On the Place of Ideas: A Reply to George Hoberg

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In "Putting Ideas in Their Place," George Hoberg raises some important and persistent questions about the explanation of policy change.[1] In particular, he suggests that our attempt to demonstrate the role played by ideas in changing forest policy in British Columbia using Paul Sabatier's Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) gives excessive weight to ideas at the expense of more traditional concerns with power and interest.[2] Although it is unclear whether he places the blame on the ACF itself or merely on the way we have employed it, the burden of his critique is that we fail to live up to our commitment to show how ideas and interests can be combined in a more comprehensive form of explanation than one which appeals to interests alone. Worse still, by our reckless overstatement of the case for ideas, we risk creating a "straw monster," thereby warping the judgment of an entire generation of political scientists.[3]

While greatly flattered by this assessment of the far-reaching importance of our work, we would like to suggest that our intentions are altogether more modest. Hoberg states that it is not his intention to

1 See George Hoberg, "Putting Ideas in Their Place: A Response to 'Learning and Change in the British Columbia Forest Policy Sector,' " this JOURNAL 29 (1996), 135-44. For our original article, see Ken Lertzman, Jeremy Rayner and Jeremy Wilson, "Learning and Change in the British Columbia Forest Policy Sector: A Consideration of Sabatier's Advocacy Coalition Framework," this JOURNAL 29 (1996), 111-33.
2 Hoberg, "Putting Ideas in Their Place," 143-44.
3 Ibid., 136.

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develop a comprehensive theory of policy change. Nor was it ours. We aimed to illuminate the potential explanatory gains to be made by focusing on the complementarity between interest-based and idea-based explanations. Space constraints precluded a full discussion of the interest-based components of forest-policy change, but our abbreviated account (which, incidentally, touches on most of the factors mentioned by Hoberg) should make it clear that we do not believe that interest-based factors can be ignored.

However, we do not think that these power and interest variables should be given explanatory primacy. Following Goldstein and Keohane, Hoberg suggests that an interest-based explanation could, in principle, fully account for outcomes like those under analysis. We disagree. To play a part in explaining the behaviour of agents, interests have to be conceptualized by the agents themselves. That is, agents have to be able to give an account of the interests they are allegedly pursuing, and to do so they will necessarily employ ideas. An important interest of the provincial New Democratic party government (though one might have difficulty inferring this directly from its behaviour) lies in re-election. Hoberg presents the present government as having been "forced to honour its environmental commitments" because of these interests.[4] In fact, the strategy employed has been much more complex, involving responding to the environmental concerns of urban voters while trying not to alienate traditional supporters in resource-dependent industries. Our account attempts to show how government could walk this tightrope in the forest policy sector by reframing the debate as a response to a sustainability crisis, drawing on ideas promoted by the environmental advocacy coalition both inside and outside government over the previous decade or more. Nowhere do we suggest that these ideas, by themselves, could function as necessary and sufficient conditions of change. We are not Hegel come again, but we do want to insist on the essential complementarity of ideas and interests in explaining action. Hoberg's resistance to complementarity strikes us as both unwise and outdated, not so much a straw monster as a straw fossil.

Hoberg also seems to miss the point of our focus on the legitimation function of ideas and the consequent delegitimating role of policy debate. He writes, "In analyzing policy change, ideas are best conceived of as a type of power resource."[5] This is exactly what we believe, too, only we attempt to go further and contribute to a more complete understanding of how ideas can function as a power resource. We do this by considering the different legitimation requirements of different kinds of policy network and propose, as a testable hypothesis,

4 Ibid., 142.
5 Ibid., 144.

that corporatist and clientelist networks will be more vulnerable to delegitimation than pluralist ones. Again, Hoberg seems to think that we are crediting ideas with magical causal properties when our whole focus is to try to explain more clearly how ideas actually function in an arena where interests clash.

Next, Hoberg writes off a whole dimension of our article, the attempt to distinguish between learning and change, with a quick paragraph on our inadequate conceptualization of these slippery terms. Working from the same sources as Hoberg, notably the extremely useful discussion in Bennett and Howlett,[6] we note the difficulty of distinguishing between learning and change and introduce a number of distinctions, based on the work of Ernst Haas, in an effort to provide some much-needed clarity. Here we are concerned with a quite different question from the *explanation* of change. We want to be able to assess whether the current changes in BC forest policy are an improvement over the old policy, in the sense of learning from the mistakes of the past. "The underlying issue here," we pointed out, "[is] how to distinguish between significant policy shifts and incremental tactical adjustments."[7] This question is central to policy analysis, providing an alternative criterion of improvement to the economist's standard of Pareto optimality.

Here we distinguish, as Bennett and Howlett do, between learning more effective means to achieve unchanged policy goals, what we call adaptation, and learning to abandon some or all of the goals themselves, or paradigm shift. In our case, we distinguished between learning to be more effective managers of public forests for commodity production, and learning that commodity production may not be a sensible primary goal for forest management. The consequence of policy learning of either kind is to provide good reasons for doing things differently. In the case of adaptation, for example, the forest policy community was able to identify a regeneration problem and respond to it with a combination of investment, incentives and more effective regulation. In the case of paradigm shift, considerable evidence has been produced to show that commodity production under increasingly stringent Integrated Resource Management constraints is both inefficient as a way of allocating land between competing uses and ineffective in sustaining the full range of ecological services that forests can provide. There are good reasons to shift the focus of forest policy towards maintaining healthy forest ecosystems, turning commodity production levels such as AAC from an input into an output of the forest planning process. A

6 Colin Bennet and Michael Howlett, "The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change," *Policy Sciences* 25 (1992), 275-94.

7 Lertzman, Rayner and Wilson, "Learning and Change," 112.

forest policy of this kind would be a better forest policy than the one in place from 1945 to the late 1980s.

Finally, at the risk of restating the obvious, nowhere do we suggest that the mere fact of decision makers knowing that, for example, forestry practices like progressive clear-cutting put biodiversity at risk, will put an end to policies that promote progressive clear-cutting. We do not say it because we do not believe it, and nothing in our original article can be taken as arguing for such an absurd conclusion.