GREAT BOOKS REVISITED /
REVUE DES GRANDS CLASSIQUES

Andrew Graham

Pressman/Wildavsky and Bardach: Implementation in the public sector, past, present and future

"Implementation is worth studying precisely because it is a struggle over the realization of ideas. It is the analytical equivalent of original sin: there is no escape from implementation and its attendant responsibilities."

Pressman and Wildavsky, 3rd edition, p. 180.

Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland: or, why it's amazing that federal programs work at all, this being the saga of the Economic Development Administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes. *By* JEFFREY L. PRESSMAN *and* AARON WILDAVSKY. *Berkeley: University of California Press.* 1973, and subsequent editions. *Pp.* 182.

The Implementation Game: What Happens after a Bill becomes a Law. *By* EUGENE BARDACH. *Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.* 1977. *Pp.* x, 323.

Great books, to use the title of this series, do not necessarily have to be uplifting ones. What makes them great is that they create an enduring framework through which future scholarship and action are designed and understood. In the case of *Implementation,* by Pressman and Wildavsky, and *The Implementation Game,* by Eugene Bardach, both explore and define the challenges of implementation in the public sector. A return to reading these important books, however, suggests that, while we may know a great deal more about implementation in the public sector, not a great deal has changed in the challenges that it poses. It is also the case, unfortunately, that we know more about its failures than its successes.

The relevance of both of these books and their applicability to the current Canadian public policy scene is almost eerie. The gap between policy conception and policy implementation remains as rough and as tenuous as any

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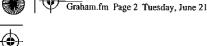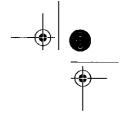
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time in the past. The principal question is what has to change to create a greater congruence within the public-policy process to ensure that legislated and policy intentions are actually carried out in reality.

This is pertinent to the current discussions of the credibility of government and to the challenge of true democratic reform. It is also relevant to a much needed debate about the administrative underpinnings of government at a time when the failings of traditional bureaucracy (closed, unresponsive and unaccountable) have not found a satisfactory solution in new public management. What is the new synthesis? Let us look back to many of the questions posed in these books.
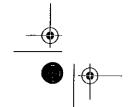
In reading these distinguished authors, it is compelling to see the clarity of vision they bring to this issue. Neither book presents a happy picture. Bardach says of his study, "This is not an optimistic book" (p. 6). Both books document the failings and twists and turns leading somewhere other than to the intentions of good public-policy initiatives. Both, however, maintain something close to a bemused if not humorous perspective. But they clearly belie the notion of the "Declare it done and it will be done" style of central control that is satisfied just to have a great law or a good policy without much regard for how it actually gets executed.

Each author has played an important role in the development of thinking about implementation. While much writing and consideration had preceded them, both their contributions are defining elements for subsequent scholarship, teaching and research. In 1973, Pressman and Wiladvsky delivered a wake-up call, a shock of cold water that began with a specific tale and moved to general observations, inviting much more examination. Bardach, following a few years later, offered a more detailed and exhaustive examination of the key elements of both implementation failure and the potential for success.
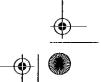
Together they redefined the study of public-sector administration implementation. As L.R. Jones has noted, "By focusing on actual results rather than on the more visible politics of program creation, Pressman and Wildavsky created a new field of public policy study. Since the edition of *Implementation* in 1973, hundreds of studies of efforts to achieve resolution to 'knotty and sticky' social problems have been conducted."[1]

In both cases, the thought process begins with a real-world situation, one in which a grand idea is put into place, or not, as the case may be in each situation. The now famous Oakland Project that Pressman and Wildavsky describe and from which they learn has a familiar ring of many government initiatives. A grand conception is formed that targeted spending on local projects would presumably employ more chronically unemployed and thereby reduce the risk of violence at a time of great national concern about urban violence among African Americans. As the number of parties involved – both within the federal government, the local government, the

local not-for-profit sector, and the private sector – increased, so too did the complexity of the situation. As well, the clock slowed down. Or, at least, the time needed to move anything forward stretched out beyond anyone's expectations. Over the years, this project transformed itself from one thing to another. Money was never really spent exactly as intended. Of course, initial intentions were not entirely clear in the first place. Policy assumptions about probable outcomes of the program were never met. Compromises along the way led to goal diffusion and, in the end, disillusionment with the entire concept.

