stovepipes, silos, and sectoral approaches - will only become more entrenched in the months and years to come.

At the same time there will be a rapidly growing need to create capacity to provide integrated analysis which presents decision-makers with meaningful and effective options for action. Coherent overviews and cogent integrated analyses based on trans-disciplinary approaches are what is required.

I will present some specific examples later, but for the sake of exposition here let me simply refer to the emerging challenge of “*sustainable development*”. The now classical, and widely accepted, Brundland report underlines the importance of three pillars – the social, environmental and economic aspects of development. So the very concept of sustainability requires due recognition and balanced consideration of a complex set of cross-cutting principles. In fact, the legislation creating a number of departments and other public institutions in the Government of Canada – therefore their accountability - requires them to apply “*sustainable development*” principles in their policies and operations. Working “horizontally” is the rule of the day.

This is where Geography could contribute to a much greater extent than at present.

Modern policy and Geography

I am now going to stick my neck out, and perhaps even get into trouble!

Over history one of the virtues of Geography as a discipline and as a science has been its integrative nature, bringing together an understanding of both physical earth systems and human activity - and the interactions between the two. Part of a Geographer’s fundamental contribution is the ability to straddle disciplines and identify complex linkages in earth-human systems. I do believe that the policy/government dilemma I have just described is crying out for the application of a geographic integrative framework which provides options that are multi-dimensional. Indeed, on the specific example of “*sustainable development*” I just used, it would be interesting to develop the argument that in fact Geography is the quintessential “*science of sustainable development*”, but that is for another time.

The schism between “physical” and “human/economic/urban” Geography (to which a number of us contributed) has undoubtedly led, over time, to significant benefits from specialization. This is certainly evident in the field of urban spatial systems. However, I would argue that in the process we have probably lost a good part of the integrative base which is fundamental to Geography as a discipline. In the process this has possibly reduced the impact of *Geography* on broad public policy issues, since it is precisely this integrative approach which is becoming increasingly relevant, even though *Geographers* have made significant contributions as individuals.

So herein lies another dilemma – but this time it is one for the discipline and science of Geography, and not for government. How can we keep and enhance the benefits of specialization, while at the same time re-energizing the multi-dimensional and integrative aspects of the discipline?

Having stuck my neck out – now let me get into trouble! I have come to the conclusion that before we promote the necessary specialization of individuals as they pursue advanced research and further degrees, as practitioners of the discipline we need to ensure (indeed, require) that aspiring Geographers *be grounded in all of the aspects of the discipline*. By providing such grounding, we will ensure a supply of individuals who, whatever they specialize in and wherever their career takes them, will be imbued with an integrative methodology and a multi-dimensional approach to inquiry. In his 1988 paper “Geography, Social Science and Public Policy” (*Canadian Geographer*, Volume 32, no.1, p.12.), Guy Steed expressed this more eloquently than I could:

“Few real-world problems can be solved by the application of a single discipline, yet for the most part universities continue to train specialists. Geographers should take heart at the crying need in the emerging information economies for scientifically educated problem solvers, able to integrate various fields of knowledge. Their strengths have

traditionally been in this newly vital boundary-spanning expertise. Nowhere, I suspect, is there greater potential for such expertise than in policy research” (and, I would add, policy development)

If my diagnosis of the situation is inaccurate, then current directions may well be the best way to go. If, however, there is some merit in my arguments, then there could be implications for academic Geography programs as well as for the organizations such as the RCGS and CAG which support the discipline and its adherents and promote Geography through their educational programs.

Some examples

I would now like to review some key examples of public policy which I have been involved in over the decades and thereby try to illustrate my arguments.

I will clearly not be sharing any confidences inappropriately, but let me first make several key points about our federal system of decision-making. Cabinet as the executive body has traditionally worked on the principle of consensus in decision-making, followed by solidarity in support of decisions. This means that issues being presented to Ministers for deliberation need to have been worked out in terms of different views and approaches, which can be many and profound, and that unified and meaningful options are provided. This requires significant integration across portfolios (not to mention the related arm-wrestling!), but also across disciplines within various departments. The reality is that at one point, having weighed *all* the relevant pros and cons of various options, *all* of the different pieces have to be brought together to provide an outcome – a decision which is in the public interest. This is an integrative approach at its most acute.

Global Warming

As everyone here would agree, I am sure, one of the most complex and pressing issues of the day is *global warming*. The development of any sensible options for dealing with this issue requires an understanding of aspects of many different disciplines. (Indeed, as DM at Natural Resources Canada I would refer to climate change as the “golden thread” which ran through the many (and sometimes disparate) components of the Department – energy policy and programs; the forestry service; minerals metals and mining; the Geological Survey of Canada; and the Canada Centre for Remote Sensing).

What is required to deal sensibly with this issue is a knowledge and broad understanding of: global climatological systems and their variability; evolving marine systems and the interchange between ocean and atmosphere; impacts of changed hydrologic and carbon cycles; the evolving cryosphere and impacts on permafrost and tundra environments; impacts of sea-level rise on coastal communities; natural and engineered sequestration; energy supply, pricing, distribution and use; engineering solutions for energy conservation and efficiency; behavioural patterns of change and adaptation; incentives to promote such behavioural change including subsidies and the price mechanism; the role and impact of legislation and regulation; overall impacts on the economy, productivity and competitiveness; international relations and negotiations, and so on..... At the national level the issue touches virtually every federal department and agency in one way or another, and the ongoing discussion is a veritable Babel Tower of policies and programs.

