

Susan Owens

Knowledge, Policy, and Expertise: The UK Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution 1970–2011

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This book is based on the experiences of Susan Owens, a Cambridge Professor of Environment and Policy. The book is written first from her perspective as a researcher into the Commission and secondly as a member. Susan also had access to a full set of minutes of the 40 years of the Commission, which was abolished in 2010 by the incoming Coalition Government. The book is divided into 7 chapters. The first two focus on general issues of knowledge and politics, before the other chapters focus on the work of the Commission and where its advice was heeded and where it was ignored. Thus, the book should provide a fascinating insight into how environmental policy is affected by third party advice using three research paradigms: literature review, interview based research, and participant observation.

Chapter 1 outlines four conceptualisations of the interplay between knowledge and policy. First, *technical rationality*, in which scientific findings in a linear model are adopted by policy makers. Second, *political rationality*, in which advice is sought to delay a decision or is rigged to justify a decision. Third, *cognitive perspectives*, which emphasise the messy process of policy making and hypothesise that governments formulate policy via a learning process derived from a complex set of information sources. Fourth, *co-production and boundary work*, in which policy makers and researchers act behind their own boundaries but decide to interact for mutual benefits. These concepts are used to structure the discussion in the final evaluation chapter. Within this context, Chapter 2 provides a useful potted history of environmental thinking and policies in order to set the context, with the constant theme of British pragmatism in policy formulation.

Chapter 3 provides extremely useful insights into how UK politics works. It details the delicate balance between the antithetical elements of the Commission being independent but also a standing commission being part of government. It also highlights the nature of the so-called British Establishment in highlighting how members were selected. The chapter also provides very useful information on how and why topics were selected for the 33 reports the Commission produced and how evidence was taken and reports were drafted. Finally, the chapter outlines how the Commission was continually under duress until its final demise in 2011.

Chapters 4 to 7 are focused on themes and case studies of various aspects of the Commission's work. The initial theme is of *risk paradigms*, where the Commission seems to have progressed from a cost-benefit approach towards a more precautionary approach, via reports on air pollution, nuclear power and removing lead from petrol. However, in other reports the Commission was seen to be *sliding between paradigms* with a strongly precautionary stance in its report on genetically modified organisms, but a weaker stance on waste incineration. So Owens concludes (p. 100) that the development of the Commission's thinking was neither linear nor straightforward, but three significant developments can be discerned. First, a shift away from the enlightened technocracy of the earlier reports towards more

inclusive perspectives on risk governance. Second, a move from prevention to precaution. Third, a move away from producing reports behind the so-called objectivity boundary of science towards a more porous co-production with policy formulation realities.

Integration is the next theme discussed by Owens, with particular reference to the reports on *Air Pollution Control* and *Environmental Planning*. To some extent these reports were instrumental in introducing more holistic policies, notably the idea of the best practicable environmental option (Twelfth Report) in the Environment Protection Act 1990. However, the complex goal of providing policies for integrated land use and transport planning (despite brave attempts in Acts setting up Regional Planning Bodies and Regional Plans) fell foul of what Owens calls the *Contingency of Influence*. She concludes (p. 124) that: ‘...exploring the Commission’s impact and authority in these two cases amply illustrates the complexity of the factors contributing to policy change; we can see how cognitive and discursive factors, institutional inertia, political and ideological commitments, economic conditions, and random events combined to produce very different outcomes in each case’.

Finally, Owens discusses the *circumstances of influence* within the context of a continuum, with direct, rapid responses to its recommendations at one end and subtle, long-term conditioning of the policy environment at the other. Direct ‘hits’ are said to be the reports which led to targets on the reduction of CO₂ emissions and removing lead from petrol. Causality cannot be proven, but Owens argues that in both cases, by giving the government the legitimacy of an independent authority, it gave the government a ‘way out’ of policy dilemmas. Other reports are said by Owens to have sown dormant seeds or to have slowly changed the frame. In contrast, the goal of integrated spatial strategies seems even more distant after intensified efforts to reduce the burden of planning and regulation and the introduction of local planning.

Owens concludes with an important discourse on the interconnections between knowledge and policy, which has become even more important since she completed the book in 2015. Notably the rise of populist politics, distrust of experts and the concept of fake ‘truth’ on the internet. She uses the four concepts outlined in Chapter 1, to argue that there were elements in its advisory practices of all four. But perhaps most pertinent are her observations on p. 167, which are well worth reading in full:

‘What emerges most clearly, however, is the *contingency* of influence, with outcomes at any one time depending on political and ideological commitments, institutional structures, economic conditions, and external (even ‘quirky’) factors and events. The Commission could have rapid effects when its recommendations made sense – for whatever reason – in a receptive political climate, and tended to fail when proposals went too much against the grain; but powerful ideas could gain currency as external conditions moved, and influence could sometimes be diffused or obscured within broader trajectories of change.’

In conclusion this is a book about much more than the Commission, as it has a good deal of empirical and experiential evidence on how policies are made, and as such it

has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of so called evidence led policy making. It deserves to be widely read.

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