

This account of the CSPP's founding is from Richard Rose, [Learning about Politics in Time and Space](#).

Creating a Problem-Focused Centre

If social scientists are to apply theoretical ideas to the world as it actually is, they must look not only at journal articles and books but also look out the window to see what is happening in the streets. If there are inconsistencies between the two, this is an opportunity to expand knowledge by critically reflecting on what government and what academics do.

Unexpected and often unwelcome events in the late 1960s rekindled social science interest in what government does. In Europe the student revolt of 1968 made governance of the universities a major political issue and youthful demonstrators were proclaiming that their goal was not only (or not even) to understand society but to change it. In the United States, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programmes provided a banquet of foods for thought. The Vietnam War made students ready to question the institutions and integrity of government and to expect professors to have relevant answers. I needed no push from students to question what government was doing. My involvement in Northern Ireland put me in the front line of engagement with a situation in which failings of governance had fatal consequences.

The response in American universities to the call for relevance was led by senior social scientists who were interested in politics, such as Dick Neustadt at Harvard and Aaron Wildavsky at Berkeley. They helped create Schools of Public Policy offering technical skills and substantive knowledge relevant to the analysis of the problems of government. Aaron's first achievement was to secure a hillside building for the School above the tear gas zone of the Berkeley campus. During a trip to the United States in 1973, I visited Harvard's Kennedy School and Berkeley and became convinced that there was a 'there' there, that is, focusing on problems of public policy through an interdisciplinary lens made intellectual as well as practical sense.

What made institutional sense in the United States did not fit easily in Europe. American public policy schools are one of many post-graduate professional schools along with law, business, medicine, education, and other subjects. Post-graduate professional schools have not been similarly common in Europe. The LSE saw its three-year undergraduate BSc (Econ) degree, in combination with its location, as sufficient to give students an understanding of public policy. Oxford long regarded its status and the confidence and ability of its undergraduates as sufficient to open up a career in government, whatever the subject that they studied.

As I did not want to leave Europe, moving to an American school of public policy was out. Moreover, even when an American programme has many students from abroad its curriculum focuses almost exclusively on American experience. I also ruled out moving to a London think tank, because that would have meant abandoning long-term basic research in favour of writing position papers about immediate issues. Furthermore, some of my views were unlikely to be consistent with the political line of any think tanks.

In 1976 I established the Centre for the Study of Public Policy (CSPP) at the University of Strathclyde. It became the first Centre of its kind in a European university. The idea of the CSPP fitted with the University's definition of itself as

a place of useful knowledge, a philosophy matching that of public policy. I had no trouble in explaining this to the then Principal of Strathclyde, Sir Samuel Curran, who was comfortable with backing research of international quality. The upshot was that the CSPP was left to go its own way at Strathclyde (see www.profroze.eu/writings.php#studying). This gave me the freedom of action and incentive to undertake comparative research through a network extending across continents.

The CSPP is university based, but has never been a conventional department. This reflected my own vision of public policy research as inherently problem-focussed and drawing on social science tools from more than one discipline. By contrast with the Committee on Political Sociology, which was a network without an institutional base, the CSPP has the advantage of an institutional infrastructure. The university provides the CSPP with a small core budget that enables it to avoid the interminable scramble for short-term funding that is an obstacle to long-term programmes of research. In return, the CSPP provides the University with internationally visible research, which is well rewarded in the distribution of British government funds.

Location in Glasgow has the disadvantage of being distant from London, whereas free-standing public policy institutes are usually within walking distance of government offices. Their contributions to public debates can be intelligent as well as timely, but so much time is spent in the daily round of speculation and gossip that pervades capital city politics that there is little time to add to social science knowledge. Being in Scotland has the advantage of not wasting a lot of time in ephemeral discussions (www.profroze.eu/writings.php#public_policy). The CSPP relies on a mousetrap strategy: If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door. It has cultivated a comparative advantage in a limited number of areas rather than claiming that it could deal with everything that is currently in the headlines.

The priority that the CSPP gives to comparative research makes it possible to test hypotheses against evidence from a range of national contexts in order to understand the causes and consequences of variations in public policy. While a Centre that concentrates on national political issues has good reason to concentrate its staff in one place, comparative research requires knowledge that is more easily accessed on the ground in multiple countries. Hence, the CSPP has always operated with a network of collaborators in other countries. Its initial programme of work on the territorial dimension in United Kingdom government was supported by the UK Politics Work Group, which I founded as part of the British Political Studies Association as well as by Ian McAllister as the CSPP's Research Officer. Work on overloaded government was supported by an ECPR network and by co-authorship with B. Guy Peters in the United States. Current programmes on the experience of corruption involve Transparency International's secretariat in Berlin as well as the CSPP and research on EU politics involves Alexander Trechsel at the European University Institute, Florence, and collaborators in Lisbon as well as Dr. Gabriela Borz in Scotland.

I have always believed that travelling stimulates fresh thoughts and insights helpful in understanding the circumstances of others with whom one works. Location is unimportant for a comparative centre as long as it is near a good airport, and Glasgow meets that condition. By collaborating with a trans-national network of social scientists from Kiel in Northern Germany to Naples and Pittsburgh, the CSPP has been able to produce comparisons of public employment with a common conceptual framework and more national data than OECD or Eurostat have compiled.

Comparative research favours the use of quantitative data, which is well suited to systematic cross-national analysis. It also requires care in the construction of indicators presented to policymakers who are concerned with validity as well as reliability. If one understands how programmes work, survey data can be used to produce relevant evidence about how citizens react to the services they receive.