

**The Dynamics of Agenda-Setting:
The Case of Post-Secondary Education in Manitoba**

by

Kelly Saunders

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Faculty of Education
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Abstract

The field of public policy analysis has long been a point of interest in the social sciences. Yet while we may know a fair bit about how policies are implemented or evaluated in terms of their impact on society, we know less about how they came to be issues on the government's agenda in the first place. While there may be any number of issues swirling around a government at any point in time, only some of these issues get acted upon in the form of a policy outcome. Moreover, on any given issue there may be a number of policy options from which to choose. Why do decision-makers decide to select one alternative over another? Together, these pre-decisional processes of agenda setting and alternative specification represent relatively uncharted territory within policy analysis.

The focus of my research project is the formulation of post-secondary education policy in Manitoba from 1988 to 1996; the period extending from the election of the Progressive Conservative government of Gary Filmon to its decision to establish the Council on Post-Secondary Education. Utilizing the multiple streams model of agenda-setting developed by Kingdon (1995), I explore those factors that motivated the Filmon government to decide in the first place to take action on post-secondary education, and secondly, to do so in the manner of the creation of the Council on Post-Secondary Education. In particular, I analyze Kingdon's three process streams of politics, problems and policies, the actors that comprised the policy subsystem at the time, and the wider context within which these processes occurred.

This qualitative study utilizes a case study approach, and is based on a triangulated research design that includes:

- elite interviews with some of the key actors comprising the post-secondary education policy subsystem in Manitoba during the period from 1988 to 1996;
- archival research of government documents, Hansard, briefs submitted to the University Education Review Commission, media reports, and other relevant primary sources;
- an extensive literature review of the relevant scholarly research in the areas of post-secondary education; agenda setting and policy analysis; social constructivism; New Public Management; educational politics; policy borrowing; ideology; globalization; and multiple streams theory.

It is anticipated that the research findings will help inform not only issues related to the wider processes of agenda-setting and alternative specification within governments, but the formulation of post-secondary education policy in particular.

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In particular, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dr. Levin, the chair of my Committee, who never wavered in his belief in me and in this project. I will be forever grateful to you for your constant encouragement and friendship throughout these past several years. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my son, Hunter Goodon, who continues to inspire me everyday with his courage, tenacity and love of life. You are my hero, buddy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public policies - those measures and decisions (and in some cases, non-decisions) that governments undertake in response to a problem - affect all of our lives in one form or another. Whether it be in the form of a program designed to increase the number of Aboriginal students attending university or a surcharge placed on gasoline purchases, few of us can escape from the actions of governments. Policies help define what is relevant to society and represent the public expression of the values and beliefs we hold as a community. Given their impact, it is not surprising that the examination of public policy has long fascinated political scientists.

Yet, while the field of policy analysis has grown and developed over the years, a key question remains: where do public policies come from? At any given time there are dozens of issues and problems swirling around a government, yet only some of these issues get responded to in the form of a policy output. How do decision makers decide which of those problems in society merit attention and which ones don't? In the words of Kingdon (1995), how do we know when an idea's time has come?

For many of us, policies are seen as "things that just happen"; the inevitable conclusion in a series of events that make sense within the larger context (Anderson, 1975; Levin, 2001). Hence, a plane crash sparks a review of aviation

safety policies or the election of a new government brings about a review of spending policies in the health care field. This sense of inevitability seems especially pertinent in contemporary times, where such macro-level variables as globalization, the ideology of the New Right, citizen demands for more accountability and the dominance of managerialist-inspired ideas within the public administration field suggest a certain convergence in policymaking across post-industrialized states. We are not surprised then when governments implement policies designed to reform the public sector, or tighten the line on program spending. In light of these global trends, these kinds of measures seem to be just good common sense; a logical reaction to the circumstances of the time.

Yet, while these economic and social variables may help inform our understandings of government action in some areas, they do not tell the whole story. "Sometimes, conditions accepted as inevitable or unproblematic may come to be seen as problems while damaging conditions may not be defined as political issues at all" (Edelman, 1988, p. 12). While at times the political process may be as logical and straightforward as these variables suggest, the rationale for why governments choose to do some things and not others, and the manner in which they choose to do so, is often fuzzy and unpredictable. As Ball (1998; 1990) argues, public policymaking is inevitably a process of bricolage, of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from here and there in an attempt to find anything that looks like it might work. "Most policies are ramshackle,

compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are re-worked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through a complex process of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice” (Ball, 1998, p. 126; 1990).