The list is much longer than this, but my point is simple – the issue of global warming is a Geographer’s dream. The need for government’s to understand, and hopefully to predict, complex physical systems and track their linkages to social and economic systems is combined with a pressing urgency to develop practical policies and approaches to mitigation and adaptation which are economically feasible and culturally acceptable. Isn’t this in fact what Geographers do for a living?

Potential Opening of the Northwest Passage

My second example in many ways flows from the first.

In relation to other disciplines, Geographers have had a relatively greater predilection for studying and understanding Canada's north and its peoples. So I would like to focus on one emerging northern issue which is potentially of global and national importance – the predicted opening up of the Northwest Passage because of global warming. While there is little certainty about the pace of ice-melt and the ongoing nature of ice-conditions in the Passage, most evidence suggests that we are experiencing significant ice thinning and vastly different ice regimes. Even if full transit through the Passage does not become an ongoing possibility, the increase in access to northern and Arctic waters (including Hudson Bay) represents a changing world dynamic.

Access to resources, whether fish or hydrocarbons, will be facilitated by more open waters. So too will access for the curious – the number of cruise ships visiting the Arctic is already on the rise. Benefits to communities could be significantly offset by impacts on traditional ways of life, many of which are related to an ice edge which is moving and even disappearing altogether.

Transit through the Passage would be driven by straight economics of transportation. While savings because of shorter distances from Asia to the Eastern Seaboard of the United States and to Europe might be offset by higher insurance and fuel costs, at some point things could break even - especially in a world of mammoth post-Panamax vessels which necessarily voyage around the Cape.

These possibilities have led to broader questions of sovereignty and international relations, although there are currently a number of differing views in this regard. At a minimum, however, any increased traffic into and/or through the Northwest Passage would mean providing significant support to navigators – ranging from accurate charts to nav aids, fuel access, and communications systems - as required under international obligations. So the practical implications of most scenarios related to the NWP are enormous. These are policy and program issues of major import and, yet again, are a Geographer's dream. Indeed, along with global warming, the Northwest Passage issue could well end up defining our times. How we respond to potential outcomes will determine very much how we impact on future generations – another key pillar of sustainable development.

Ocean Management

Finally, but by no means least, I want to talk about the oceans. Society has always considered the oceans to be infinite in size, capacity and their ability to re-generate themselves. Elsewhere I have referred to this as “infinity lost”. The oceans are under immense stress and their seemingly endless resources are being rapidly depleted. The “tragedy of the commons” is increasingly evident in how the high seas are exploited, and the Exclusive Economic Zones of many countries are no better managed. The “loss of infinity” induces scarcity and the need for stewardship, but this has yet to be broadly realized. Traditional activities such as the fishery and commercial navigation have increased their scope and impact through the use of new and broadly available technology, and spurred on by world trade. New activities have sprung up in the last fifty years in a most amazing way – from recreation and tourism to aquaculture and the mining of marine aggregates; from offshore hydrocarbon development to urbanization and enclosure of the shoreline. And the list goes on.

You now know my patter (this is a Geographer's dream etc.), so I will not go through it again. However, here again is an enormously important set of issues which do not fit into any institutional structure. In Canada we have moved from the Oceans Act (1997) (which lays out the use of precautionary approach, the application of “sustainable development” and the objective of integrated management of marine areas), through the publication of Canada's Oceans Strategy (2002) to the recent Oceans Action Plan (Budget 2005). Throughout all of this it has been perfectly clear that unless the twenty-odd federal departments and agencies which have a role to play in managing oceans are not at the table, then an integrated approach simply would not be possible at the national level – and the same is true when other jurisdictions (provinces, municipalities, aboriginal governments) are included. And here again is a clear set of geographic issues which, over time, will ever increase in importance.

Conclusion

I said earlier that we need to refocus our academic approaches to geography so that there is a clear basis for providing a supply of people with an integrative capacity. This may be necessary, but it is not sufficient.

I have often been asked – are there opportunities for Geographers (particularly in the federal Public Service). My answer to this is unequivocally that there are opportunities for smart people – and this applies to Geographers too! And so the key is for the discipline to continue to attract the smartest people it can – with the right values - and then for them to practice their Geography throughout their career and in whatever position they may occupy.

The other side of the equation is demand. Geographers' ability to integrate across widely disparate disciplines is potentially enormous, as in the three cases I have just outlined, but the sad thing is that this is not broadly understood. Other disciplines have been extremely successful in educating decision-makers, both political and bureaucratic, about the contribution they make to society. This has led to an increased demand for their services. Unless I have missed something, Geography has not been as successful in this regard. The challenge is to increase the awareness of decision-makers that their roles and responsibilities are intrinsically geographic, and so the input of the Geographic community is invaluable to public discourse. This is a task for all of us, and particularly for our academic and professional Associations such as the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and the Canadian Association of Geographers.

Let me finish on a very personal note. My own background as a Geographer led me through most of the different aspects of the discipline and culminated in a greater personal focus on economic geography and resources management. The surprise for me has been that in the last decade or so one of the most relevant and useful aspects of the discipline has in fact been physical geography. This may be partly because the “non-physical” aspects come “more naturally” after all these years, and it certainly has to do with the nature of the different portfolios I have had. What it has meant in terms of my own personal learning is that I have had to become more integrative. And you know what – I never thought I would be standing here saying this!

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