"Attempting to control funding for one institution to force changes in the behavior of another would prove to be an exasperatingly indirect process" (Pressman and Wildavsky, p. 44). Such lines are indeed prophetic and have become even more so when we look at how goal-distorting funding arrangements can be for third-party delivery, especially in the not-for-profit sector.

In the 1984 edition of *Implementation*, Pressman and Wildavsky also ask why governments do not learn from their mistakes. They encourage the use of evaluation as a tool to better understand what went wrong and what worked. Most importantly, however, they push the boundaries of thinking about how public policy is made, a seminal contribution to which Bardach added. This challenges the great divide between those who conceive of policy and those who have to implement it. Taken more impersonally, the authors deliver a message still poorly heard today: Policy conception needs to account for the whole picture, not just front-end conceptualization but also the reality of actually doing it and accounting for what is actually done.

Bardach makes an important contribution in *The Implementation Game*. He provides a snapshot of an emerging field of public administration research. Thus, he builds and organizes thinking into his own perspective, drawing also on his examination of the transition of mental-health legislation in California, from concept to actual implementation.
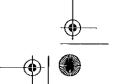
In speaking about the interrelations in implementing his iconic mental-health legislation, Bardach notes a few that have general applicability:

L-P-S [the Lantrerman-Petris-Short Act, passed by the California legislature in 1967] has many of the features that I believe are relevant to the study of the implementation process in many policy areas besides mental health or social services. It has elements of intergovernmental relations, interagency relations, relations between government and private contractors, professional participation as providers and overseers, inter-professional rivalries, regulatory as well as service-delivery activities, intra-bureaucratic politicking, important interface programmes with other policy areas, and continuing legislative oversight and intervention (p. 10).
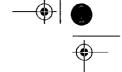
The principal contribution Bardach makes is some order to what he calls the "games" that are associated with implementation. He uses the term "games" intentionally, not simply as a frivolous construct. These games are

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serious and stakes can be high. He explains his usages of games as the "master metaphor" for the analysis he then offers (p. 5). In doing so, he claims to move further than Pressman and Wildavsky in creating an analytical framework for examining implementation. Indeed, he does. Such a framework is important and useful.

Bardach notes that the use of the games metaphor enables those thinking about implementation to "look at the players, what they read as the stakes, their strategies and tactics, their resource for playing, the rules of play, the rules of 'fair' play, the nature of the communications among the players and the degrees of uncertainty surrounding the possible outcomes" (p. 56).
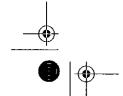
He describes, often in telling detail, games of obstruction, misdirection and delay that prevent implementation of intended policy. He also offers some tentative and useful ideas for how to overcome such obstacles. This is commendable, because it is so easy to throw one's hands up in the air and abandon any hope of achieving public goods. Bardach has continued this line of inquiry, to good benefit, over the years since *The Implementation Game.*[2]

Implementation is a tough business, as these seminal texts and much experience in the public sector have taught us. However, much good work has been done by the public sector, often unnoticed by various players more focused on failures or deviance. All is not a failure. These books, however, point out that the sustained energy and capacity to actually do things, especially where stakeholders grow in numbers, is itself a key piece in the puzzle of the public good that merits focused attention.

As Bardach points out, with a nod to his predecessors,

What are we to make of implementation failures when everyone is agreed on the principal objectives? In such a case the dialectic of pressure and counter pressure would presumably not exist and could therefore not shape outcome. But minor disagreements between just a few actors can cause delays, as can simple standard operating procedures in bureaucracies. A vicious cycle of delay, fear of ultimate failure or high salvage costs, withdrawal of previous commitments, more delay, increased anxieties, and so forth, can also cause implementation failure, as Pressman and Wildavsky have shown in their EDS study (p. 39).
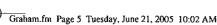
The current political scene in Canada suggests that the challenges of implementing public policy remains front and centre. Whether it be a simple advertising campaign to "save the country from separatists" or the privatization of one of the world's largest energy providers, the tales remain the same, as we see in these seminal books: central conception moves out and becomes something else. Directions change, and intended effects are not what they seem. Indeed, what this may tell us is that there is no quick fix about how to implement public policy and that sustained attention is key. So too is transparency and some better understanding of the policy paradigm.
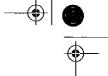
The need for sustained oversight in implementation of important public policy cannot be underscored. Unfortunately, this calls for sustained political will, as well as sustained bureaucratic will. Current democratic structures and culture tend to focus on the policy or law and then on what went wrong after the fact. Politicians and senior bureaucrats become distracted and lessen their focus on the nitty-gritty. They move on. They move out. They pursue higher priorities. They pursue headlines. They get bored. This is unfortunate, because it is the great middle of public policy that is implementation, and it is often left on its own. It is interesting to note some exceptions, such as the use of sunset laws or mandated legislative reviews, that have, in the limited Canadian experience, proven to be exceptionally useful in bringing under scrutiny and offering solutions to issues of implementation of large legislative changes.