In order to get a better understanding of why some problems get acted on and why others fail to capture the attention of decision-makers, a number of political scientists have attempted to break down the policymaking process into a series of discrete stages or cycles (Lasswell, 1951; Brewer, 1974; Jones, 1984; Anderson, 1975; Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). Typically, this process is seen as comprising the following phases: identifying a problem; considering the various policy alternatives from which a choice is to be made; making an authoritative choice amongst those specified alternatives by passing laws or regulations; implementing the policy; and evaluating its outcomes (Brooks and Miljan, 2003; Kingdon 1995). The value of this kind of middle-range theoretical approach over grand theory models is that it allows each stage of the process to be investigated in greater depth on its own. While the linearity suggested by the cycles model is in many ways an artificial construct (in reality, public policymaking is often ad hoc and idiosyncratic), it facilitates our understanding of where public policies come from by breaking down the complexity of the process into a limited number of manageable steps.

In addressing the broader question of how governments decide that an idea's time has come, we need to draw our attention to the first two stages of the policy

process, the identification of problems that the government views as important, and the specification of the various policy solutions. This first stage is commonly referred to as “agenda-setting”. The government agenda is the list of subjects or problems on which decision-makers have decided to take action. Once an issue is placed on the government’s agenda we enter into the second stage or cycle of policymaking, policy specification, whereby various proposals for action are defined, considered, accepted or rejected, based on what is possible or feasible within the given context. This stage involves the “elimination of policy options, until one or only a few are left from amongst which the policymakers make their final selection” (Kingdon, 1995, p. 123); although in a sense this selection is almost never final. Together, these first two stages comprise what Kingdon refers to as “pre-decision” processes; the steps before an actual policy solution is decided upon.

As Kingdon (1995) points out, despite the flurry of activity around public policy analysis these pre-decision processes remain relatively uncharted territory within political science. “We know more about how issues are disposed of than we know about how they came to be issues on the governmental agenda in the first place, how the alternatives from which decision-makers chose were generated, and why some potential issues and some likely alternatives never came to be the focus of serious attention” (Kingdon, 1995, p. 1). Yet these questions are germane for not only a more complete understanding of the richness and complexity of the policymaking process, but also for a deeper insight into the

ways in which the decisions of government impact a community. The visible outcomes of the policymaking process – the implementation of a new program or the passage of a law - only reveal part of the picture. The patterns of public policy in any given society are also shaped by what doesn't happen; the fact that some issues and proposals emerge in the first place while others are never seriously considered.

The focus of this research project is the formulation of post-secondary education policy in Manitoba from 1988 to 1996; the period extending from the election of the Progressive Conservative government of Gary Filmon to its decision to establish the Council on Post-Secondary Education. This example presents a useful case study of agenda-setting in the policymaking process because it represented a substantive policy shift for the province in the area of post-secondary education policy. While ostensibly the province's post-secondary education system was always an area of interest to Manitoba's political leaders, by the early 1990s its perceived role in the economic future of the province rendered universities and colleges amongst the most important institutions to policymakers. Throughout this period the Premier's speeches on Manitoba's prospects were constantly littered with references to the knowledge economy and the necessities of having a strong post-secondary education system to best position Manitoba to compete in the global market. Motivated as the government was by economic concerns, in particular the need to boost the province's economic productivity, reduce government spending and achieve balanced

budgets, post-secondary institutions became, for the Filmon administration, one of the principal vehicles through which its economic goals could be furthered.

These goals were to be achieved not only by holding the line (or reducing) post-secondary expenditures, but in redesigning the kinds of programs universities and colleges offered in order to make them more relevant and responsive to the economic needs of the province. Indeed, the principal government document guiding policymakers during this time, *Framework for Economic Growth: Policy Directions for Manitoba* (1993), heavily emphasized the link between post-secondary education policy and the province's economic, social and cultural well-being.

In keeping with this energized focus on post-secondary education as a major policy consideration for political leaders, how the system was to be governed and directed also fundamentally shifted in 1996. For the first time in Manitoba, and indeed the first time in Canada, all post-secondary education policy was now to fall under the direction and guidance of an arms-length, intermediary agency, the Council on Post-Secondary Education. As outlined in its *Act*, the Council was to be comprised of ten individuals from the community and a Chair of deputy-minister status, all of whom were to be appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. Amongst its various responsibilities the Council was to be responsible for setting broad education policy for the universities and colleges system, approving (or not approving) program changes, implementing a new

accountability framework focusing on the activities of teaching, research and community service, and fostering greater coherence and cooperation across the post-secondary system.

In addition to its decision-making powers in the area of policy, the Council was also given substantive fiscal powers. While the government continued to set the overall budget for post-secondary education, the Council was charged with the responsibility of determining appropriate resource levels for each of the province's seven universities and community colleges, and for allocating these funds. While the idea of a separate agency responsible for the allocation of funding to universities was not in itself new (prior to the creation of the Council this was the function of the province's Universities Grants Commission), the power to set overall direction in policy and funding matters for the entire system did represent a new direction for the province.

The two basic questions that will guide my study are: why did the Filmon government decide in 1988 to act on post-secondary education? And secondly, why did it choose to create the Council on Post-Secondary Education, instead of pursuing other policy alternatives that were available at the time? As previously noted, the Council represented the first of its kind in Canada. While provinces across the country had flirted with intermediary agencies for their higher education systems, by the early 1990s most of these agencies had been abandoned with responsibility for universities and colleges rolled into government

ministries. For those provinces that retained some kind of external agency, for example Ontario's Council on University Affairs, (OCUA), these tended to be advisory rather than authoritative bodies with little real power to affect the system.

There are a number of different models and units of analysis that can be applied to the study of public policymaking. Agenda setting, for example, can be examined from the point of view of the policy communities and policy networks involved, which give shape to the kinds of ideas and discourses that become prominent in the decision-making process. Or alternately an institutionalist perspective can be adopted, that looks at role that such structures as legislatures and bureaucracies, and the values and traditions contained therein, play in policy development.

The conceptual framework which guides this research study consists of three broad elements: the *processes* through which agenda-setting occurs; the *actors* involved in these processes, and the *larger context* within which it all happens. While no single model can possibly capture the complexity and ambiguity of any policy process in its entirety, these three elements combined shed light on what I perceive to be the most salient features of my case study.

With regard to the first of these elements, processes, I will draw on the model of public policymaking known as multiple streams theory. Unlike more rationalist or

incrementalist approaches, the strength of multiple streams theory is that it considers the ambiguous, contextual and anarchic nature that describes much of the political process. Particularly useful is Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams model of agenda setting. In Kingdon's schema, agenda setting occurs through three distinct processes, or streams: the problems stream, the politics stream, and the policy stream. While these three streams flow relatively independently of each other, Kingdon maintains that they can couple at critical junctures. It is at these moments of coupling that windows of opportunity open up for agenda setting to occur. By considering the key variables in each stream and how they can come together at key points in time, we can more closely discern how some issues end up making it onto the government's agenda while others continue to languish.

It is not enough for a window of opportunity to open up for agenda setting to occur; instead, people have to make it happen. Hence in addition to Kingdon's multiple streams model I will also consider the policy actors that were involved in post-secondary agenda setting in Manitoba. Howlett and Ramesh (2003) suggest that the most relevant policy actors in industrialized democracies tend to be members of the executive (the prime minister, premier and members of the cabinet); senior political aides; key bureaucrats and certain organized interests in society (notably the business community). Depending on the issue, research organizations, think tanks and the media can also play a role, as can public opinion. The particular actors involved in the Manitoba case will be explored to

see which individuals were in fact the most salient in getting the issue of post-secondary education onto the government's agenda.

And lastly, I will examine the larger context within which agenda-setting in the Manitoba case study occurred. Policy actors do not operate within a vacuum, contained in their own little world, but rather within a larger environment. What is occurring in this larger environment; the broad trends, issues and the kinds of discourses that are prevalent have an impact on policymakers, both in terms of the kinds of policies that are adopted as well as the manner in which policymaking occurs. While there may be any number of themes within this larger context that can influence public policy, for my purposes I will focus on two factors: globalization and the climate of ideas. As I shall argue, policymaking in the Filmon government became subsumed under the rubric of macro-economic change and the massive economic restructuring that occurred in the world beginning in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. In this midst of this change reform of the post-secondary education system was seen as critical to advancing the province's social and economic goals, and maintaining Manitoba's competitive edge in the face of globalization.

The impact of globalization can be discerned not only in terms of the kinds of policies that governments were implementing during this time, but in their general approaches to policymaking and governance as well. While we tend to think of globalization in purely economic or political terms, a third form – managerial

globalization – also had important ramifications for the process of policymaking in Manitoba and elsewhere. Managerial globalization refers to both the ways in which states borrow policies from each other, as well as borrow management tools and techniques from the private sector. Hence, related to globalization are the ideas of policy borrowing and New Public Management.