Another key issue is the great divide between central policy control and those "in the field" who carry it out. This has certainly played itself rather dramatically in the past few years in this country. The HRDC controversies demonstrated elements of just such a discontinuity. As Barbara Wake Carroll and David Siegel point out in *Service in the Field: The World of Front-Line Public Servants*, "Academics have not paid much attention to field-level public servants. Political scientists have usually focused on the high-profile legislators, cabinet ministers, or deputy ministers."[3] Their very helpful work, which focuses on the dynamic between headquarters and field offices, is highly instructive in looking at how the centrally created policy and the realities of its implementation are often at odds. As they point out, however, "Recent interest in implementation and service delivery has focused some attention on what happens in the field, but these studies have not looked at all the pressures facing public servants. They have frequently arrived at the quick conclusion that implementation has not been handled properly, without digging deeper to determine what pressures on field-level public servants could be causing the problems."[4]
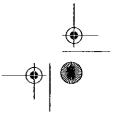
Like Bardach, Carroll and Siegel have seen instances where the great divide between policy and practice and the centre and the field are blamed for what are essentially flaws in the policy. Bardach makes the point, "Indeed, it is not exactly clear what 'good' implementation of a basically misconceived policy would mean. As we have used the term 'implementation,' it should probably imply that the process of implementing the policy would reveal its defects and that over time they would be removed. The more likely event, however, is that implementation problems will exaggerate rather than ameliorate basic conceptual problems" (p. 252).

In a similar vein, the divide between conception and realization is explored in great detail by Professor David Good of the University of Victoria in *The Politics of Public Management*, his recent examination, in which he had a role, of the HRDC controversies. As he points out, in discussing imple-

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mentation, "Ministers do not want to be told that they cannot do something because it is not administratively feasible."[5] Tellingly, he echoes Bardach: "Although administrative reforms are usually designed by a few people, invariably they are implemented by many. It is through the implementation, and not the design, that the issues, contradictions and dilemmas rise to the surface and become grounded in the reality of administration and politics. And it is often the implementers, not the designers, who are called upon to reconcile them."[6]

Implementation remains a major challenge to good public policy. It grows in complexity in a world where any major change in policy will inevitably lead to different systems to support it, diverse interest groups to either be subject to it or have an interest in it, and multiple parties engaged in delivery. Indeed, while new public management was intended to be a way to make different delivery tools available to further public good, the very existence of these tools simply compounded the complexity and demands of implementation. It is worth noting that this phenomenon was extremely well document in these two works well before the notion of new public management was in vogue. Obviously, these authors found that government agencies on their own did a fair job of complicating their own lives and slowing down and redirecting intended policy goals. Today, the potential for such slippage is exponentially greater.

As Lester A. Salamon has pointed out in *The Tools of Government*, "Indeed, the implementation of public programs has long been the missing link in the policy analysis world view."[7] As the public sector becomes more porous and more complex, the challenges foreseen in these great books will grow. We can only be grateful that clear-thinking critics such as Pressman and Wildavsky and Bardach set the framework and issues so well so early. Let's not forget them.

Notes

1 L.R. Jones, "Aaron Wildavsky: A man and scholar for all seasons," *Public Administrative Review* 55, no. 1 (January 1995), pp. 3–16.

2 See mostly recently Eugene Bardach, *Getting Agencies to Work Together: The Practice and Theory of Managerial Craftsmanship* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

3 Barbara Wake Carroll and David Siegel, *Service in the Field: the World of Front-Line Public Servants.* Canadian Public Administration Series (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), p. 205.

4 Ibid, p. 206.

5 David A. Good, *The Politics of Public Management* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 182.

6 Ibid., p. 188.

7 Lester A. Salamon, ed., *The Tools of Government: A Guide to the New Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 7.