In addition to globalization, the second key feature of the larger context that was critical to the case study of post-secondary agenda setting in Manitoba was the climate of ideas. At any given time certain ideas take hold that give shape to what values and beliefs we hold as a community, and set the broad parameters of what we consider to be acceptable actions on the part of government. The climate of ideas can be influenced by a number of forces, including ideology, the prevailing policy paradigms, the scholarly discourses surrounding a particular issue, and the public mood.

As I shall demonstrate, actors do not enter the political process devoid of ideas and values; rather, they come to the table with certain ideological assumptions that help form the language through which they articulate their interests and decide upon courses of action. Ideology thus helps shape political decisions, serving as it does as a useful reference point in an ambiguous and rapidly changing world. At the same time, while actors are influenced by their own ideological preferences they are also impacted by the discourse of ideas that develop around policy questions; what Ball (1990) has referred to as the policy

paradigm. These paradigms help to broadly define the goals behind government policy, the related problems or puzzles that policymakers have to solve to get there and the kinds of instruments that can be used to attain these goals. And lastly, the climate of ideas can be influenced by the scholarly literature and discourses surrounding a particular policy issue.

While for many the climate of ideas seems to be “things that just make sense”, in fact it is not spontaneously generated. Social problems do not have an objective life of their own; simply waiting to be discovered and acted upon by an attentive government. Political actors will construct and frame social problems in certain ways in order to achieve certain goals, and to build legitimacy and support for their actions. To do this they will also engage in “crisis talk”; portraying certain policy areas as a crisis and thus warranting immediate attention; whether or not an actual crisis exists.

And lastly in my discussion of the larger context I shall argue that the public mood at the time regarding government in general and post-secondary education in particular helped create for the Filmon government a conducive climate for change. Efforts to hold the line on public spending and to render post-secondary institutions more accountable and relevant to the needs of the larger community found a great deal of resonance amongst Manitobans, and provided legitimacy for the cause of reform in Manitoba. At the same time, trends in other jurisdictions served as an impetus for the prioritization of post-secondary

education in Manitoba. By 1990 Alberta, Nova Scotia and Ontario, as well as numerous states in the United States, Great Britain and other western countries had begun to implement far-reaching reforms of their higher education systems. These developments not only served to further motivate the Filmon government to prioritize post-secondary education on its agenda but also provided a certain degree of legitimacy for their actions.

Following the Introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the research design that I employed in addressing my two research questions. Utilizing a single case study (the formulation of post-secondary education policy in Manitoba), I collected data through a triangulated approach. I began the project with a fairly extensive literature review, covering such areas as policy analysis and agenda setting, educational policymaking, higher education, social constructivism, New Public Management, and the role of actors in the policy process. As the events that constitute my case study occurred over ten years ago, the second substantive thrust of my data collection involved archival research. I consulted a variety of primary documents including government reports and documents from not only Manitoba but a number of other jurisdictions (Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia, as well as federal government reports); Hansard; and media reports. I also reviewed a number of submissions made to the University Education Review Commission (the Roblin Commission) from a variety of stakeholder groups, including universities and colleges in Manitoba, student associations, and the business community.

The third key piece of my data collection involved a total of six interviews with some of the key actors involved in the post-secondary education policy subsystem in Manitoba. Included in these interviews were discussions with past Ministers of Education and Training in the Filmon administration; the former Deputy Premier; a Senior Political Advisor to Premier Filmon; the former Executive Director of the Universities Grants Commission in Manitoba; and a prominent Manitoba business person with close ties to the Filmon government. These interviews were invaluable because they afforded me an opportunity to get an inside look into the kinds of issues, ideas and events that went into the decisions that were made at the time.

As I point out in Chapter 2, a unique aspect of this study is my own direct involvement in the events that comprise the case study. In 1990 I was appointed as a political aide to a senior cabinet minister in the Filmon government; a position I held until 1993. And in the fall of 1995 I was hired by the Manitoba Department of Education and Training to advise the government on a new governance structure for the province's universities and colleges system. This later experience in particular provided me with a unique insight and knowledge into the events under review, and allowed me access to certain elites that were involved at the time.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 discuss in broader detail the conceptual framework that guides this research study. Chapter 3 discusses multiple streams theory and

Kingdon's model of agenda setting, as well as the role of actors in the policy process. Chapter 4 focuses on the larger context within which the Filmon government engaged in policymaking, notably the impact of globalization, policy borrowing, and New Public Management. Chapter 5 examines the second aspect of the larger context – the climate of ideas. In this chapter such concepts as the public mood; ideology; policy paradigms; and the social construction of problems will be examined. A brief overview of some of the main ideas and arguments contained in the scholarly literature on higher education in Canada will also be discussed, as they contributed to the climate of ideas surrounding the issue of post-secondary education in the new millennium.

With these conceptual issues in mind, the focus of the study then turns to trends in post-secondary education policy in other jurisdictions in Canada and throughout the world. Chapter 6 considers the kinds of changes that were occurring at the time in higher education systems in the United States, Great Britain, as well as parts of Western Europe. In Chapter 7, the changing public policy landscape in Canada throughout the 1980s and early 1990s will be examined. As we shall see, national recession, the election of Brian Mulroney, and the growing involvement of business in educational issues began to alter the discursive framework in which public policy, notably post-secondary education policy, was considered in Canada. Evidence of this change at the national level, as well as in provinces such as Alberta, Ontario and Nova Scotia, will be presented.

Chapters 6 and 7 help set the stage for understanding what subsequently occurred in Manitoba; to shed light on why the Filmon government chose in 1988 to place the issue of higher education on its agenda for action, and secondly, why it chose the policy option of the Council on Post-Secondary Education. In Chapter 8 I “tell the story”, so to speak, of post-secondary education agenda setting in Manitoba from 1988 to 1996. In this chapter I present a rather detailed examination of the events that transpired during this period, the main ideas that informed these events, and the major policy actors involved in the decision-making process. Interwoven throughout the chapter are excerpts from the interviews as well as references to Hansard, government documents and media reports.

Chapter 9 sums up some of the major findings of the research project, and assesses the degree to which the conceptual framework of processes, actors and the larger context adequately reflects the evidence. It also outlines some of the limitations of the case study method and proposes areas of further study.

I anticipate that this research project will make a contribution to the scholarly literature in a number of ways. Firstly, while much has been written about various aspects of the policymaking process in governments, how issues first become seen as problems warranting attention by decision-makers represents comparatively new ground within political science. Also, why some policy options are chosen over others; the kinds of criteria that actors engage in the

policymaking process in their consideration of the various possibilities, has also not received a great deal of attention. Equally significantly, while there has developed a rather substantive body of work regarding the formulation of educational policy on the schools side, given the unique position of higher education in contemporary society (the principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, the organizational structure and processes of universities and colleges), the formulation of post-secondary education policy also remains an understudied area of policy research. By combining these two aspects – agenda setting and post-secondary education – into a single research project, I hope that my work will help inform not only our understandings of public policy but the field of higher education as well.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This research project grew out of my own involvement in the events leading to the creation of the Manitoba Council on Post-Secondary Education. In 1994 I was hired by the then Minister of Education and Training, Linda McIntosh, to advise the Filmon government on a new governance model for the province's universities and community colleges. As a policy analyst in the Universities Grants Commission I was responsible for researching and preparing various papers and proposals for the consideration of the Minister, cabinet, and members of the Interim Transition Committee (a body struck by the Minister in 1995 to draft the legislation for the Council on Post-Secondary Education) on what this new governance structure should look like. This position gave me unique access to not only the main issues and events of the time, but also the key players involved in the latter stages of decision-making in the post-secondary area. From 1990 to 1993 I had also served as a political assistant to a senior cabinet minister in the Filmon government, Jim McCrae, who at the time was the Minister of Justice and Attorney General for Manitoba.

During my employment in what were the dying days of the Universities Grants Commission I became intrigued about why the Filmon government decided to focus on post-secondary education in the first place. At the time it just seemed to make sense to prioritize higher education, despite the fact that there were dozens of other issues that could have equally become a focus of government

attention. At the same time, I was curious about why the government decided to create the Council on Post-Secondary Education instead of choosing other policy options. While other provinces in Canada were also in the midst of examining their post-secondary education systems, none had decided to create the kind of intermediary body envisioned for Manitoba. This curiosity, combined with my interest in higher education and public policy analysis, combined to create what I deemed to be an ideal avenue of research to explore.

Given that the focus of my interest was the process through which the Progressive Conservative government of Gary Filmon decided to place the issue of post-secondary education on its formal agenda and to later create the Council on Post-Secondary Education, I chose case study analysis as my principal methodology for the research project. Rather than portray a broad cross-section of individuals or some other unit of analysis, case studies focus on a bounded system of action (Padgett, 1998). A case study differs from other research studies in that the focus of attention is the individual case, not the whole population of cases. As Stake (1988) notes, in most other studies researchers search for an understanding that ignores the uniqueness of individual cases and generalizes beyond particular instances. The case study, on the other hand, "focuses on a bounded system, whether a single actor, a single classroom, a single institution, or a single enterprise ... so as to understand it in its own habitat" (Stake in Jaeger, 1988, p. 256).